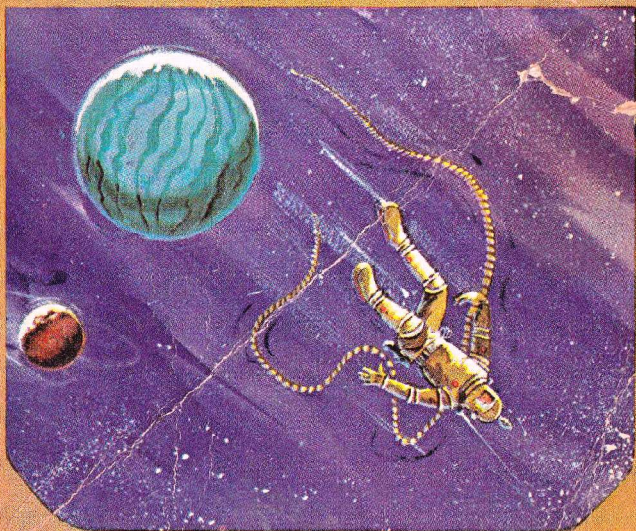


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Kenneth Bulmer



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BEHOLD THE STARS

by

KENNETH BULMER

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I

EVERY YEAR the reunion was held in a private room of a small secluded club where they sought fragmentarily for the comradeship that had really existed out there among the stars.

This year the reunion would be different. They'd still congregate happily together and sing the old songs and remember; but this year the rejoicing held a sharper, a more poignant, an urgent note.

For a few days before the reunion David Ward would think back happily and nostalgically to those days of violence, and would forget the violence and think only of how old Pinky Dawson had commandeered a Navy scow for planet leave and of how old Kicker Sloane and he had walked off with the only two eligible girls on Dirthram IV, and of a hundred other quizzical comical sadly merry little incidents of those four jagged years of his life.

BEHOLD THE STARS

He would look forward to the reunion hopefully, as each year passed and his buddies filled out and married and became good citizens—they really had been a tear-away bunch. He would go along to enjoy himself in the old talk and the jargon and the memories. But each year brought the same jokes and the same memories that yet were subtly not the same, so that the outlines blurred and—was it Johnny Red who got that Venie gunner on their forward base or was it Jackie Franks?—no, he bought it in the drop on Suvla—surely that was when that new blond young shavetail got his when his parapack roman-candled—no, you're thinking of that guy, what was his name? was always sick when we went through the box . . .

And so on.

He would come away from the reunions, happily fogged on his alcohol limit, whistling one of the old songs that sounded so damned embarrassing any other time, feeling somnolently good; they were a good bunch of guys. But the next day he'd wonder why he'd bothered, at a loss to explain why he hadn't foreseen this let-down feeling and had the nous to duck out of it.

A little of that anticlimax feeling pervaded him as he strolled into the foyer of the club and was directed to the private room on the twentieth storey.

"Hi, Dave!"

It was Crombie.

"Hi, Alex," said Ward, smiling, shaking hands. "You look sleeker than a mouse-fed kitten. What's your secret?"

"A clear conscience, and a good night's rest." Crombie winked. "And that's what I tell my wife, for the record."

David Ward had not seen Alex Crombie since last year's reunion; he didn't keep up the old contacts as some did—about the only ex-trooper he saw at all regularly was Steve Jordan, and that because Jordan had been his oppo and was still his best friend in a lonely life. Now Ward smiled at Crombie as though at a bosom comrade and, throwing off that chill depression he was feeling, went with him into the elevator and so to the private room.

BEHOLD THE STARS

The noise hit them before the cage stopped at the twentieth floor.

"The boys are whooping it up already." Crombie couldn't wait for the gates to open. "And I'm as dry as Mars! Come on, Dave."

"Right with you."

"Where's Steve?" Crombie reached the door and hammered on it, disdaining the ident robot. "Thought for sure you two'd turn up together as always."

"I don't know. I was waiting for him down below . . ."

The door opened, emitting a blast of heat and sound, and effectively preventing Ward from continuing.

Jim Wichek stood welcoming them inside the room, red-haired, squat, thick, tough and with hands that could assemble a transistorized printed-circuit lashup with tremorless delicacy under nuclear attack. He wore the regulation issue enormous smile from ear to ear.

"Alex. Dave. Come on in."

Familiar faces popped shining from the haze as men circulated, orbiting on the bar at the end of the room and talking, talking, talking. Heart-warming stuff. The right session for a man to forget today and remember the more glorious past. Nobody wore medals, of course; they weren't gong-hunters. But had they done so, the starry glare would have been brilliant. They were an elite. They were, in their own unspoken estimation, the elite.

Dinner was served. Ward tucked in, determined to enjoy it. The thought scarcely crossed his mind that this good food had been processed in vast factories, manufactured by bacteria and viruses, perhaps barely a quarter growing naturally on fields in the open air. It tasted fine. Turtle soup. Crisp golden-brown rolls with white fluffy bread, thick richly-smooth butter. Dover Sole. Steaks—of varying cuts and degrees of cooking, on demand from the robots to suit individual tastes. Sweets, Zabaglioni. Liqueurs, coffee, brandy; the whole works. Each man present eating a meal of his own choosing, and yet sharing it with his comrades as a part in a joint function.

BEHOLD THE STARS

A Man's meal.

Leaning back, replete, satisfied in body but still troubled in mind, Ward thought again of Steve Jordan, glanced uneasily at the single empty chair and place setting.

As soon as he decently could after the meal, when the ex-troopers were once again standing and sitting around the bar and looking forward to a night of it, Ward walked through to the phone booths. Snatches of conversation rode tag on him, like sheepdogs herding along an ungainly flock: First time I went through the box I couldn't tell my elbow from my—those poor Navy slobbs thought we were a bunch of ghosts—but there's nothing like sleeping in your own bed at nights . . .

He called Jordan's home first. He couldn't understand why Jordan hadn't left his destination on his phone robot; he'd expected to hear: "Mr. Stephen Jordan is attending an Army reunion tonight and requests messages be left." But this blank ding ding of the call bell infuriated and alarmed him. He called Stella Ransome's number and again that mock ing ding ding was all his reward. Common sense told him that they were out together. This vague dyspeptic feeling of unrest that had dogged him all evening must be growing blackly from his own awareness that he didn't possess a girl like Stella, that he wasn't progressing in civilian life like Steve Jordan and the rest of his buddies, that life was slipping past and nothing had been done.

At last, and feeling irrationally that he was prying, he called Jordan's office.

"Ransome Stellar Corporation."

At least here he had a reply, even if it was only a robot.

"Mr. Stephen Jordan, please."

"Mr. Stephen Jordan. He is attending an Army reunion tonight—"

"Thank you; but he isn't. Will you check if he is still in the offices."

The robot could carry out that simple internal office check in fifteen seconds.

"I am sorry, sir. Mr. Jordan is not on the premises."

BEHOLD THE STARS

If he asked the robot to check if anyone knew where Steve had gone it might raise questions better left unposed. After all, he wasn't Steve's keeper. . . . Just that it wasn't like the guy . . .

"Thank you," he said and cut the connection.

Jack Tracy was talking to a circle of men whose faces looked serious and in strange contrast to their previous gay hilarity. After one or two words Ward knew why. Tracy was talking about the threat hanging over them, the unspoken fears thronging all their brains, the dark shadow that made this reunion so different from all the previous ones.

". . . secrets." Tracy looked up as Ward joined the circle and he did not smile a welcome. He went on evenly: "I'm not spilling anything that you all won't know pretty soon and I wouldn't be telling you guys even this much if I didn't know you all. After all—you may be ex-troopers but you're still Army."

"They won't get me back in the mob, that I swear," someone said on a note of grim determination.

"Let's hope there's no need. But out beyond Ramses we're beginning a build up. The poor old Navy is chasing its tail as usual and getting really fouled up in the process. If it wasn't for the Army I'd almost sign up with the Gershmi myself—" He shook his head. "Stupid talk. Those aliens may look like us and the Venies and the Centaurians and Procyns and a dozen other local stellar races; but they're more alien, if you allow a vague statement like that—"

"We know what you mean." Crombie sat quietly with the others now, his usual liveliness not evident. "We remember the Venies as they were—oh—ten years ago. But today they're just another friendly race in our local interstellar civilization. Sometimes you can make contact with an alien race and remain friends and sometimes there just has to be a dumb stupid war. But so far we haven't bumped into any alien aliens so hostile that they won't see sense."

"And so these Gershmi, too, will become our friends!" George Appleby spoke quietly but with complete conviction.

BEHOLD THE STARS

"Say, Jack," Crombie broke in, "are we at war with the Gershmi or aren't we?"

"I don't know." Tracy held up his hands in bafflement. "No one does. We've tangled a few times out past Ramses. One or two ships have been reported missing. But we don't want another war, it's too darned soon after the Venie clash. But *they* might think we are at war. And that would make the difference."

"If there is a war with the Gershmi then we'll be in it," someone put in.

"And," Tracy added evenly, "their transit equipment is right up there with ours. Good. What we can do, they can do too. We had a fractional edge over the Venies. But not with these boys."

"Well," said Vince Macklin belligerently, "we're all young enough to be called back into the Army and we're all capable of making a box drop. If these damned Gershmi are asking for it then I for one am prepared to hand it to them—and not worry too much how damaged they get. Right?"

Only when he was shrugging on his coat to leave and shouting good-byes and promises to ring friends and to turn up faithfully next year did David Ward think that if war with the Gershmi became a fact he, too, would once more have to don the green Army uniform and drop through hellfire onto a hostile planet.

II

THE FIRST THING David Ward did the following morning was to ring Steve Jordan's apartment to give him a piece of his mind.

The answerobot said: "Mr. Stephen Jordan has left town and it is not certain when he will be back. Will you please leave any message."

Ward opened his mouth to reply, cursed, and slammed the receiver back. What the hell? Still, it wasn't his business.

BEHOLD THE STARS

If Jordan wanted to take a trip then that was up to him.

Ward left for work. He was three minutes early and that made him smile. The front office would start thinking that at last David Ward was trying to make something of himself.

His footfalls soundless on the deep pile of the carpet in reception, he walked past the robots already handling routine staff duties at the counters and headed for the elevator banks. He had an hour's office work before his first trip. All about him rose the monstrous hundred and fifty storey edifice of Solterran Space Agency. Here many thousands of men and women attended to the needs and problems of Earth's position in space. Here policies were initiated and investigated and matured so that Man's outward thrust for the stars should be ordered and economical and of most effect.

These days you couldn't just slam the airlock on your spaceship and blast off for the planets. Anyway, spaceships were absolutely useless for interstellar work, even interplanetary, and as such performed their tasks well within reach of their planetary bases.

Except for the Carriers.

The box bags.

Those were what was carrying mankind out to the stars and they were what made life real and earnest for Ward and for men like him.

He checked his clip for the day's assignments and grimaced as he saw they'd set him up for three carriers. Three. Well, if nothing went wrong and each box bag behaved itself there still should be a little overtime in it for him.

Down in the canteen, a tall, freckle-faced man with athletic shoulders and modishly slim waist walked across and sat down at Ward's table.

"Say, Dave, have you heard? Jimmy Kinross went missing on his last assignment yesterday."

Ward put the coffee cup down deliberately. His mind blanked for an instant, then he said: "No, Bill, I hadn't heard. That's bad."

BEHOLD THE STARS

Bill Roscoe sipped his own coffee as though to collect his thoughts. Roscoe was a Navy man, Lieutenant Commander, trim and efficient in Navy whites. He wasn't just passing the time of day.

"What happened?" asked Ward.

Roscoe frowned. "He transitted okay. The circuits were operating on all systems go. But he didn't return on time. I went through to check and there was no sign of him. I know he'd reached his carrier and begun to stock the matter bins—but he'd evidently been interrupted. They were still filling and overflowing when I had to stop them to transit myself."

"But he couldn't have just disappeared."

Ward couldn't help thinking of Steve Jordan. But there was no comparison in the two cases of disappearance—if Jordan could be said to have disappeared at all.

"But he could, Dave, and you damned well know it."

"But we haven't had a miss in—oh, in ten years or more! Why now? Why should we have a miss now?"

"We may not have. He got there safely. He began his job. When I went after him there wasn't a sign. He may not have tried to return—we'd know if he had and he gave us no indication of it."

"He'd have called for the fuel lines to be stopped anyway."

"Yes. But he didn't."

"Well, what's all this nonsense about a miss?"

Roscoe rubbed a hand across his forehead. "We just don't know, Dave. He's just *disappeared*. We've got to look for any eventuality however remote."

"Well what do you think happened?"

Roscoe looked uncomfortable.

"Jimmy was servicing a carrier on the Ganges run."

"Thank you for telling me." Ward saw it all now, the whole messy business. He spelled it out. "The Ganges run trajectory goes out past Ramses. The carriers are well on their vector past it. And I've three carriers on the Ganges run today."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"Check," said Roscoe. He spoke without enthusiasm.

"But surely—you don't think—I mean . . . Oh, no!"

"Salter has been informed on this. He and most of the top brass think what you're thinking right now but there's no way to prove it."

"The Gershmi."

"Seems like it, Dave. It would explain the facts."

Ward suddenly didn't feel too well.

"Is this official, Bill? Are you telling me I'm laid off these assignments today?"

Slowly Roscoe shook his head.

"No, Dave. You're not. You'll be transitting as planned—"

"But, Bill, for gosh sakes! I don't want to step out of the box and be blasted or something by a damned Gershmil"

"Wait a minute. I'm going along too. We'll go ready for trouble. But those three carriers need servicing. They haven't been looked at for a year. They'll run out of steam and that will foul up the whole landing pattern."

"I know that. But why me? I'm a civilian. They ought to send the Navy in. It's their pigeon."

"I'm going along too, remember? And I'm Navy."

"But I'm not—!"

"Maybe. But you're a Solterran Government employee; a civilian, yes, but a civilian with special rights and privileges and duties. We'll have a back-up team of marines—"

"I don't like the sound of that back up. Why can't they go first?"

Roscoe laughed. "Maybe they will, at that. Come on. We ought to get down to the Drain."

"The Drain," said Ward, rising and looking unhappy. "That doesn't sound so funny now."

Going down in the elevator through the armored shell covering the elevator and trolley lines, and boarding a trolley that sougheed off into the lighted tube slanting into the ground away from the SSA building, Ward tried to tell himself that Salter, the big boss, wouldn't send men out to their deaths. That wouldn't be economical. Men's lives were

BEHOLD THE STARS

the most precious single asset that Solterra possessed. You don't throw away your best cards . . . unless you're backed up against a wall and have nothing left to lose.

The trolley contained half a dozen other operators, a few techs and a sprinkling of Naval personnel. The lighted tube leveled off and the airpumps smoothly evened out the momentary imbalance of air pressure so that no ears popped. Down here they were a mile or more beneath the ground. The Drain was even lower.

Above them, half a mile beneath the surface, stretched the armored membrane protecting the Drain. That membrane completely surrounded the Drain, like a gigantic ball, allowing of ingress only through miserly orifices deep below the top-most levels. The biggest concentration of nuclear weapons known to man could explode all around the concentric ring of defences, could rip and tear the very Earth apart, and still the ball containing the Drain would remain impervious.

The trolley halted silently at the last station before the armor and everyone alighted for security check. Normally security checks were strict but formal; it was hardly likely that anyone of Earth would wish to destroy the Drain, but the eventuality must be taken into account. And as all aliens so far encountered by Earthmen were humanoid, then checks against them, also, must be stringent. Today Ward caught a tenseness, a more than usual alertness, a sense of urgency that, he supposed with a little shiver, must originate in snap orders sent down by Salter after the incident of Jimmy Kinross's disappearance.

Checks over, they waited quietly in line before their assigned box door. Ward stepped through, emerging from the matching door on the inside of the armored membrane. Quickly, he and Roscoe walked through to the trolley waiting to take them to their work area.

Captain Mainwaring met them, looking harassed and yet still contriving to keep his dignity as a shield between him and lesser mortals.

"Ah, Commander Roscoe. I see you've briefed Ward. Major Perry will take his squad in first. You will be issued side

BEHOLD THE STARS

arms. Ward, your job is just the same as it always is. Don't get flustered., As soon as you're through the Marines will take care of everything. Understood?"

Mainwaring was Navy. Ward smiled, a smile he tried to make thin, as though he felt supremely confident. Thankfully he saw Major Perry and his file of Marines approaching.

Major Perry looked like a bulldog. Like his men, he wore full combat uniform. From the bulbous helmet down past the armor and the spring-heel boots, he looked tough, trim, trained, very deadly. His pale blue eyes and thin nose, the heavy jaw and flushed cheeks, all reminded Ward of the way many men had looked going into combat. He felt a pulse start up in his temple and his annoyance at that stiffened his spine. Goddamittohell! He, an Army man, wasn't going to pieces before these poor Navy and Marine types! Never!

He walked across to his locker to pull out his space suit.

"You'd better wear an armored suit," Roscoe said. "The Marines have brought up a couple of spares—if you don't object to wearing Marine gear?" he finished with a flash of sarcasm. Roscoe knew, as many in SSA did not, that Ward had been an Army man.

"That'll suit me fine," Ward said gruffly.

Major Perry picked up a Massenet Nine—a sweet little hand gun that coughed a hundred miniaturized high-explosive shells in half a second—hefted it and then tossed it curtly at Ward. Ward caught it by the butt, twirled it, caught it by the butt again and felt the safety with the fleshy part of his thumb.

Perry raised his eyebrows, his face grimly amused behind the emergency faceplate of his helmet, the visor high and peaked above his head.

"You've handled one of those before?"

"Uh-huh," Ward said, annoyed with himself for showing off.

The Marines formed a single file and unlimbered their weapons, holding them ready for instant action. In back of the

BEHOLD THE STARS

group a second team of Marines waited by the single exit door from this flat. They were there in case the operation backfired and the Drain was faced with an incursion of Gershmi out for blood.

A bull-necked, craggy, immense Marine with enough stripes on his arm to fence in a state prison stood at the head of the line. Plastic sheathed concrete walls surrounded them, fluorescents blazed down, air filters maintained the atmosphere at its best level for human toleration. Ward and the team going through couldn't feel that; they were already on suit air, their helmets battened down and clamped. Major Perry slammed his own visor down, gave a single curt gesture with his hand, and stepped forward as the fire-engine red door silently opened.

Ward licked his lips. Despite the filters and wipers in his suit, he was sweating, and he felt the dizzying fingers of fear clawing at him. He wasn't enjoying this one little bit.

The big top sergeant stepped in, the door shut, the scarlet transitter light glowed for the second time, the door opened as more air gushed into the waiting vacuum. The line moved up one.

Major Perry came through on the phone to Mainwaring; Ward and the others waiting in their suits couldn't hear the conversation, they could only see Mainwaring nodding and looking relieved and his urgent gesture to the men to get on with it. He hadn't stopped the transit, so Perry must have reported in negative on Gershmi.

Ward felt relief go through him like a weakening flux.

Only four men left now, and Roscoe, before him . . . Three . . . Two . . . He became acutely aware of where he was. Buried deep within the inconceivably tough armored membrane of the Drain, surrounded by millions of tons of rock and concrete and steel and plastic, deep within the earth, he had for a tiny instant the sensation of being crushed.

One . . .

Roscoe said: "Just stick close to the box as you come through, Dave. Major Perry has everything under control out there."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"See you," Ward said, fumbling the words.

Now why should he get all het up now about this transit when everything had gone well? If there hadn't been this stupid hitch, the disappearance of Jimmy Kinross, the intervention of Major Perry and the Marines, he would have been halfway through servicing the carrier by now. And he wouldn't have been in a blue funk about stepping past that red door into the box, either.

The green ready light glowed as air pumped hissing into the vacuum of the box. The fire-engine red door opened and he stepped through. The door closed and the internal red light cycled.

The door in front of him opened and he stepped through. He hadn't switched on his exo-skeleton power and he drifted easily across in free fall to grasp a stanchion anchoring the box to the floor of the carrier deck. Roscoe hung at right angles to him half way up one wall. Perry and his Marines were fanned out all around the box and the big top sergeant was just going through the lock out onto the hull.

"All okay, Dave." Roscoe gave the thumbs up and his armored body swayed in reaction. "Get on with it, there's a good boy."

"And make it snappy, Ward." Major Perry's grating voice rode in over Roscoe's last words. "I'm sending a party across to the other carriers—doing it physically. They're within a coupla hundred miles of us right now."

"And that's good shooting," Ward had to say.

"Sure," Perry came right back. "That's your job."

A fraction of a second before he had been standing on concrete, deep within the Earth, surrounded by armor and machines and men and women; now he stood in the hollow steel hull of a spaceship spearing through space fifty light years or more from Earth.

That meant little; it was his condition of work.

He set about servicing the carrier with methodical thoroughness, forcing himself to slow down, to make a good job of it.

No damn Gershmi would make him skimp a job.

BEHOLD THE STARS

The fuel bins were nearly empty. He'd do those first, as per schedule. He unhooked the phone and called Earth on the direct line. Mainwaring answered.

"Put Chuck on, will you, Captain? Let's get this heap serviced fast."

"Chuck, here," came Marlow's familiar voice from Earth, riding along the carrier waves that had a moment before brought Ward and Roscoe and Perry and his men through some queer non-space to the carrier fifty light years from the planet of their birth. "Everything okay?"

"Sure. Sorry I didn't get to speak to you; too many uniforms around."

Chuck Marlow was a civilian, too, the switch operator on this shift for Earth.

"You're fueling from Zanzibar Twenty today. I'm on the line to them. Switching you—now."

The phone crackled softly, like soggy cereal. Then a new voice: "Zanzibar Twenty here. Smithson. All ready when you are, Dave."

"Hi, Smitty." Ward set up the deflector circuits, checked that the red box door was shut—he didn't want a spray of dirt sprouting through the crew flat of the carrier—and thumbed the toggle. "Start her going."

The control board lit up with the telltales, indicating that the deflectors were in operation and functioning on the top line. From Zanzibar Twenty—a small outer planet five thousand million miles from a minor sun—in the Zanzibar system, thirty light years from Earth and thus about twenty from the carrier, a stream of rock and minerals and dirt dug from the soil, loosened by robot mining equipment and funneled through the box, spouted across space and into the box aboard the carrier and was deflected into the fuel bins. For a moment Ward watched the fuel meters, noted their steady rise.

"Okay, Smitty. Your stuff is coming in fine."

He had no need for the servicing manuals or schedules in their plastic sheaths tagged to the control fascia. He'd been servicing carriers for six years now and knew the drill.

BEHOLD THE STARS

After an hour of general checks, minor adjustments, a thorough going-over, he felt satisfied that this Ganges carrier was functioning on all systems go.

"I'm going outside now," he called to Roscoe.

The Navy man had been perched up in the angle of deck and wall, wedged comfortably in, watching Ward at work.

"Right, Dave. If you want to make course corrections you'll have to check with the Major first."

"What the—! Why?"

Roscoe's words came thinly. "Use your head, Dave. If there are Gershmi hanging around a flare of energy will bring them like hungry sharks."

"Yeah. I get you. Well, here goes."

He sailed up towards the air lock and stepped through. No air inside the ship meant no wait for cycling, and he went straight on through the outer valve. They'd designed air locks into the carriers but no external viewports—that made sense, micrometeorites would have sandblasted them into useless opaqueness in months—but Ward figured they might have installed a screen. But then, if the designers had done that, he wouldn't have had the chance of going outside, the best part of any servicing transit.

He stood on the carrier's hull, activating his magneboots, and stared about him in a genuine pleasure that all the fears of Gershmi and of violent action could not alloy. Looking out on space like this, at the eternal stars, gave him a feeling of peace. Many men felt their own insignificance, facing the stars. A man was after all but a tiny mote of dust set in a strange and terrifying environment.

But that was not all. Man by his very being negated the senselessness on the universe. David Ward was a man, a human being, from the planet Earth. He was proud of that. Proud, because he could think about the stars and the planets and the comets of space—and they were mere bundles of matter, dead, for all their giant outpouring of energies, dead, unreasoning, unthinking. No—Dave Ward wasn't afraid of the might of space.

BEHOLD THE STARS

He was afraid, very much so, of other human beings, aliens, with the minds and thoughts of thinking beings, who might bear him no good will.

The carrier had drifted a mere thousandth of a degree off course; probably one of the multifarious shifts of gravitational attraction interlacing through space had proved to be stronger than originally predicted. A microsecond of thrust would put her back on course. He made the necessary calculations, using his equipment and then, after a last long look around, went back inside.

Out there, too, prowled the Gershmi.

Space did not belong to the men of Earth. They might send off their ships on the long lonely treks; but others could do the same. No one owned space. You could only try to own the little chips of matter orbiting parent suns; you could lay claim only to the planets.

Jimmy Kinross must have done this. He must have set his fuel supply pouring into the bins, transmitted from whatever feed point had been allocated for the day, and then gone outside to check his astrogation. And he hadn't come back inside the carrier. That seemed the obvious answer to his disappearance. Had Gershmi taken him? Had he been killed, taken away to some unimaginable hell of alien invention?

Ward shuddered.

"All set okay, Dave?" Roscoe's voice startled him; he was too used to operating on carrier assignments alone.

"Yeah. I need to use energy, though; a small correction."

"I'll check with the Major."

Ward left him to it and went down aft to run a final check on the engines.

The decision whether or not to fire the steering tubes lay with the Major. Ward would see the reasonableness of the Marine's position; the stern engines to which Ward was now sailing through the empty hull gave off a steady beat of energy as they converted the rocky fuel and thrust the carrier forward steadily at a low g acceleration, safe and economical and quite insufficient to give the semblance

BEHOLD THE STARS

of gravity aboard, so that free fall conditions prevailed. But to introduce a sudden modulation to the energy pattern radiating from the carrier would indicate the presence of life; the carrier's energy patterns would no longer be swallowed up by the eternal beat of power from the stars and the waiting Gershmi would home in to rend and destroy.

That is—if Solterra was at war with the Gershmi.

Even if there was no war, there was absolutely no guarantee what a hot-headed alien race might do.

If Perry decided not to fire the jets, Ward, for one, wouldn't object.

Trouble there, though, was that the carrier would continue on a diverging course from the Ganges run. Just how much later on the corrections could be made, Ward, of course, could not know; but he did know that the longer they were left the more violent they would have to be.

The engines were running sweetly and Ward saw at a glance that his ministrations were not needed. Rock and dirt from the bins fed through hoppers into the converters, driving the ship gently forward. That gentle drive steadily pulsing away over the years had already built up a sizeable c number. The carrier, in theory, if propelled at one g for a year or so should attain c unity—the velocity of light. They hadn't done that yet, although they'd struck very near it, and some of the effects had been very peculiar indeed.

He checked that the dials gave the same values as the repeaters on the control panel. Current speed—point three two one seven c. Nearly a third of the speed of light. Not bad. The Ganges cluster of stars lay sixty-nine light years from Earth. The carrier had reached to within nineteen light years. There was still some way and time to go before she would be turned end for end—exactly at the halfway mark—and her speed be meticulously dropped off in the same ratio as she had built it up.

The really exciting times for a carrier supervisor were the days when a carrier reached her objective. Ward had shared in three of those in his six years' service and he

BEHOLD THE STARS

really yearned for more. That was when all the toil and planning and sweat paid off.

Roscoe's voice called him on his headphones.

"Everything all set to go, Dave, apart from the course correction?"

"Everything. As soon as I put the old tub back on course we can transit out."

He began to make his way forward again, arriving in the control position with the fire-engine red door of the box closed and waiting. He switched the deflectors out of action as the bins filled to maximum capacity, and then looked at the door. Through it lay the Earth.

Major Perry said: "Reports from the other two carriers are negative. My radar search reports no sign of any suspicious object in space for a thousand miles." His voice roughened. "Make your course corrections, Ward! To hell with the Gershmi . . . If they do show up, we'll be waiting for them!"

III

"WE NEED this license and we need it fast!" Old Man Ransome hammered a sinewy fist onto his teakwood desk. His high cockscomb of silver hair danced over a baby-pink skull. His thin, pinched, dedicated features were flushed with a fine network of veins spidering the skin. "We're a private control corporation, not a Terran State enterprise! You get onto Bates at the Ministry and jolt him up a bit! You're here to run things, Mikardo, and by damn you'll run them my way!"

Gerald Mikardo sighed—but he was careful to sigh under his breath. Old Man Ransome had a bite that was way worse than his bark; and that was bad enough. Mikardo often wondered why he bothered to head up Ransome Stellar Corporation; but he knew the answer to that: money, money and a position where juggling with power invigorated him every minute of every day.

BEHOLD THE STARS

"You hear me, Gerald? Get your tail outta here and go chase Bates! I want that license and I mean to have it!"

They were sitting in Old Man Ransome's private office on the one hundred and tenth storey penthouse atop the RSC building. From the sweep of picture windows you could see away over the city, northwards, to where the colossal bulk of the SSA building towered even higher than Ransome's little pile, dominating the skyline, blue with distance.

There were a few dozen other skyscrapers of such size dotted about the city; but over the last fifty or so years the fashion had declined. Ransome's had been the last to rise, shaking a fist against the sky.

"Well?" rasped Ransome.

Mikardo flushed darkly beneath his tanned skin and rose from the formfit.

"I'm on my way, sir. I don't anticipate much trouble with Bates; but he might be difficult—"

"It's your job to undifficult him! Git!"

"Yes, sir."

Gerald Mikardo slid the door closed behind him manually, hard. He didn't have time for the doorobot to do it for him. He wanted to get out of there, fast. The Old Man was always overpowering; but lately a demon seemed to be driving him. It wasn't even that he was that old; he couldn't be much more than ninety-six, just the right age to handle the complexities of a corporation as vast as Ransome Stellar.

At fifty-one, Gerald Mikardo was just entering the prime of life and he was well aware, thankfully so, that he had reached a top link position at a very young age. He intended to go higher, of course. Except that Stephen Jordan could stand in the way. He might be troublesome. Or he might be a playboy, after the boss's daughter for the unobvious reason that he loved her, and not her fortune. In that case he could have Stella; she meant nothing as a person to Mikardo, who had his own devious pleasures in the fleshpots of the city, who was determined that only he would go on to run and eventually to control completely

BEHOLD THE STARS

the whole enormous star-bridging empire of Ransome Stellar. He might even change the name to Mikardo Stellar. . .

In his office on the hundredth floor—all the ten floors above him were totally devoted to Ransome's needs—he first checked his scrobot for the day's appointments. Nothing there he couldn't handle without fuss. Bates was going to be the big problem of the day. If Old Man Ransome was really serious about wanting this license for transit facilities here on Earth then he was up against not only the other Corporations in the Interstellar Bridging business but Solterran government also.

The doorbell chimed and his doorobot triggered the ident-plate to reveal the beaming face of Ted Zukowsky. Mikardo sighed again, openly, this time, and let Zukowsky in. Despite the chief scientist's huge smile and broad gleaming forehead, Mikardo was not fooled. This could spell trouble.

"Trouble, Ted?" asked Mikardo.

"Some." Gasp. "Fellow over at I.I.I. was talking in the club last night." Pant. "Seems that incredible idiot Takao Embebe has the ridiculous idea of stringing a chain of boxes clear around"—puff.

"Yes? Where?" sharply from Mikardo.

"He wants to box in the Earth! Can you imagine it, Gerald! Crazy notion. Whew."

"I—see. . . ." Mikardo steepled his fingers on the polished plastic surface of his desk and considered.

"You don't—seem surprised."

"Should I be? What's so idiotic about the idea? Seems to me if you can transit from New York to London in no time at all you'd be foolish to take a rocket aircraft that would take all of fifty minutes. Sound common sense."

"Yes, but—"

"How far along is Embebe on this project?"

Ted Zukowsky looked carefully at the managerial boss of RSC. He saw a man fully capable of any underhanded trick of the trade to gain the ends he wanted. Mikardo had black hair plastered slickly to his head and receding from a high forehead so that from the front his head appeared

BEHOLD THE STARS

bald with a thin layer of black paint over the top and sides. He affected a thin black moustache. His heavy, doughy face with the pouched eyes and the fleshy nose and thin, cruelly rapacious mouth might tell the observer that Mikardo was ruthless and dominating; it could not tell the full story and Zukowsky knew he didn't want to know that, either.

"Well," he said carefully, mopping his forehead but getting his breath back. "This fellow didn't know a lot. He talked more than he should, of course. Embebe really wants to do it and is dickering for a license." He glared suddenly and sharply at the manager. "What's in it for us?"

Zukowsky looked like a man who never stopped eating; but that gross frame and sweaty face concealed one of the keenest intellects in the science of transits; his latest matter transmitter consumed less than half the power of former models and did the job far more efficiently. He was a man Ransome could not afford to lose.

"For us?" Mikardo leaned back in his formfit which adjusted to his weight shift. "We think we would like that license. We are going to get it. It will be Ransome Stellar Corporation and not Interstellar Instantaneous Inc. who will put a girdle on boxes around this planet—and all the others that the Solterranean government opens up. Understood?"

Zukowsky sat for a moment considering the proposal. Nothing that Mikardo did, or Old Man Ransome, was done without careful thought and preparation. If they said this, then they meant it.

"It would bring up complications on the scientific side—"

"I know. It's going to be a tough one. No one has wanted matter transmission as a normal means of conveyance on Earth; the economics of the thing alone have hitherto proved a big enough stumbling block. We have rocket aircraft travel and underground systems so complex that you can get anywhere in the world in a few hours. The installation cost of a box system will be astronomical—"

"They still will be. I can't see us recovering our initial outlay in—oh, a hundred years."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"If then—if we do it the way the Old Man wants it done."

"City to city first, I suppose? Then outlying centers as we expand on a grid. H'mm. It should prove interesting—"

"More than interesting, Ted. Vital. It's got to be done. That's why I asked you to call here this morning. I'm still in process of trying to arrange the license. Now you tell me Embebe is involved, that just makes it that much more difficult."

Zukowsky switched his train of thought: "Pal of mine working for SSA tells me they're still a million parsecs from ever pushing a ship along at FTL."

"I don't think they ever will. Einstein won't be mocked."

"We do, don't we, every day, after a fashion? We break down a person or a load of freight, shoot them along our beams from one box to the receiver box and recreate them. Just about instantaneously, too."

Mikardo for all his faults spoke now like any ordinary man of Earth. "We of Solterra," he said slowly, "must expand our civilization to other planets orbiting other stars. But they're all so far off. We would take generations in traveling to them aboard an ordinary spaceship—"

"And who's going to spend his whole life cooped up aboard a so-called generation ship? When he knows the scientific brains of the world are working on FTL travel? He wouldn't want to waste his whole life, would he?"

"Point taken—was taken. So they began to send out the carriers, spaceships carrying a matter transmitter. When they reached the planet at which they were aimed then you just went through the box and set about colonizing the new world with materials and men almost instantaneously transmitted from Earth. I bet you do wish you'd been alive then!"

"Maybe."

"And maybe so do I. But at least we're seeing the results of that work. I hear they're just about ready to start in on the planets around Ramses—"

"Ramses. There have been some ugly rumors about that sector of space, Gerald."

"The Gershmi, you mean? Oh, I don't think much will come

BEHOLD THE STARS

of that. Just think of the horror of the Venie war. My God! We can't let that happen again!"

"I lost a nephew in that mess."

"Old Man Ransome lost his grandson."

"Yes."

Mikardo spoke with an emphasis that pinched white patches on either side of his nostrils and his fists clenched on the shining top of his desk. "When we meet any more aliens in space we must meet them as friends! We cannot allow any more wars! To do so is unthinkable—and insane! Mankind must greet all aliens as friends!"

Zukowsky agreed. But the violence of Mikardo's words vaguely alarmed him.

The doorbell chimed and the doorobot, subservient to Mikardo's commands, now that he had a visitor already, said: "One moment please."

Mikardo glanced down at the identplate at the edge of his desk. The polarized screen showed him his visitor but did not transmit his own image to the screen outside the door.

"Stella Ransome," he told Zukowsky.

The scientist rose wheezily. "I'll be on my way. We can't afford to keep the Old Man's great granddaughter waiting."

"She's not like that!" Mikardo said, sharply. Then: "Sorry, Ted. You know that, of course. But this Earth license business is giving me a little headache—"

"That's what you expect in your line of country," Zukowsky said, going towards the door.

The door opened and Zukowsky was almost bowled over by the dark-haired virago who bounced in. Stella Ransome's color was up, her cheeks inflamed, her eyes dangerous. She stormed past Zukowsky and then halted, swung on one high heel so that the synthi-Persian squealed beneath her, her skirt flaring high and showing a brilliant flash of crimson lining beneath the space-blue material. Zukowsky was not too old to have admired her legs before. He did so again, sighing.

"Ted!" Stella snapped imperiously. "Have you sent Steve

BEHOLD THE STARS

off on one of your tom-fooling missions again? If you have, without so much as telling me, I'll—I'll—"

"Whoa, Stella!" Zukowsky liked Stella Ransome too much for his own good. "I haven't sent Steve anywhere. I want to see him. He's a brainy boy and I need him to take over a job in the pipe-line. Where is he?"

"Where is he?" Stella looked as though she could cheerfully spit tin-tacks. "How the blue-blazes do I know? He was supposed to—never mind. I want to know where he is, and fast!"

They both turned as one and stared at Gerald Mikardo. The manager of Ransome Stellar walked toward them, smiling, holding out his hands to Stella.

"You look absolutely charming this morning, Stella. I wish I could help. But, as you know my dear, I've always felt that Stephen Jordan was a little—shall we say—impetuous? Who knows where he is?"

Stella looked hard at Mikardo. "You're not holding out on me? You're the only one who could send him off somewhere if Ted here hasn't."

"No, my dear. Now, if you will excuse me. Oh, by the way. I—ah—that is, there are two tickets to that new charming Javanese shadow-play at the Bowl tomorrow night. I was hoping—if you would do me the honor . . ."

"Tomorrow? I was supposed to be going with Steve."

"Oh. I see." Mikardo's tones gelled.

Stella tossed her head spiritedly. "If Steve doesn't turn up—it's a deal, Gerald. I'm not missing seeing that show for all the Steve Jordans in space."

Going down in the elevator to Zukowsky's laboratory on the eightieth floor, Stella said: "He sounded all-fired certain, didn't he, Ted?"

Zukowsky came back from the intricacies of a box system that would avoid the more obvious snarl-ups from the city's power lines. "Huh?"

"I mean," she said impatiently, "He sounded as though he expected Steve not to turn up."

"Well," said Ted Zukowsky, briskly. "That young man of

BEHOLD THE STARS

yours better had! I'm going to need him to put the Mark Ten to bed. I've bigger fish to fry."

She shook her head. "It's not like Steve to—to disappear like this without so much as a word. He was going to some Army reunion last night. I know! Dave Ward! He can tell me what happened to Steve last night." Stella shivered suddenly. "But—I know it's silly, Ted. But suddenly I feel afraid. . . ."

IV

WARD GLANCED up at Major Perry, received an affirmative nod, and depressed the firing stud. For a microsecond of time the forward steering tubes fired. Then the computer coupled into the carrier's control system from Ward's pack and through that, via the box, to the city-dominating central computer back on Earth, cut the jets. The carrier was back on course.

"You'll understand my natural reluctance to leave you now, Major," Ward said, half-smiling. "But Gershmi or no damned Gershmi, I have two more carriers to service."

"I understand." Perry's voice over the headphones sounded dry. "My men have checked the other two carriers. So far—so good. You'll transit back to Earth, I suppose?"

"Too right." Ward began unclipping the computer power lines. "It's quicker to transit back fifty light years to Earth and transit back to the next carrier than it is to free-jet across the hundred miles or so between."

"We'll be around when you get back." Perry sounded only the slightest uneasy. "I wish we had some heavier weapons than sidearms, and, good as they are, our a.p. stuff. Suppose the Gershmi show up in a battleship?"

"That's highly unlikely, Major, out here in the nothingness between stars, and you know it." Bill Roscoe spoke briskly, obviously at a loss to understand the tough Marine Major's remark.

Perry shook his head, the movement vaguely glimpsed inside his faceplate beneath the armored visor.

"Not so, Commander. We have a funny idea that the Gershmi have transitted the pieces of a battleship out into deep space before and assembled her there. Think what one could do to our carriers!"

"Now he tells me!" said Ward, disgustedly.

"Well, Major—why did you authorize Ward to carry out the course correction!" Roscoe sounded huffed.

"Oh, I don't think it's likely here. But we've got to think of these things, however unpleasant they may be."

"I'll see you on the second carrier, Major." And Dave Ward stepped through the fire-engine red door as the green ready light glowed.

That light, in space, was just filaments behind colored plastic, naked to space itself. The first things the techs carried when they filled the carriers with air again were supplies of bulbs to light the equipment.

Back on Earth Ward staggered and then spring-heeled upright under the abrupt tug of one g. Captain Mainwaring nodded curtly as Bill Roscoe followed.

"Everything is okay, then? Good—you'll want to carry on straight away? Or—?"

"Sure." Ward couldn't keep the sarcastic bite from his voice. "Major Perry's just been mumbling about a Gershmi battleship in space. But I'll carry on. All fit, Bill?"

"Yes." Roscoe didn't say it, but his manner indicated pretty clearly that he was thinking: "Civilians!"

Mainwaring checked the second carrier circuits and as they were being resited onto the new box, Ward had time for a quick word with Chuck Marlow, the switch man.

Marlow was small and chirpy and dapper and had been a Navy blister gunner before joining SSA. He liked his job. Now he said: "This is a hell of a note, Dave."

"Yeah. Just get the switch to Zanzibar smooth and fast. I want to get back here fast."

"Sure thing, Dave."

When you were filling a carrier's fuel bins with matter—

BEHOLD THE STARS

any matter would do if it had a good mass to bulk ratio—you could transmit anything fifty light years from Earth. Earth had no problem of refuse disposal now. But you couldn't keep on sending out chunks of your own home planet, or of those green and pleasant planets of other suns settled by *Homo sapiens*, or even, really, of planets belonging to quondam enemies like the Venies. You'd soon end up with no place to live. So you picked out some otherwise useless hunks of rock orbiting suns no one had yet got around to settling, the vermin of space, and you mined what you wanted and transmitted that.

Zanzibar was the current fuel supply, a minor sun with a swarming brood of planetoids of rock and metal and dirt. The rock and dirt went carrierwards, the minerals to the ever-hungry furnaces back on Earth or to any other of Solterra's federated planets. As a system it was divine. No waste anywhere.

"All set, Ward." Captain Mainwaring was sweating out this duty. "The box is set for the second carrier."

"Check." Ward hitched his equipment around more comfortably. He resettled the computer analogue on his hip. That connected at one end into the giant computer that was almost as big as the Drain itself, and at the other into whatever piece of equipment needed the solution to a problem. Why carry around a small and relatively slow and inefficient computer when you could plug into the biggest there was?

Efficiency and forethought, and no—absolutely no—waste: they were the keys to success in colonizing the Galaxy. And courage, too—but that went without saying.

Clamping his helmet down again, checking his air supply, feeling the computer on his hip, the instruments and servicing gear in his pack, the Massenet Nine on his right thigh, the exo-skeleton power pack, the spring boots, David Ward experienced a grim little flicker of humor; he was certainly dolled up for the simple task of servicing a carrier.

Mainwaring had checked with the Marine top sergeant aboard the second carrier. The fire-engine red door lay wait-

BEHOLD THE STARS

ing, the green ready light glowing cheerfully. Ward swallowed. Then he stepped past the door into the box, waited for the cycling red light to die and stepped out of the other door into the empty hull of the carrier, fifty light years away.

"All clear so far," the craggy Marine sergeant said. His voice grated harshly against Ward's ears. He nodded.

"I'll get right with it. I've another one to do after this."

The drill ran smoothly and Ward had the carrier re-fueled and checked out in only a few minutes above his usual time schedule. All a carrier consisted of were the essentials. The fuel bins containing rock and compressed rubbish, anything that could be spared, that slid down the hoppers under pressure into the converter to be ripped asunder into primitive particles and ejected from the venturis as a wash of ionized dust. That gave sufficient thrust for the carrier; over the years that slow but steady thrust built up into quite high orders of c.

In front of the engines a simple tubular framework supported the control cabin globe, housing the matter transmitter and the controls. There was an air lock, and various aerial arrays. And that was all, apart from the tubing to the forward steering tubes extended widely on outriggers. All that the carriers were was explained by their name. They carried matter transmitters out to alien planets of alien stars.

"She'll need the same degree of course correction as number one, sergeant," Ward said, questioningly.

"I'll check with the Major."

Ward heard the reply.

"This is Major Perry. Go ahead, Ward. Our detectors show no signs of Gershmi. If they were around they'd have been here by this time."

That made sense. The only way the Gershmi, like men, could arrive at this spot in space was via matter transmitter. One of their carriers would have had to have passed close to those from Earth—although the Solterranean carriers had not been sent off from Earth herself. Obviously, the nearer you got to the planet you were aiming at the better; these carriers aimed at the Ganges cluster had been sent

BEHOLD THE STARS

off from the furthest outposts of the Solterranean interstellar sphere of influence.

As soon as the Ganges cluster had been reached the first job would be to assemble fresh carriers and send them off the deeper into the Galaxy. The system was akin to interstellar leapfrog.

These three carriers, now. Two were for insurance, in case something went wrong. The third would still go on past Ganges, if everything else went right, spearing out past what would by then have become a nearer cluster of stars, aiming for the deeper reaches, the inner spaces, the glowing populations of stars along this spiral arm.

Maybe the people of Earth were crazy to imagine, even to dream, that one day they would spread out over the entire Galaxy. Perhaps such a destiny was manifestly impossible. But until someone showed men that it was not for them, they'd just go steadily on about their business of making it come true.

And all the stars, every one, would be visited and chartered and put into a useful and meaningful purpose in the pattern created by the power of human thought.

Would be—if the aliens who already either lived there or laid claim to them permitted.

No damn Gershmi had been sighted this trip. Perhaps Jimmy Kinross had been unlucky, or careless. Maybe he was drifting now in space, with empty air tanks and a mind driven insane by the stupidity of his own actions.

Ward put the carrier on course, finished up with Zanzibar, checked with Perry and then transitted back to Earth.

"Number three," he said to Mainwaring as the techs stripped off his air tanks and substituted a fresh supply.

Mainwaring looked appreciably more cheerful.

"Seems to be going well, Ward. The Gershmi couldn't have been responsible for Kinross's loss, after all. I feel sorry for him; but I'm mighty thankful, all the same."

In marked contrast to the doubts and fears that had tormented him when he had stepped through the box on the two previous occasions this morning, Ward stepped through

this time to the third carrier almost jauntily. He could recognize the symptoms himself. Overconfidence stemming from relief that his fears had not materialized. Dangerous.

A Marine corporal met him with a thumbs up all clear and he soon had Smitty on the line and the rock from far Zanzibar pumping through to the fuel bins. Everything else checked out much the same as on the other two carriers. These three must have been sent off many years ago; they must have made at least three long trips, judging by some of the styles of handiwork about their construction, and this last journey to the Ganges cluster must have begun before the Venie war. Time stretched out pretty thin between the stars.

Perry's voice on the headphones caught him as he stepped through the lock onto the hull. Half a dozen Marines hung on out here, searching out with radar and mass detectors and magneprobes, the old magnetic anomaly detectors blown up to maturity for use in space.

"I take it you're correcting course on this one, too, Ward."

"Yeah, I imagine so. Just taking sights now."

"Well, go ahead whenever you like. There are no Gershmi around here, I'd stake my pension on it."

"I had reached that conclusion too, Major. They'd have to have had a carrier operating across our carrier lines and they couldn't have shifted that fast when we showed up, even if they had brought a combat space ship with them."

"That's the way I read the situation too. Carry on."

When the cyber brain on far distant Earth decided the carrier was back on course it cut the jets. Ward took a last look around. Everything on all systems go.

He watched the green ready light and stepped past the red door. When he walked out the other door, juggling his body to one g, he was safely transmitted across fifty light years and back on Earth.

Captain Mainwaring was looking like a man who has dropped a priceless china vase—and seen it bounce safely.

"Major Perry and his men will be transitting home right away," he told Ward. "Salter doesn't believe the Gershmi

BEHOLD THE STARS

can be in that sector of the Ganges run. Kinross must have had a genuine accident."

"Yeah," said Ward, stripping off his gear—carefully. No spaceman or box trooper ever abused the equipment he or another might depend on in an emergency. "The Ganges run wasn't too near Jimmy's box bag; I just guess we had to be careful."

"That's it, exactly. Now, Ward, I want you—"

Ward snapped his head up and, quite by chance, he happened to be holding the Massenet Nine. Mainwaring glanced at him and started back, one hand going up, his face startled. "Ward!"

"What's that, captain? I'm due for the biggest feed the canteen and the city can offer. You were saying?"

Mainwaring swallowed. "For a moment there I thought . . . Never mind. Yes, cut along and have a meal. But I want you to report back here on the double. We've a problem on our hands."

"Sure thing. I'll just take my regulation break." The sarcasm was not lost on the Navy man.

As soon as Ward saw Bill Roscoe waiting for him in the canteen he knew that the Lieutenant Commander had been taken off the Ganges run carriers to handle the new emergency. Any crisis around the Drain tended to become an emergency if too many high-ranking officers got their cotton-picking hands on it.

Roscoe was half way through a steak that must have been the size of the dinner plate—with frills.

"Hi, Dave," he said around his fork. "Siddown. We've got a lulu going for you now."

"Much obliged, I'm sure." Ward sat down and consulted the menu. "If it wasn't for the money I wouldn't be a carrier box supervisor for all the gold dust on Paracelsus VI—and that's a whole planetfull of it."

"Paracelsus VI? Oh—King Midas. Yeah—that's a weird planet if ever there was one."

"They'll get around to using it for fuel for the box bags one of these days. But I'm hungry. Now, let me see . . ."

BEHOLD THE STARS

He ordered a meal that made Roscoe raise his eyebrows.

"You feel like the fatted calf, then, Dave?"

"Haw, haw. That's not funny."

"Wait 'til you hear what choice item I have to tell you. Then you'll laugh. Ha ha."

The meal arrived and Ward started to eat, not deigning to reply.

This was one of the canteens in the Drain, not the outer canteen in the SSA building, so that Ward was surprised to hear his own name on the paging robot system. He pulled the phone off its hook at the side of the table, not bothering to activate the screen, and said: "Dave Ward."

A girl's voice answered. "Dave? This is Stella—Stella Ransome—"

"Well, for Pete's sake, Stella! I've been trying to get hold of you. What happened to Steve?"

"What do you mean—look, put your screen on, Dave, I want to see you."

He thumbed the screen on and Stella's face appeared. Bill Roscoe said: "Wow! You know girls who look like that, Dave, and you sure keep 'em close to your chest!"

"You must have pulled a little weight to get through to me in the Drain, Stella. What about Steve?" Ward pointedly ignored Roscoe and his lecherous looks at the screen.

"I had to. This is becoming nasty, Dave. Steve wasn't home all night. When did you guys leave off drinking—"

"Steve didn't come to the reunion. I tried to call him—and you—but no luck. If he hasn't been home all night, then where is he?"

"I had some business for the Old Man." Even though she was his great granddaughter, Stella called Old Man Ransome the Old Man, like everyone else. "Took me off planet. I transitted back expecting to see Steve after the reunion—I wanted to check he hadn't made a fool of himself." Her voice sharpened. "Oh, Dave, what's happened to him? He could be hurt, in trouble—"

"Now simmer down, Stella. Take it easy. Steve can look after himself. Look—as soon as I'm off duty I'll meet you.

We've got to do something—perhaps you'd better inform the police right away—”

“I've already done that. They weren't very helpful. Nothing unusual for a man to take a trip, they said. As good as told me I was fussing over nothing.”

“Not quite, Stella. They don't know Steve like we do. Sure, he's impulsive; but he'd let you know . . .”

Dave Ward stopped talking and cursed himself under his breath. A fine line in reassurance that was.

“I'm off at seventeen hundred. I'll see you at Frazzy's, the Venusian restaurant. Don't be late.” He tried to make the last flippant but failed miserably.

“All right, Dave. But—but—”

“I know. Don't worry. Steve will have a perfectly reasonable explanation, you'll see.”

When he had cut the connection, Ward sat back, toying with his food, suddenly not hungry. Old Steve was a fine chap and all that; all the same, if he, Dave Ward, had a girl like Stella he'd think more than twice about dropping out of sight so casually.

Roscoe leered and said: “You know any more like that, Dave? Enough to make up a chummy foursome tonight?”

“Get lost,” Ward said, and then, quickly: “Sorry, Bill. But Steve Jordan and I are buddies—I only hope nothing has happened to him.”

“So you were concerned about a missing man before you heard about Jimmy Kinross. H'mm.” Roscoe hunched up in his chair, staring beadily at Ward. “But common sense must tell you there is no possible connection—”

“Of course there's no connection!” Ward felt frustratedly furious. “What is the latest little bit of hell you have to hand out?”

“Oh, that. Maybe you'd better cool off a little first. We'll go slowly up to Captain Mainwaring and I'll fill you in on the way.”

“Now why the hell should you treat me like a baby?” demanded Ward wrathfully. Then he quieted. The reasons were self-obvious. He finished his drink quickly and stood

BEHOLD THE STARS

up. "What's it this time? Holding hands with a Gershmi while you creep up behind and brain him?"

"Oh, no," said Roscoe, visibly relieved. He smiled. "It's much worse than that," he finished reassuringly.

Ward sniffed and they left the canteen surprisingly amicably. Ward could even rationalize out his feeling that Roscoe had not only humored him but actually maneuvered him. After all, if Ward had stayed on in the Army he'd have made at least captain by now; possibly even, like Jack Tracy, major. He would have been level pegging with Roscoe.

At the moment in fact he was, of course, merely a civilian box bag supervisor employed by the Solterranean Space Agency and consequently a mere nothing in the eyes of military personnel. He didn't think he'd ever worry about that when he'd taken the job. He couldn't shuck his green Army uniform quick enough. And when he'd had to face going through the box with the prospect of facing inimical aliens on the other side he had been so afraid he'd scarcely been able to think straight.

No—Dave Ward didn't mind being manipulated and humored by military personnel so long as they did the fighting and let him get on with his job and earn his salary.

V

UP IN Roger 87-65-2 Captain Mainwaring was sweating again.

As Ward and Roscoe came through onto the flat with the transparent armor glass tech booth to one side, the fluorescents above, the concrete walls sheathed in plastic all about and the brooding fire-engine red door of the box leering at them, they sensed at once the air of tension.

The guard marines were still on duty, lounging watchfully at the rear, an a.p. gun set up on a heavy tripod aimed directly at the box door.

"Ah, Ward—" began Mainwaring.

BEHOLD THE STARS

"I've done my three jumps for today, Captain." Ward spoke firmly. This tension, this sweating air of apprehension was not to his liking. "I'll just collect my gear and sign the book. Then I can check out—"

"No," said Captain Mainwaring.

Ward tried to hold back the feeling that he had known this would happen all along.

"No?" he said, trying to sound hurt.

"Hasn't Commander Roscoe briefed you, man?"

"No, sir," said Roscoe stiffly. "I wanted to know the full details first. David Ward is entitled to that, at least. No need to send him off half-cocked."

Mainwaring regarded Roscoe as though the gallant commander had crawled out of the wall. "I see, commander. Ah—thank you."

Mainwaring walked across to the wall charts. These were standard issue and showed the area of space covered by the control centers operated from Roger 87-65-2. Even this limited area contained thousands of stars. Those of immediate concern to the group showed as brighter points against the glow of the far constellations. Lateral displacement had been arranged easily enough to scale; depth could be shown only nominally; which was why charts of relatively shallow depth and not three dimensional tanks were used here.

Mainwaring tapped the chart with a bark-like forefinger and cleared his throat.

"You were out here this morning, Ward." The point tapped showed on the route line, a red track, the position of the three Ganges run carriers. They were represented by three little green arrows. On the scale involved they were moved forward an inch or so about every three months—no one really minded just so long as they weren't too many parsecs and years out.

"That's right," said Ward brightly.

"Harrumph," said Mainwaring.

Why doesn't the old fossil get on with it? Ward thought with nasty overtones of anticipatory fear riding him again. *I don't like the sound of this.*

BEHOLD THE STARS

"Here is the problem." Mainwaring barely touched the surface of the chart. The plastic could have been white hot to the touch. Ward swallowed. This one was going to be rough. He knew the signs.

"The Salamis run," he said. Then: "What's so tough about that one?"

"We're spreading out from Solterra in all directions," Mainwaring said, avoiding the direct question. "Our rate of progress varies. Now, the Salamis run has reached the point where we are branching—"

"So I'd heard. We're in process of assembling fresh carriers with materials, transitted out to the carriers already there and they will then deflect to a fresh star system. Well?"

"This morning I heard that we could not get through to the Salamis run carriers—"

"Not get through!"

"Precisely. The reasons for this could be any dozen out of a hundred or more—"

"Sure they could. . . . Where do I come in?"

"Well now, Dave," said Roscoe, trying unavailingly to smooth over the ugly sound in Ward's voice. "We've finished assembly on the new box bag but no tests have been run. No one at the other end, d'you see . . ."

"I see." Blind anger that covered the shrieking fear in him bolstered Ward's words. "I see it all! You want me to transit out to a carrier where you don't even know if the box is functioning at all, let alone properly—"

"It's working all right, Ward." There was a snap to Mainwaring's words. "We've sent the standard test objects through and they've vanished from the box here in the Drain—"

"Yeah. Sure. But what did they look like when they reached the other end?"

"Now, see here, Ward—"

"You send someone else through, or go yourself! I'm a civilian and I've done my three bags today! That's what my contract calls for and that's what I'm prepared to do. And I'm not—d'you understand, *not!*—going to transit into a box you can't guarantee!"

BEHOLD THE STARS

"You could be put under military law—"

"You just try it! You just try the union on! They'll roast your hide so crisp you'll be selling matches on the corner for the rest of your days!"

"I didn't think you'd take it like this, Dave—" Roscoe sounded hurt and unhappy.

"Well—for God's sake! How did you think I'd take it? Jump for joy and go through welcoming a miss? You crazy?"

"Someone's got to go through, Ward," Mainwaring said stiffly.

"Check. But that someone isn't me!"

A haze of human emotions, a mingling of antipathy and sympathy, surrounded them in a shroud of their own making. They wouldn't see each other again as they had in the past; their relationships had changed as a result of this impasse. And all the time Ward had to keep the fear seething in him from showing on his face and blasting his reason into making him run screaming from the Drain.

Every person who transitted contained that little seed of fear of a miss in their minds—every single one.

Mainwaring was speaking on the internal phone.

"A little trouble, sir; oh, nothing we can't handle. But we'll have to delay investigation of the Salamis run carrier for an hour. I need to re-assign another service operator—yes, sir, as soon as humanly possible."

The phone slapped back onto its cradle with a loud click and Mainwaring swung his face, hard and hating, towards Ward. "I'll find the next duty box supervisor, Ward. I don't think you need delay your departure from the Drain."

"Thanks." Ward felt light-headed. "Find yourself another hero. Not me."

"Well, Dave—" said Roscoe. And left it at that.

Sure, someone had to risk his neck and take the chance of a miss going through to the Salamis carrier. But why David Ward? Why him? Just because he happened to be handy, on duty, around when the sucker was needed?

What else could he have done?

So he was scared—sure; but he was no longer in the

BEHOLD THE STARS

army and consequently no longer required to do stupid and dangerous things without thinking. If the danger represented by going through an untested box had been presented to him when he'd been a box trooper he'd have gone—unwillingly and afraid—but he'd have gone.

Or so he told himself, lonely with his thoughts, shivering and ashamed.

Packing up his gear ready to stow away in his cubicle alongside his own spacesuit he hadn't used, he was aware of Captain Mainwaring talking on the phone. The back of Mainwaring's neck shone a ruddy red.

Then the captain swung around sharply, still holding the phone, his eyes glaring balefully on Ward.

"Ward," Mainwaring said curtly. "The repercussions of your action here may be unpleasant. But they will have to wait. There is a simple job that needs to be done at once. Oh, there's no danger involved!" His sarcastic venom tore at Ward. "Just a simple job of routine maintenance that you can complete inside the schedule without difficulty."

"Yes?" said Ward, cautiously.

"The supervisor assigned to the carrier has been taken ill—outside the Drain. As you are here you can do the job. Oh—and you'll be paid full overtime rates, of course."

"Of course," said Ward, and meant it.

"Go along to Roger 87-66-5 and take your gear. We'll be needing this box for the Salamis supervisor."

"And the best of Solterran luck to him," said Ward blindly. He reached down for his gear, the computer box, the instruments, and turned away, scarcely seeing where he was going, picking up the suit he had already used, knowing it to be checked out, with adequate air supply.

As he went out the door heading along the linking corridor for Roger 87-66-5, a fresh-faced young Marine lieutenant said: "Don't forget to bring that suit back. That's Marine property—" The lieutenant showed unmistakably that he thought Ward the scum of the system.

"You'll get your property back, chum," said Ward.

BEHOLD THE STARS

The lieutenant's face set bleakly at Ward's tone.

A guy has to live with himself, Ward had heard that often enough; and he'd also heard of men who didn't like what they found in the dark recesses of their own brains. So a man has to live with himself; but first he has to *live*. Stepping through an untested box was a good way to end that condition, permanently. *Then* how could you live with yourself?

"I'm Ward," said Ward, carefully placing the suit and his gear on the flat. Roger 87-66-5 looked just the same as Roger 87-65-2. He glanced at the chunky, barrel-bodied Lazenby, seeing the heavy dew-lapped features, the graying hair, the pouched eyes. "I'm your replacement."

"I'm Commander Lazenby. I've seen you around."

"Same here. Let's get to it, shall we? I'm on overtime, remember."

". . . civilians . . ." said Lazenby, turning abruptly to the wall charts.

"Here," said Lazenby curtly.

The chart showed a single green arrow in surprising isolation. There were clusters and clumps on every side; but this singleton stood out like an oak among pines.

"One?" said Ward, sharply. "How come?"

"She's on the Kwangtao run, eighty light years out. A long term op. The second box bag was lost about ten years or so ago—"

"Venies?"

"Probably." Lazenby's expression showed he was wondering what this civilian knew about Venies. "There are so many damned red M-stars out there it's a wonder she hasn't wrapped herself around one long ago."

The whole area of the galaxy's spiral arms seemed filled with little cool red M-stars—and everywhere else too, it sometimes seemed—packed in like currants in a cake. Man-kind wanted the G-type stars, good solid sensible stars like Old Sol. Apart from wondering beves of astronomers and astrophysicists, there hadn't been much traffic around the

BEHOLD THE STARS

other star types, from the hefty hot blue O-stars to the little red M-stars.

"So this box bag on the Kwangtao run is shedding on her way out?"

"Check."

Ward shrugged on his suit, carrying out pre-flight checks with sure hands that had done this a thousand times and would never skip a single function. He suddenly realized he was wearing the Marine suit with the exo-skeleton and power pack—and the Massenet Nine was still snugged down in the holster on his thigh. He became aware of Lazenby looking at the suit curiously.

"They thought there might be a spot of trouble back in 65-2."

"Was there?"

"No." Evidently the news of the way he'd chickened out hadn't circulated yet. A man like Lazenby would condemn him for that; Ward had an idea his fellow carrier supervisors would not.

He didn't like the idea of going off to a singleton. If the matter transmitter aboard the carrier failed whilst he was aboard—that would be his finish. Nobody older than his hypothetical grandchildren would ever be in time to reach him.

Travel by matter transmitter across the gulfs between the stars contained seeds of its own danger; you became blasé. The thought that he'd be eighty or so light years from Earth, at least fifteen from the nearest inhabited planet, meant little when those distances could be covered almost instantaneously. The great gulfs shrank. But when you had no transmitter; when you were thrown back on mere physical transport—fifteen light years marooned . . . The thought was suddenly ghastly and he stepped quickly to the fire-engine red door and watched the green ready light.

He stepped through.

He'd shown himself to be a coward; in a way that step across the matter transmitter threshold was in a very real sense a step towards his own mental rehabilitation.

BEHOLD THE STARS

He stepped out the far door, adjusting his body to the anticipated near free-fall conditions in the carrier and fell full length on his face, his body crushed down by a stunning and unexpected and altogether terrifying acceleration.

The breath had been thumped out of his lungs by the drop. He shoved up on hands and knees against the force dragging him down, feeling the blood pounding crazily behind his eyes, the drag on his muscles, the loosely sagging feel of his stomach muscles. Then all idea that acceleration was clawing at him was dispelled.

He was kneeling on a muddy ground, on earth and clay and a short squat mossy growth blotching that ground, and around him as he slowly rotated his head to look, dragging against that inexorable force, he saw squat scaled trees and dripping branches and dangling fronds of metallic creepers, and in his ears from his outside pickups the sound of dripping water and sloshing mud and the insane chirruping of some unseen animal life mocked him.

He was on planet!

No acceleration was tugging him down, but at least two gravities. Two honest to God gravities created by a planetary mass and not by the two-g thrust of rockets.

His eyes burned. His breathing came short and labored. There was only one way out of this.

He thumbed in the exo-skeleton's power pack and at once he gained command of himself. Breathing was still labored; but he could stand two gravities in reasonable comfort for a little time without the more extensive aids of a full augmentation suit. He stood up, the exo-skeleton doing the work with its mechanical muscles pulling on the metal members strapped along his legs. The power pack operating them had a good long life. He began to feel angry.

He turned around to face the box. As he moved quite normally the metal exo-skeleton members attached to his backbone and limbs corresponded with power from the power pack and reproduced his movements. He had set the throttle to two gravities and standard strength; if he set the strength

higher he could walk over and uproot one of those squat and unlovely trees without so much as raising a sweat.

The matter transitter stood at a drunken angle, mud sloshing around its base, its top covered with dead leaves and mud and a few scaly animals, two inches long, that scattered and scuttled away as he waved at them.

His anger continued. Those idiots in the control booth had obviously keyed him into the wrong box. He knew enough to know it was easily done. With a limited number of boxes in the Drain being switched into thousands upon thousands of boxes aboard carriers in space, a mistake was sometimes bound to occur. But all the same, he felt anger and fear that it had happened to him.

And, anyway, if the switching operators had made a mistake and sent him to another box, then even so that box should still be aboard a carrier in space. Not on planet. That didn't make sense.

He lifted the phone off its hook and noted the battered condition of the box and its ancillary equipment.

"Commander? Can you hear me?"

The silence on the phone held the quality of the silence of a pharaoh's tomb.

He didn't even speak again; that line was dead.

The sweat stung his forehead before the swabs cleaned it up and his heart thumped slowly and painfully—and the two gravities were not wholly responsible for that. His mouth and throat felt Sahara-dry. He was in a terrible state of fear and yet he had to look around the planetary features, consign them to memory, make box trooper observations.

The box stood in a small clearing of the squat trees, dripping their eternal rain. What light there was seeped down through heavy pendulous leaves, a light of a ghastly orange hue that threw contorted shadows—*wrong* shadows. Ward realized that he hadn't been off-Earth and on an alien planet for some time. The fear nearly choked him.

The clearing appeared to be fenced in by those trees, roofed by the leaves. He could not see more than five yards in any direction. He felt the clearing to be a prison.

BEHOLD THE STARS

He resumed his scrutiny of the box and half lifted a powered arm to the controls. Then he paused. A tiny unpleasant though obtruded itself.

How had the box come here?

The first and obvious answer lay in what Lazenby had been saying; the carrier had been trapped by the gravitational pull of a small red star and had fallen onto the surface of a planet. But that was absurd. Even if the carrier had not been traveling at something like point four of *c*, even if it had just fallen onto the planet from a simple orbit, it would have been vaporized, smashed, utterly destroyed.

The boxes were built ruggedly; but even their armor couldn't stand up to that type of punishment.

So—the box had been brought here.

And then Ward saw that, arguing along these lines, the techs back in the control booth deep in the Drain probably hadn't made a mistake and had sent him to the single carrier on the Kwangtao run.

But, correct box or another one, that still did not explain how the box had come here.

Ward remembered the Venie war. He remembered the tricks both sides had got up to—and he became even more afraid; with a deadly cold fear that for a brief moment held him in paralytic stasis before the box.

He turned sharply on his heel, the exo-skeleton smoothly pacing him and carrying the muscle-load. He thought he glimpsed movement between the trees—and if he had guessed right beyond those fake trees would be a concrete pen and a vast arsenal of weapons and waiting ranks of Gershmi.

There was movement!

He drew the Massenet Nine without thought, hefted it, fired a ten-shot burst between the scaled trunks and saw a human form rear and flop and another appear behind it. He fired again and this time heard the zing of bullets striking the box. Somehow or other he was icy calm. His fingers found the controls and activated the door. No lights shone above the box—the naked elements would not func-

BEHOLD THE STARS

tion in this atmosphere; whatever atmosphere it might be. That was a chance Lazenby and the techs back in the Drain on Earth, light years away, would have to take.

He fired again, and had time to note with impersonal approval that the old ten-shot formula was still successful. A single shot could miss. Half a dozen might strike but might not damage. Ten was the optimum number to score sufficient hits to penetrate body armor.

There were more man-shapes flitting through that artificial screen of trees. He thought he glimpsed the snout of an AFV and then he felt the door open against his fingers. He triggered two bursts, fanning them fractionally, and stepped back. Something struck the corner of the door viciously and buzzed past his helmet.

The door began to close.

Two inches from the jamb the door hesitated. A hand—a non-human hand with three fingers and a thumb clad in an armored mitten-type glove—appeared around the edge of the door. The muzzle of a weapon snouted suddenly into view through the two inch crack.

Ward flung himself sideways, jerked his exo-skeleton up to full power, stamped down on the retaining armored hand and heard the crunch as he mashed it flat. The stream of bullets from the weapon passed over his shoulder. He pushed his own weapon's muzzle up to the other and fired. The alien weapon vanished. He thrust hard at the door edge, forcing it to close and overriding the lock mechanism. Then he sagged back against the door at his back and fell on and over as that door opened and he toppled out into the Drain.

"What the blue blazes is going on?" screamed Lazenby,

Ward gathered himself. He jerked up and sprang ten feet into the air. He shouted as loudly as he could: "Switch that box off! Switch it anywhere! But disconnect it from the Drain! *Jump to it!*"

He had forgotten the one gravity of Earth, forgotten his exo-skeleton was on full power. He went on jumping un-

BEHOLD THE STARS

til he crashed into the plastic-coated concrete overhead. Then he fell with a crash back down to the floor.

Lazenby stood over him furiously.

"Explain yourself, Ward! At once!"

"Is that box switched off?"

A tech shouted down, alarmed. "She's safe."

Other personnel came running. Ward stood up, deactivating the exo-skeleton. He patted one of the metal limbs strapped alongside his forearm. "Thank God I was wearing that—and had the Massenet!"

Lazenby had caught on now. "Gershmi?"

"Yeah."

Then Ward sat down suddenly on the floor and tried not to be sick. After a minute or two, he said: "Find a bomb. A nice big one. Send it through the box to that carrier on the Kwangtao run."

A gruff, rasping voice said: "All that time wasted! Years of effort and waiting—thrown away! We won't reach Kwangtao now for—oh, decades! Blast it!"

Ward looked up. He remained sitting down. He felt safer that way. Towering over him stood Byron Abdullah al-Alghafeki, his rear-admiral's uniform incongruous on his gigantic frame. Alghafeki was rear admiral in command of the Roger 87 group. Now he took command in a crisp incisive way that made Ward feel that perhaps the Navy might have good in it, after all.

The bomb was wheeled in on its trolley and the Navy techs handled it with some care and affection.

Ward watched, fascinated.

"They won't send this back in a hurry," Alghafeki growled. "But they might guess what we're up to and wreck the box their end. Set a damper on the bomb so if it comes back it won't wreck half the Drain."

"Aye, aye, sir," said a tech petty officer, busy with gleaming instruments half buried inside the bomb.

Rear Admiral Alghafeki rubbed his raspy chin, a brooding look growing on his face as he stared at the bomb, at

BEHOLD THE STARS

the box door, at Ward now slowly rising to his feet. "Hold it," he said abruptly to the petty officer.

"Aye, aye, sir. Hold."

David Ward stood up slowly. He began to hate himself. He began to cringe mentally. But he was still an Earthman, he still had duties and responsibilities larger than himself. He said: "I think it could be done, Admiral."

Alghafeki nodded. He did not lift his face from its brooding surveyance of Ward as he said: "Switch man. That box is safely in neutral? Confirm you had switched into the Kwangtao run carrier."

"Safe, sir," came the tech's voice from the speaker hitched below his armored transparent booth window. "We carried out a check; the supervisor was sent to the Kwangtao run box, sir. No possibility of error."

"All those light years on the way," Alghafeki said, musingly. "Eighty light years away, shedding as she went. At least two hundred stars must be involved."

"She'd have to be accelerated again, Admiral," said Ward. "She could start off again from where she is—and that's fifteen better than the nearest jumping off point—"

"Do we take the chance to save fifteen light years, fifty or so Earth years? It may cost men's lives—can you buy light years with men's lives, supervisor?"

Ward swallowed. "We're doing it all the time."

Lazenby and the tech petty officer had caught on now. The P.O. began to screw the safety back on all the way on his bomb. He patted the casing, a gesture that eloquently told what he thought. He acted like a master returning a favorite horse to its stall without giving it a run.

"Give me all the details, supervisor—I know you're a civilian." Alghafeki looked again at Ward, taking in the Marine suit and the consequent lack of Ward's name. "Name?"

"David Ward."

"Ah—I see. That explains the suit. You acted quickly then, Ward. That doesn't gell with what Captain Mainwaring told me."

"What he told you, Admiral, was probably quite true.

BEHOLD THE STARS

I refused to go through an untested and non-guaranteed box." The memory did not smart so much, now.

Ward went on: "Two gravities, at least, where I was. Heavy, squat, scaly trees, dripping fronds and moisture. Mud and clay, moss. Atmosphere—"

"We trapped some you brought back," Lazenby said, cutting across. "Analysis soon. But it did not affect us. If it isn't air—that's unlikely—it's near enough not to make too much difference."

"Good," rumbled Alghafeki. "Go on, Ward."

"The box stood in a clearing about thirty feet in diameter, in the exact center. Light—the light was orangy-red, could be an M-star." He swallowed, remembering. "My impression was the scene was a fake; that the trees were merely a screen, two dimensional. There could be a whole Gershmi arsenal beyond."

"Proof?"

"Observation on that score, Admiral. Oh—and a Gershmi tried to shoot me and prevent the door from closing. I saw his hand before I mashed it. Three fingers and thumb. No mistake."

"No mistake. Gershmi."

The men from Earth had been surprised at first to find recognizably human types of near-Earthly type planets, as they expanded outwards into the spiral arm of the galaxy. You couldn't tell a Venie from a human being of Earth. But the fact remained that the further away men voyaged greater differences in physiological structure appeared. The Gershmi—like men in every way except their lack of a fourth finger—were the latest race to be contacted.

"Gershmi," the rear admiral said again. "Keep that Kwangtao box bag firmly locked into a neutral, switchmen. Hold that bomb, P.O. Shove it into a handy corner. I don't like throwing away fifty years of effort; but I don't like throwing away men's lives."

Alghafeki turned and walked abruptly from the flat.

The hatred for himself in David Ward bubbled over.

He called after the departing admiral: "It could be done."

BEHOLD THE STARS

They evidently set it up as a trap knowing the two gravities would hold a human long enough for them to jump him without harming the box and without giving him time to get back."

Alghafeki turned, scowling.

"Well?"

"I was lucky I was wearing an augmented suit and had a gun. They didn't expect that on what should have been a routine service. They know the way we go about things—Jimmy Kinross alone and the others we've lost before him. They could have had a box there all ready to strike straight into the Drain."

So?"

Ward licked his lips. His head felt light. "I'll go back with the assault group. I know the terrain. We could establish a bridgehead and—and the rest would follow." The fear in him lay low, like deep-banked fires in the nether pits of hell. "I'll volunteer to transit back."

VI

DAVID WARD, *civilian*, felt like the condemned man on the scaffold having the hangman's noose removed from his neck and a free pardon thrust into his hand.

"It takes six months to train a competent box bag serviceman," said Salter, heavily. "And another six or so before he can do the job blindfolded. And at least four years are required before he is competent enough to be promoted to supervisor. A lot of time, money and effort has gone into your training, Ward."

"I know, sir." Ward couldn't look at Alghafeki and the other admirals and Marine captain generals sitting in a semi-circle in Salter's conference room high in the SSA building. "But it takes time to train a competent assault Marine—"

"Their job is to fight if it is necessary. Yours is to service box bags. We needn't argue the point any further."

"No, sir."

BEHOLD THE STARS

He tried not to let the heartfelt relief show too much in his face and voice. Everything he knew, had seen, had experienced, even had thought, in those few frightful moments when he'd stumbled out of the pseudo Kwangtao run carrier onto a hostile trap, had been extracted from his mind. The Marines going into the assault—if they went at all—would know all he had learned.

"We are not actually in a state of war with the Gershmi," said a captain general.

"It's coming, though, there's no use denying that," said Alghafeki, here among his superiors because he was rear admiral in charge of the Roger 87 group, and under whose tactical command the operation would fall—if the operation was mounted.

One horrible doubt that had plagued Ward, resolved during his questioning, returned now to haunt him. He felt reasonably sure, thinking back, that he had fired first. Oh, sure, the Gershmi had shot at him; but, surely, that was after he'd shot at them, wasn't it? But, even so, they had not acted with friendly intentions. That box had not taken itself down to that unfriendly planet and set itself up so that anyone coming unsuspectingly through it would be trapped and mired, ready to be jumped and the portal to Earth left open. No—he had to accept that even though he had fired first he had acted correctly.

"We may not be in an official state of war," a captain general said, his eyes bleak and his face a granite mask. "And I accept the truism we must be friendly towards aliens. But since when has a formal and chivalrous declaration of war ever been obtained between hostile races in space? And since when have we of Earth continued for very long to turn the other cheek?"

"We've taken just about as much as we can from the Gershmi," put in an elderly admiral whose fighting days were over. Then, shaming Ward's thoughts, he added: "My grandson doesn't want to go out to space to fight. But if the Gershmi continue to act as they are doing, he'll go—and go willingly."

BEHOLD THE STARS

A vice admiral with a curt voice and jerky neurotic movements said sharply: "And I say we're barbarians even to dream of carrying on another interstellar war! We must show every overture of friendship to the Gershmi, tolerate their different mores, turn the other cheek and try to seek friendship—and go on turning that cheek and go on seeking!"

"You would not have far to seek, Admiral," said Salter drily, "if a thermo-nuclear bomb or an invading swarm of Gershmi had erupted into the Drain."

Ward stared curiously at the pacifist vice admiral. He recognized him, of course, as Carthew Prendergast Garcia, well-known for the brilliant ship-handling that had smashed a Venie sneak attack on the triple suns and whirling planets of Alpha Centaurus. His chest glowed with medal ribbons. He carried half a dozen wound stripes on his sleeve. His face possessed that solid, craggy, square look that comes to men of habitual command with the years. He looked every inch the ruthless fighting man. And he hadn't gone soft; he fought now for his friendship-to-the-aliens approach with all the ferociousness that Ward knew he would bring to smashing the tactical plans of his junior officers in battle.

Ward did not know enough about the way top-level conferences were conducted to guess the probable outcome. So far Salter had not shown his hand and Ward guessed the top man in the SSA would seek guidance on political policy from contacts in the government before committing himself. Some of his advisers wanted to send in the bomb. Others wanted to shunt the Kwangtao run box into a permanent closed field. Others wanted to send in a full-scale assault party ready to strike inland, take over the Gershmi installations and start the Kwangtao run again. And others wanted to send in a peace mission to seek contacts with the Gershmi and gain their friendship.

Ward thought of the way Gershmi bullets had tzingged past his helmet, the dreadful sight of that alien hand tugging at the door—and he couldn't bring himself to hope that any solution was the right one.

BEHOLD THE STARS

They were talking about him now. "We appreciate very highly your courage and quick thinking, Ward." Salter seemed to mean what he was saying. Ward had to hand that to him. There was no oily patronage, no paternal head-patting here. Salter must know pretty well what Ward had been through. "You did very well. But as a civilian you will not accompany the assault party, if there is one. Thank you, Ward. You can go now—" Salter favored him with a quick warm smile that changed that massive face from the semblance of a gargoyle into that of a dear friend. "And you'd better go off and enjoy yourself. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir," said Ward, rising like a puppet.

He went out and down in the express elevator and that looming impressive visage of Salter paced him as he went. The passionate fires of conviction banked beneath the surface of Salter's mind had glared through during the conference; that smile made a dragon into a cherubic gazelle. Or something like that. Ward felt suddenly too tired to worry about men as highly placed as that. He needed a drink.

Bill Roscoe waited patiently for him in the canteen, one foot hooked over the brass bar rail, a glass of whiskey in one hand and another glass on the bar.

"Thanks, Bill." Ward drank gratefully.

Roscoe was looking uncomfortable. He said: "Your actions along in 66-5 certainly disprove what they were thinking about you in 65-2. And, if I'd been in your shoes, I wonder if I'd have had the guts to refuse."

"It wasn't guts, Bill. Don't get it wrong. I was dead scared." Then he added, slowly: "As I had every right to be—"

"You did." Roscoe looked grim. "I thought you'd better have a drink under your belt before I told you—"

Ward halted his arm as he reached for the second glass deposited on the bar by the barobot. A tight band encircled his forehead. After what seemed an eternity, he said: "What happened?"

"Joshua Mkolo went through—"

"I know him. Nice guy."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"You knew him, Dave. It—wasn't pretty. The box was a good few angstroms off balance—"

"Oh my God!"

"He died unpleasantly; but they balanced the box. The Salamis run carriers will be serviced again. And no doubt they'll find out why the others went on the blink."

"Gershmi."

"Could be."

Ward said irritably: "I'm glad I saved my skin and no one can blame me for Joshua. But I can blame some of the top brass if they don't see this is a whole carefully calculated scheme of the Gershmi! It's obvious! The Gershmi are deliberately out to sabotage our carriers!"

"I think that eventuality is well under consideration—"

"Consideration! What are we going to do about it?"

"Leave that to the ones who do the worrying. We've a date tonight, remember?"

"Oh—!" Ward glanced at his watch, and then, stricken, checked with the bar clock. Eighteen hundred hours.

He swung violently away from the bar and began striding for the door. Roscoe paced him at his elbow.

"What's this 'we' business, Bill?"

"D'you mind?"

"Hell, yes!" Then Ward simmered down. Bill Roscoe was a right guy. If he asked him to go if Stella became too emotional, or told him things that perhaps a third party shouldn't know, why, Roscoe would leave right away. Ward was confident of that.

"All right, Bill. But you take your tail outta it if I tell you scam. Understood?"

"Understood."

They left the SSA building and took a robot taxi to Frazy's, the Venusian restaurant.

The place was a gimmick, a pipe-dream, dredged from the legends of the future of long ago. This was the Venus of myth, the steaming jungle swamps, the enormous trees, the silvery misted light sifting down through a perpetual overcast. Solidos of prehistoric monsters and monsters gouged

BEHOLD THE STARS

from the imaginings of drug-stupified artists paraded the walls, roaring and snorting and tossing gargantuan backs and rolling saucer eyes. As you sat down at your table intensity fields picked up your wishes, muting the sounds and sights, or enclosing you in a four square wall of privacy.

Ward and Roscoe stared about through the dank jungles of a Venus that never was, and for a horrible instant Ward jerked his mind back to that abrupt exit from the box of an hour or so ago. Then he straightened his spine and grabbed Roscoe's arm.

"She's still here, Bill! Come on."

He fairly dragged the Navy man to the table where Stella sat talking easily to a girl in the next seat. Ward didn't know the girl; her face lay in shadow and he caught only the pearly gleam of teeth as she laughed.

Then he was standing inside the sphere of privacy around the table and stammering an awkward apology.

"Dave!" She pouted up at him, serious and yet laughing. "I thought you'd gone awol on me, too!"

"Stella—you look—what's the news? He's back?"

"Yes! Well, rather, not back. But I have news of him. He's safe!"

She glanced past Ward.

"That's great," he said, with genuine relief. "Oh, this is Bill Roscoe. He's Navy." Roscoe was wearing a neat civilian suit, yet he still contrived to look toughly naval, a gift that had in the past made Ward smile. "Miss Stella Ransome."

"Of Ransome Stellar? It's a pleasure," said Roscoe, shaking hands. "And I do mean a pleasure."

"You're wasting your time, pal," said Ward, the friendship in his voice only just outweighing the sharp snap. "The lady is otherwise occupied."

Stella laughed. She appeared to have thrown off all the cares that had ridden her when she'd spoken to Ward on the phone earlier. "And this is Julie," she said.

The girl in the adjoining seat lifted her head and smiled.

Ward forgot Stella Ransome. He forgot Steve Jordan and

BEHOLD THE STARS

Bill Roscoe—forgot his own problems and worries and cares.

He came to when Stella spoke his name, introducing him. Julie's hand lay warm and soft in his, yet he could feel the strength in the slender fingers.

"Hi, Dave," she said. Her voice caressed him, husky and warm.

"H-hi, Julie,"

She would have won no prizes in a beauty contest. Her nose verged on the snub; her mouth was generous. Her eyes, impressive, sparkling, shaped with care, laughed out at him. Her vigor and aliveness, the essence of womanliness, these were her attractions.

"So your long lost love has returned to the fold, then, Stella," Bill Roscoe said, smiling and sitting down.

Ward sat next to Julie and he could have sworn the seat radiated heat.

"Julie told me where he was. The nincompoop boxed out to Capella—I don't know which planet—and he didn't leave a forwarding address."

"But why, Stella?" Ward felt he had better concentrate on the business he had come for, instead of making a fool of himself. Already Roscoe had given him a dirty look.

"Search me. Did he say why, Julie?"

"No. My father told me and he heard it from someone or other quite casually. It was a million to one chance I heard."

Roscoe hunched around in his chair so that he was more directly facing Stella. He smiled at her. A large and square shoulder bulked up between her and Ward. He started to say something, to remove that interfering shoulder, when Julie said softly: "I hear you're a box bag supervisor. Have you been out today?"

"Yes," said Ward, forgetting about Roscoe's shoulder.

"I wish I could box out freely like that, right out to the limits. Just boxing across to Centaurus or Amphitrite or any other of the old familiar stars—it palls. Now you—you're lucky."

"I suppose so."

BEHOLD THE STARS

Lord! He wasn't exactly making bright conversation.

"You're a friend of Steve's? I mean—a good friend?"

The tone change in the last sentence brought Ward's attention away from Julie as a woman, to someone with something on their mind.

"I like to think so. We went through some tough times together. I rate him as just about my best friend."

"Ah! Well, now, Mister Ward—"

"Dave—"

"As I was saying. I'd rather like to talk to you about Steve Jordan; but not while Stella is around."

Ward came quiveringly alive. "What's wrong?"

"Not so loud, oaf! Stella is happy now she thinks Steve is safe—"

"Thinks?" Ward whispered the word.

"I've no idea where he is. I just made up that story about Centaurus because I didn't like to see Stella so upset—"

"You just made it up!"

"Keep your voice down. No—no it's no good. We'll have to talk later, in private. Do you mind?"

In private with this girl? "No," said Ward.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'd love it."

She glanced at him sharply, wickedly. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm worried about Steve. This is strictly business."

"Where?"

"Hey! What's going on between you two conspirators?" Stella turned a flushed and laughing face towards them, her eyes radiant.

"And what about you two?" Julie retorted acidly. "Have you surfaced, then?"

"Now, Julie—" said Stella, laughing.

The conversation became general as Roscoe removed his offending shoulder. They ordered a meal and ate and drank amid laughter and a great relaxed sense of freedom. But Ward was well aware of the undercurrents. He caught Julie's eye on him more than once, and reminded himself that behind that vivacious and alluring face, lay a scheming mind.

BEHOLD THE STARS

All in all, Ward felt, as they dialed for a robot taxi—a pleasant evening.

"Oh, Stella," said Julie, suddenly, "Can I trust you with Bill if he sees you home? I'm so tired—"

"Of course." And so it was settled. Roscoe gave Ward a knowing wink as the two taxies parted. Ward scowled back.

He turned to Julie. "Now, what's all the mystery about? Why tell lies to Stella—I mean, she's a big girl now. It's a good idea to keep her happy; but you can't keep that up for long. And the longer you do, the worse it will be for her. You see that?"

"Of course I do, stupid! But it just has to be done this way—"

"What way? For Pete's sake, girl, spit it out!"

"I'm not one of your green young army recruits, Captain Ward—"

"Now what the hell has captain got to do with it? I was never a captain. I was acting lieutenant colonel, substantive lieutenant. I'm a plain mister. *Now tell me!*"

"As I was saying, Lieutenant Colonel Ward. I'm not one of your men! You don't shout at me!"

"I give up." Ward drew back, half turning away on the taxi seat. "What do you do with an evasive, irritating, seductive woman like this?"

"This?"

And her face was uplifted to his. So he kissed her.

They sat for a moment staring at each other.

"And," said Julie softly, her eyes still fixed on his face, "I'm still not one of your men! You don't shout and order me about."

"Just tell me," Ward said, equally softly. "Let's get this thing about Steve Jordan and Stella out of the way. Then we can explore—other avenues."

"I told Stella that lie about Steve to keep her happy and prevent her from doing what she intended to do tonight."

"What was that?"

The city building blocks sped past them in a steady chro-

BEHOLD THE STARS

matic flow of exo-skeleton old-fashioned buildings ripe for demolition and the current modern trend in endo-skeleton central stems like ripe fruit crowded on trees. They must be penetrating into an older section of the city where the eternal tug-of-war between Terran development and galactic exploration was only lately being settled amicably. Both efforts must go hand in hand, everyone knew that; of what value a handful of extra M-stars if a city still contained below-average housing and inadequate sanitation and schooling and medical facilities?

The Gershmi were one answer, of course.

"Well?"

She made no pretence of her reluctance to get to the point she was trying to make. Ward tried to compose himself; after all, just sitting next to her and thinking about that kiss was reward enough—for a time. Girls these days made the running in matters of sex equally with men. Old maids were few and far between in a culture reaching for the stars.

"Do you know Marshal Levy?"

Ward chuckled softly. "Know him? No. Know of him—yes."

"What I thought." She sounded coolly amused. "I work for him. I'm his private secretary."

"You don't say—well—" He brought himself up. "What's that got to do with Steve?"

"Marshal Levy at the moment is Chief of Staff for the Army. You probably know that. We've been receiving rather disturbing reports lately; I won't go into them for the moment as they are classified. Steve was asked to investigate—"

"Steve! Investigate! Army secrets!" He felt like a school-boy ordered to scrub the back of his neck. "What rubbish is this, Julie?"

Her face flashed with impatience, and strain and worry showed there, too. "It's not rubbish, Dave. Just listen, confound you!"

"Listen, nothing! Steve works for Ransome Stellar and he's engaged to Stella and he likes his job. He's a big

BEHOLD THE STARS

time—a full time—executive on the scientific staff there. Old Zukowsky considers him his brightest assistant—”

“And he works for Army security—still.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“You don’t have to. I’m telling you because this is the reason for his disappearance.”

“You’re telling me Steve was working for Army Intelligence and something has happened to him and you soft-soaped Stella because of that? I don’t know I like this—”

She cut him off.

“The Army, the Navy, the Marines, the whole shooting match of our forces in space are being riddled with cowards, Dave. The strength of the Earth is being whittled away. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Cowards?” he said, flabbergasted. “But you can’t have cowards in space. Men who are afraid, yes. Men like me who are scared stiff all the time—but cowards—hell, the Gershmi will walk all over us!”

“So you can see that, then?” Her sarcasm lashed him.

He began to answer angrily that he saw a good deal more than she gave him credit for; but he stopped. An image of Vice Admiral Garcia rose into his mind.

“You wouldn’t be,” he said carefully, “talking about hitherto very tough fighting men who now only talk of peace and friendship with the aliens—on any terms and in however a humiliating way, so long as they don’t have to fight?”

She sat bolt upright. Her little gasp echoed in the taxi. They had been circling aimlessly for some time now, retracing their path in the traffic pattern.

“So you’ve seen . . . ?”

“I’ve seen tough men talking like pacifists. There’s no harm in that, it’s the only sensible way to think about aliens when the aliens come in friendship. But I’ve been worried—”

“Something—or someone—is deliberately forcing our fighting men to demand peace at any price. You have the wit to guess what that will do if the Gershmi are out for a fight? Steve was assigned a task in trying to uncover the truth. He has disappeared.”

"And—?"

"You will take over his assignment. You're his best friend. You can search for him and try to get to the bottom of this mess. It's absolutely vital for the Earth that we stop this erosion of our fighting forces. And you're the guy who's going to do it!"

VII

BATES HAD been most cooperative. Gerald Mikardo allowed himself a small self-satisfied smile as he took the elevator down to the fiftieth floor of the Terran Government Transport Ministry building. His own personal car waited for him on the landing platform jutting out over the complex of the city below.

The trappings of power, of luxury and of personal magnificence mattered a very great deal in Mikardo's life. He could remember now with affectionate nostalgia the way he and his brothers had played at being rich and powerful as boys.

But his brothers were dead now, murdered in senseless wars with aliens out there in the starlanes.

He shrugged off that bitter black mood of depression and thought back to his meeting with Bates, and again that small self-satisfied smile that was very much of the present flickered across his heavy face.

The car took him smoothly into the city traffic pattern and he lay back on the cushions, thought of calling Old Man Ransome on the radio to tell him the good news, and then decided against it. The Old Man was a fanatic on security. Better to wait until he could pass on the information by word of mouth, free from prying ears.

Mixed with the pleasant thoughts that he had successfully accomplished a difficult operation were even more pleasant thoughts about the direction his life was taking. Tonight, for example, he would be squiring Stella Ransome to some tiresome shadow play. But this represented very much of a breakthrough. She had not turned him down

BEHOLD THE STARS

this time out of hand. Through her, with or without her active cooperation, he intended to take over Ransome Stellar when the Old Man had at last had enough and given up.

Steve Jordan was a mere boy, an admittedly bright spark in the scientific field; but a lightweight in the field of big business. Jordan was not the material from which a tycoon could be forged. He would not even know what to do with Ransome Stellar if he married Stella and the great interstellar bridging corporation fell to him.

The thought of Mikardo working under the orders of Jordan filled Mikardo with disgust.

He would have to leave and place his undoubted talents at the disposal of Embebe or Spottiswood or even, unpleasantly enough, of one of the other smaller interstellar bridging companies. It would mean another beginning, another fighting struggle to the top.

Or, of course, Jordan could be removed in other ways.

Mikardo did not allow his thoughts to linger long on that aspect. He didn't like the idea. It was diametrically opposed to all he was trying to do.

And he had wit enough to see that if Jordan did marry Stella the Old Man's allegiance would fall decidedly on the side of his great granddaughter's new husband.

Just what the Old Man would do about the Great Plan then remained to be seen. That was a lever, certainly; but it would be a lever only to maintain him in the place he already held.

And, with the Great Plan running so well, Gerald Mikardo very dearly wanted to lift himself up out of the place he already held.

"Come in, young man! Any friend of Steve's is a friend of mine."

Ted Zukowsky wheezed away a plump and affable welcome, leading the way through RSC laboratories' anteroom to his office. Ward had shaken that doughy hand without the usual feeling of repugnance he held for overweight, soft

BEHOLD THE STARS

and flabby men. Zukowsky's brain made up for much of his physical deficiencies.

"It's very good of you to see me so early, Mr. Zukowsky." Ward knew enough from Steve not to call the ponderous scientist Doctor.

"Is Steve around?"

"Steve? No." Zukowsky evidently raked up an old grievance. "That young man spends altogether too much time gadding about. He hasn't been in the laboratory for two days or more. And I need him for—well, never mind that. If you see him tell him from me that the place will fall down if he doesn't hurry back."

"When did you last see him, then?"

"When? Oh—I don't know. Day before yesterday. Yes, he was working on—well, again that needn't concern you. He was supposed to transit to Hildesheim on a routine checkup. I heard he had returned but he didn't report back to me—"

"Who told you he had returned?"

"Who? Why, Gerald. Gerald Mikardo."

"I see."

"We were planning to double up our transit schedules to Hildesheim. Traffic is increasing." Zukowsky mopped his brow, panting. "As you are well aware, young man, within a distance of about thirty light years of Earth there are only one hundred and seventy stars. And not so very many of them are of use to us."

"I know. That's why the box bag system is so important."

"True. Hildesheim is forty away—a far outpost compared with the closer stars. But, I suppose," he said with a grin at Ward, "not so far to a carrier supervisor?"

"Depends in which sector you're operating. Down in the Beta group they're already reaching out to a hundred and fifty light years. They started earlier down there and send their carriers out at full bore—point seven of c in some cases—and shed to the stars as they pass."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"Yes, a most interesting variation of technique. But now, young man—"

"Of course. I know you are busy. But—Hildesheim is a G-type star ten times as bright as the Sun with—ah—let me think—"

"Twenty planets, four of which are suitable for earthly life."

"Exactly."

"He went to Gordonstoun."

"Thank you, Mister Zukowsky. You've been very helpful."

Ward rode down to the taxi landing platform on the fortieth floor. He had to report in for duty at the Drain in forty-five minutes so that when reception at the RSC desk told him the Hildesheim box circuits were not scheduled for another half hour he took a taxi across to the GBI building. Galactic Bridges Inc. were just as big and impressive an outfit as Ransome Stellar and before Steve had become seriously interested in Stella he had often told Ward in moments of frustration with his job that he'd a good mind to stroll over and see old Arthur Spottiswood of GBI and grab himself a better job and one where there were no superannuated flunkies breathing down his neck. That was like Steve, to go off half-cocked over silly trifles and to remain completely calm in moments of great crisis. But he covered that well enough at work. The GBI connection with Hildesheim had only recently been opened and the services were being run still with some prestige value attached. The next box connection was due in five minutes after Ward arrived.

He stood by the counter in the vast tenth-storey reception area, marble floored, plastic sheathed, clothed in light. Everywhere men and women checked in with their hand baggage and made their chattering ways to the strips. Signs told in simple terminology of the far-off destinations of those passengers. A hum of subdued and yet electric excitement permeated the area; star-hopping was a tame pursuit by now, yet no man or woman of Earth could feel blasé about traversing the great gulfs between the stars.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Ward bought a paper—a real honest-to-goodness newspaper printed on paper in colored inks and microtoned multi-colored illustrations. He tucked it under his arm. Many people walked past with the ubiquitous portable TV news sets; but Ward liked to digest his news at his own pace. Even the press-button playback newscasts always available on specified channels of the TV wavelengths, when you adjusted the coverage to go at a speed to suit yourself, palled in Ward's estimation beside the solid, genuine feel of a newspaper.

The knowledge that he was doing all this merely because a girl had kissed him did not bother him. For it wasn't true. Oh, sure, she had kissed him; but Ward knew well enough why he had been chosen to check out on Steve Jordan. Unwilling though he was, he was still the logical choice, for he was Jordan's best friend and could therefore make enquiries without arousing the suspicion that an unknown stranger would arouse. The police had not moved in the case, nor were they likely to.

The Hildesheim announcer said: "Will all passengers for Hildesheim and Varstig please go to strip fifteen."

GBI made a good smooth job of transporting people about among the stars. Plush carpets deadened the footfalls, soft sympathetic lighting showed up only the good features of the passengers' faces, robots trundled along with hand baggage, a plethora of human nurses and attendants and friendly attentive helpers waited everywhere for the inevitable few first-timers or nervous cases.

Ward moved through the passenger foyer and found himself a nice quiet niche and waited for the green ready light to come on.

The box door for these passengers was not only larger than the fire-engine red box doors in the Drain, it was ornate, plush, and very very cunningly camouflaged.

As the people walked through in casually contrived clumps of half a dozen or so, they passed through a number of doors. Each door had been painted, carved, covered with designs in the lavish fashion of a medieval church door.

BEHOLD THE STARS

There were soft light fixtures here and there and just which one was the ready light for the box even Ward couldn't be sure. Just as he wasn't sure just which door was the box door.

Only when he walked out of the last door to face a smaller but still imposing reception area did he realize he had gone through the box and was now forty light years from Solterra.

GBI had been cunning and sympathetic in their plan for shifting people in broken down atomic particles through the unknown void of space. Psychology applied with discretion and understanding always pleased Ward.

The transit from Hildesheim VI to Gordonstoun was made on a local box and here, although the box camouflage was less obvious, it was still applied. He walked out from reception on Gordonstoun, aware of the seven-eighths gravity and the heady, wine-like atmosphere.

The town was in process of growing and consequently looked something like a child's box of bricks tipped haphazardly over the ground. Backing the site, a range of hills swept away in a ridge that extended over the horizon. Aircraft took off and landed from a field on the outskirts. Some use would be made of matter transmitters on a followup scheme for a frontier world; but the traditional types of transport were bound to predominate. It took time to train a box switchman; the technology and level of competence required could only be achieved in something like four times as long as it took to train an aircraft pilot. That was only one reason; basic economics, convenience in local hopping, administration—there were many reasons why planetary box hookups were scarce. Even Earth only possessed the official civil service and military box chains; there was as yet no public box transport.

That would come, one day, in its due line of priority.

The RSC reception building on Gordonstoun lay at the other end of the town from the GBI building. Ward walked it. He felt like the exercise in this atmosphere and on this planet, and the distance was covered in less than ten minutes. The thought struck him that he had covered forty

BEHOLD THE STARS

light years almost instantaneously, and now it was taking him ten minutes to walk half a mile.

The man at RSC was courteous and helpful. Oh, yes, he remembered Steve Jordan. A member of the firm always received just that little extra attention.

"When did he box back to Earth?"

"He hasn't. At least, not from here and I doubt very much if he would do so through any other corporation." The clerk sounded shocked at the thought of such disloyalty.

"Do you happen to know where he was staying? It's important I contact him—it's a personal matter, you understand. . . ."

"He was staying with Silas Slattery, the resident manager for RSC here on Gordonstoun. At his house."

"I see." Ward received directions and took himself up the foothills to the large white wooden-framed building that had been erected it seemed in defiance of the functional endo-skeletal buildings rising in the new town. This time he took a local ground taxi, the robot whirling the vehicle cunningly through half-completed streets and over brand new paint-smelling bridges.

No one answered his ring at the door, no doorobot even told him no one was at home. This was a repetition of the times he'd tried to ring Steve Jordan and the similarity annoyed him. He walked around the back.

Here a clump of the native trees threw deep shadows from the sun—Hildesheim—high in the zenith above.

All the back windows were fast shut. He prowled around some more, noting the isolation of the house on the hillside in the bright sunshine, the rutted lines across the earth where future roads would be, the lush native grass and the interminable twittering of insects.

This was getting him nowhere.

He glanced at his watch. The return box to Earth from the GBI building was due in twenty-five minutes. He felt completely at a loss. What would a professional investigator have done now—hunt around for clues?

BEHOLD THE STARS

Well, all right then—what sort of clues?

He thought it most unlikely he would find a handkerchief Steve had dropped. Or anything else, for that matter. The clerk here said Jordan had not transitted back to Earth and back on Earth Gerald Mikardo said he had.

So?

He kicked furiously at a stone. A sort of shame crept over him that he could do no better than this.

"Hullo there! Looking for someone?"

He swung around so fast in the seven-eighths gravity he almost pitched onto his nose.

A girl stood laughing at him. He stared back at her, glaring, and then remembering his manners he cut off that glare and managed a smile.

"Sorry. You startled me. I just didn't hear you."

"You weren't meant to."

Her voice held an odd, unplaceable accent and that was curious in a galaxy—or that part of it subject to the language of Earth—where communications and speech moved freely and maintained a common language and heritage of words and accents. Ward looked at her more closely.

She wore a pale green pair of tights that displayed excellently turned legs, a soft brown bolero jacket over a deeply cut white nylon blouse that, too, was most excellently fashioned. Her round, laughing face and tumbled dark hair loosely confined in a jeweled band, her violet eyes laughing at him, affected him most pleasantly. A lovely girl. Over her shoulder she casually carried a huge rifle, a single-shot blunderbuss firing what must be a point-five caliber round at the least.

The sack hanging from her hand contained the dangling body of some heavily scaled lizard. The claws had ripped through the sack and Ward didn't like the look of their black, red-tipped razor sharpness.

She saw the direction of his last look, and she must have seen the way he'd eyed her body and face. He felt a fool as she said: "You're looking at the Krapo? Nasty brutes. They hang out in the hills and raid the livestock. We've driven

BEHOLD THE STARS

most of them back onto the higher ridges; but every now and then one will come sniffing about down here. They have to be killed fast. Those claws—”

“Yeah,” Ward said. “I can see.” There wasn’t much left of the lizard’s head.

“Must be something of a shock to you folk fresh from—from Solterra—to bump straight into a primitive culture. But we aren’t all savages.”

He hadn’t missed that hesitation over Solterra.

He had placed her accent now. You couldn’t tell from her face or her magnificent body or her color or anything else. But he had placed her.

It made him feel strange.

“You folk settling on Gordonstoun, too?” he said, carefully, wondering if he had phrased that right.

“Why not? We were expanding in the galaxy before we—ah—bumped into you Terrans.”

“Surely. Pity it took so long before we got acquainted. But things are picking up fine now, I’m told.”

She flashed him a smile and began to walk to the shadowed back porch. She dumped the Krapo down and gave it a kick with her sandal. “You’re told right, friend. My father was killed—but I can rationalize that out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. But sorrow won’t bring back the dead. All we can do is see that it doesn’t happen again.”

“Yes.”

He felt uncomfortable.

They were both saying the right things, fencing with each other. Just how did this girl regard him and the rest of the Terrans here? Well, that wasn’t his problem right now.

He said: “I take it you know Silas Slattery?”

She laughed, a melodious sound. “Know him? I’m his mistress.”

At his distressed look she added quickly: “Oh, you Terrans. I mean I keep house for him—and we’re going to be married as soon as things are a bit more settled here.”

BEHOLD THE STARS

"Congratulations. Where is Mister Slattery now?"

"Silas is off in the hills, hunting. He's taken a few days off with Steve Jordan, one of Zukowsky's men from Solterra."

"Steve's in the hills now? Hunting?"

"Yes." She searched his face, startled. "Why, what's wrong?"

"Nothing, of course, Miss—uh, Miss—?"

"I'm—" the words were unfathomable. "You'd translate that as the Evening Star of Promise. Silas calls me Venus."

"Most apt. How long will they be away?"

"Couple of days. That's Gordonstoun days. Let me see—that's ah—"

He smiled. "All right, Miss Venus, I can do the maths. Gordonstoun has a twenty-nine hour day, I believe."

"Solterran hours, yes."

"In that case I have to get back. Thank you for being so patient with me." He began to turn away, smiling, walking around the house to the rutted track and his waiting taxi.

She walked with him. She looked truly beautiful, there in that sylvan setting. He made sure he didn't touch her.

As he stepped into his taxi she put one hand on the window sill and said, very seriously, her face shaded: "We're friends, now. All of us, friends in the galaxy. I always think of that, Mister—mister—"

"So do I, Miss Venus. It makes life worth living."

He gave the robot its instructions and the car moved away.

He sat back, blankly.

Fifteen or less minutes left. No time to go traipsing about in hills he'd never seen before in his life. And he would have had to have asked Venus to go with him, or at least show the way. He could not afford to be late to the Drain. That was his job and he didn't want to jeopardize it. Then he thought of the stakes in this game and saw how petty that thought was. But, even so, what could he do?

He wasn't equipped to go ferreting about in the hills of Gordonstoun. No—he'd have to go back to Earth, stand his turn with the carriers and then come back here, across

BEHOLD THE STARS

forty light years, properly equipped and begin a full-scale hunt.

That seemed the logical thing to do.

Why then did he feel as though he cheated, as though he was doing less than he should?

He tried to shake off that irrational and annoying feeling all the way to the GBI building. He only partly succeeded.

It had been an odd and unsettling experience talking to a Venie again.

VIII

WARD RANG Julie from the SSA building's canteen. He told her what he had discovered.

"It's not much, I'm afraid," he finished lamely. "But I told you I'm not cut out to be a detective."

"You can wrap that line of talk up," she said firmly. On the screen her face looked prettier than it really was. She glowed at him now. "This proves how right the Marshal was in asking you to do this. You've done well, Dave. Very well. When are you off duty?"

"Well, now, that's a little awkward. When I checked my assignment sheet this morning I'd been taken off my regular schedule. Maybe something that happened here yesterday with captain Mainwaring. I'm joining a group on a different assignment. I don't yet know what it is and if I did I wouldn't tell you."

"Well, of all the—"

"I may not be much of a detective but I'm reasonably adept at security. That's why this line is a tight-beam scramble. I don't want anyone else to hear this—"

"Of course not! All right, then, tell you what. As soon as you're off call my place." She gave him the number. "I'll wait. Oh—and I'm arranging for full hunting gear. We've got to find Steve and find out what this is all about."

"Check, Julie. Be good." He cut the connection.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Bill Roscoe strolled over. Evidently he had waited until Ward had finished his scrambled phone conversation. Ward smiled at him, suddenly feeling good.

"Know what you're on today, Dave?"

"No." Ward swiveled around to check his watch against the canteen clock. "Since you're the number one Navy liaison with civilians, suppose you tell me?"

"With great pleasure. Come on." Roscoe finished his coffee and rose. "Sammy Hawkins doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Hawkins! Guts and blood Hawkins! Now he tells me!"

Among all the many officers and personnel staffing SSA, inside and outside the Drain, with each letter of the alphabet covering up to a hundred different groups, a man was likely only to know his immediate circle. But blood and guts Hawkins was probably known all over the Drain, by reputation alone.

They began to walk along to Queenie group, Queenie 1-1-1. Queenie One was commanded by Rear Admiral Samuel Q. Hawkins. He was a Solterran Hero. The golden cross blazed on his uniform when he wore his gongs.

Weren't many of those, Solterran Heroes. Not many.

Most of the holders were dead.

A posthumous award, Solterran Hero.

But blood and guts Sammy Hawkins held the cross and he was still alive. That made for distinction in any man.

"So what do I want with him?"

As he spoke excitement kindled in Roscoe. He was passionately involved with what he was saying. "Queenie has the sector adjacent to Roger, as you know. Queenie One is probably out farther than any other group—"

"What about those guys down in Beta?"

"They're only out to a hundred and fifty light years."

"Sure. Well, then . . . ?"

"Queenie is way out into space now, Dave—well out. They started off a bunch of carriers at full blast years and years ago, and then they shedded as they passed by target stars. They've been shedding all over their sector, even taking in a slice of Roger 89—that's the adjacent group."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"You mean they've been able to reach some of Roger 89's stars from the side, as it were, before the Roger 89 people shot there themselves? Nice."

"That's where we come in. They've begun assembly—"

"Assembly!"

"The magic word, Dave. Yep. We're going down on a new star. There are planets and she's a yellow G type. Every prospect is good."

Every prospect was good.

"How far out?"

Roscoe led them off the elevator and headed for the trolley to take them through to the Drain station. He said, slowly and savoring the importance of what he was saying, "Two hundred light years."

"Two hundred!"

"You see, Dave, this means we are well out and away beyond the main zone of Roger groups' penetrations. We've come around in back, so to speak. It will take just as long to send a carrier back to the stars in the pocket as it will to reach them from the Roger groups' areas. But it does mean we are way way out into the galaxy there."

Ward saw that. And he saw something else. He said: "And in that pocket, between the two arms of the Roger and the Queenie groups, are the Gershmi!"

"Check."

The trolley reached the box door entrance to the Drain and they alighted and submitted to the security check. Then they stepped through the box and into the Drain.

"Don't let it run away with you, Dave. The galaxy isn't two-dimensional, you know. The Gershmi have an awful lot of space to play with. And we've still no idea of just how far they've spread in other directions than ours."

"Granted. But this gives us a beautiful edge on them. Why—it's like the Gershmi setting up shop on Hildesheim, where I've just been—"

"You did? Enjoy the trip?"

Now why had he said that? He'd told Julie he was no

BEHOLD THE STARS

detective but that he was adept at security and now he made a stupid slip like that. He smiled. "Sure."

They reached Queenie One—a flat looking exactly the same as the Roger One flat apart from the star charts—to find a seething crowd of people milling in ordered and disciplined confusion. Some people might be depressed at the strictly utilitarian and ordered sameness of the Drain flats, the mechanical repetition of places where men and women must work; but those mentalities were not catered to here. Variety was found through the portals onto the stars opening into the Drain. Even the switch techs in their booths high above the crowded flat floor lived half in and half out of the dream world inhabited by the box bag servicemen.

The wide expanse of flat floor devoted to one box became self-evident now: this was an assembly box area and the flooring space contained room enough for the multifarious items to be transitted.

Ward took it all in. He had been through this before and he wanted to live through it again. For this—all the time and effort and money and men's lives were spent willingly and gladly.

Down one side of the wide flat combat-clad Marines waited, sitting hunkered on benches, playing crap, talking, cleaning spotless weapons, reading.

Next to them their piled a.p. weapons frowned out menacingly on the scurrying activity.

Directly before the entrance the pallet loads for the box lay at hand, lined up and aimed towards the fire-engine red box door. That door was the same size as the box doors in the other flats—for of course the carriers would not magically enlarge their boxes when the time came for assembly. There were four boxes ready, Ward noted, one behind the other, every part of the broken-down complex meticulously color-coded and numbered and lettered. That was where he came in.

He stopped by the first box and Roscoe tugged him on. Everywhere men hurried about putting the finishing touches to their alignments, checking their gear.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Suddenly Roscoe stopped dragging him along. They halted by the collapsed skeleton of a box architrave. A box supervisor stood up, smiling.

"Hi, there. I'm Sonny Nkomo. Seems like today the box servicemen will have to carry the load in the other flats. Man oh man! What a day!"

Nkomo's dark face split cheerfully into a wide and hungry smile. Ward shared his feelings completely. The reference to box servicemen was simple; supervisors went into assembly, servicemen did not.

"Glad I could be here, Sonny. I'm Dave Ward—"

"He knows," Roscoe said waspishly. "The hero who fought single-handed against enormous Gershmi odds under two gravities—"

"All right, Bill. Stop the clowning. Where's a suit? Mine's over in Roger 87-65-2."

"That's what I've been dragging you along for. I've got to leave, you know. Hundreds of items to attend to and you're only one. Over there." Roscoe gave Ward a push in the direction of a broken-down half-track. "Don't get lost!"

Ward regained his balance and looked at the half-track parts. He recognized them, of course. They hadn't changed all that much in eight years.

He walked around the end of the pallet—everything going through the box had to be strapped to pallets exactly the right size to fit in the box—and saw a confused sea of men in combat space suits arranging themselves into a loosely ordered formation. Each man took up his position on the flat with a deceptively casual ease, knowing where he must go, and all done without a single shouted order. Standing there, Dave Ward stared. He saw those armored combat space suits. He saw their color.

Among the purple Marine suits and the blue Navy suits and the orange civilian tech suits, their dull sheenless green stood out ruggedly, earth brown and horizon blue patches and camouflage streaks breaking up their outlines, not single scrap of bright work about them, every surface dulled and drab.

BEHOLD THE STARS

A green suit humped up from the ruck, the huge helmet swinging loweringly towards him, the visor up and the face-plate swung open. He saw Jack Tracy's face smiling with a regulation issue smile at him. Major Tracy—the only one of his old Army crowd who had stayed in. An enormous armored glove rose like the gouging thrust of a power shovel.

"Hi, Dave! Bill Roscoe told me you'd be along on this one!"

"Jack But I thought you were out past Ramses."

"So I was, old lad, so I was. But they hauled us back to make this drop—"

"Making a drop? But I thought this was a standard assembly? Surely the Navy will assemble a planetary scoutship and go down with their survey teams?"

Tracy wagged an armored finger.

"Now you know better than that, Dave. You can't leave the poor old Navy to foul up the job! Even the Marines, bless their little hearts, don't really know what it's all about. But my guess is someone's been through before and found Gershmi waiting—"

"Never!"

Tracy humped his parapack into his back more tightly, bending his massively armored body easily.

"You tell me what the Navy would ask in the Army for? Especially a specialist Army box-dropping unit, hey?"

"I don't know, Jack. But my job is assembling matter transmitters aboard carriers ready for the Navy survey teams to go down to make planetfall. I'm not a box-dropper anymore. I'm a civilian."

"Oh, sure." Tracy sounded off-hand. "Once the Gershmi start their confounded war you won't be a civilian again for a long time, Dave. You know that."

The truth was—he did know it. He felt depressed. Roscoe appeared from behind the pallets containing the broken-down parts on the half-track. He now wore his blue Navy space suit, armored and with exo-skeleton; but it held nothing of the sheer bulky menace of the green Army suit.

"The admiral is all ready to go now. All ready, Major?"

BEHOLD THE STARS

"All set when you Navy spaceship-nurses give us the word."

"Not in your suit yet, Dave?"

"I haven't been assigned one, yet. I assume I'm to have a combat job—otherwise I'd have brought my own."

"Well, of course!" Roscoe spoke tartly. "Hasn't Major Tracy outfitted you yet?"

"But," said Ward, the icy anger fuming up in him along with the terror. "But I'm assembling—"

"Maybe. But I want you in an Army suit. Now hurry up, and don't argue. The union has okayed it. Admiral Hawkins checked."

Moodily, Ward inserted himself into the suit wheeled across by Army ground staff. The medic had delicate, skillful hands with the augmentation devices. He felt no pain at all as she coupled in his heart and lungs.

He smiled at her. She knew her job, her large blue eyes intent, her soft mouth compressed, her slender fingers threading the intricate batteries of electrodes and sensory pseudonerves and blood aeration systems. Tiny sweat globules prickled her forehead.

"Thanks, doc," he said when she had finished and they had run a check. "That's the only part of donning a space suit a man can't do for himself—and I bet some characters I've known could do even that."

"You do what you have to," she said distantly. Her lieutenant's insignia shone on her immaculate white coveralls. She couldn't have passed her doctor's degrees very long, and her Army medic training even later. She slapped her implements onto the robotray and walked lithely off, her work done.

Somberly, Ward walked back to his position. At the broken-down box parts on their pallets the roboshifters were waiting, ready for instant action. Sonny Nkomo beamed at him.

"My oh my! You do look rough!"

Ward stared at Nkomo's orange civilian suit with a sick longing. Now his own tough dulled green Army suit pro-

BEHOLD THE STARS

claimed him as a man ready to donate his life for the advancement of mankind in space. Oh—they were all prepared to do that if it came to the pinch; but there were degrees of expectation of duty. And an Army box-dropper was the guy right out on the end of the limb.

The speaker coughed and a crisp voice said: "Hear this. This is Admiral Hawkins. You men are about to gather in the harvest sown by men long ago. We are about to claim a solar system for Solterra. You all know the importance of that. You have your allotted tasks and I want each one of you to know that the eyes of everyone here will be upon you, that you carry with you the hopes and ambitions of our civilization." Hawkins paused and now his voice crackled drily from the speaker. "You may wonder at the unusual display of strength. We are far out in the galaxy with this one. The sun is called Mycenae. We have reason to believe that the Gershmi are relatively near; but I know that that fact will not deter you in the carrying out of your duty."

No movement or stir of words betrayed the feelings of the men listening.

Hawkins finished: "I now wish you God speed and the very best of luck."

The green ready light shone bleakly from the red door of the box and the first Marines went through. The lines of men and equipment moved up in a smooth flow. Roboshifters handled the pallets, trundling them to the door of the box where the men took over and thrust them in on the warning of the light. Ward and Nkomo moved up. Still the transit went smoothly on; still no frantic phone call had come back from the carrier orbiting a planet of Mycenae. Still no broken and bleeding body had reeled from the box, hurled back by dying fingers from the great deeps.

"It's going fine," whispered Nkomo.

"Yeah." That was all Ward could find to say.

He found himself thinking of Stella and Steve, of Julie and even of that pretty little Venie, Miss Venus, on Gordonstoun. Angrily he shook himself. He had to clear his mind. He had to concentrate on his work in this vast and

BEHOLD THE STARS

intricate job of assembly. One weak link in that chain and decades of devoted care would be destroyed. They were almost up to the door.

"Here we go," said Nkomo.

Ward activated his exo-skeleton to low power and hefted the pallet into the box, following on with his own body, cramped down on top of the matter transmitter part, his massive suit cranium pressed against the box roof. Nkomo would come through with the second pallet of this box.

The far door opened and eager hands reached in and hauled him out. A voice on his headphones shouted: "Keep it moving there! Come on, soldier, get your tail outta that box!"

Cursing, Ward shoved the pallet viciously, sailed in free-fall conditions into the empty shell of a carrier, propelled the pallet fast toward the airlock which stood with both valves wide open. He shot through and was expertly caught on a magnelasso, hauled around in a tight arc with all the stars of space spinning past him.

A Navy tech hauled him in and steadied him. Then Ward was turning in his turn to catch and haul in Sonny Nkomo with his section of the broken-down box for which they were responsible. Other units shot out of the carrier airlock, to be caught and concentrated. Ward and Nkomo set about assembling their box without fuss and with the deft, trained movements that had taken years to acquire.

All about them in space, tethered by snaking tie lines, other men were assembling boxes, Marines were fanning out, Navy techs were already assembling the parts of a picket boat; all this area of space swarmed with activity.

Now over his right shoulder, now under his left ear, the green and misty hemisphere of a planet showed in giddy rotation. Ward ignored it. That would come later; now, he had a job to do. Many men just could not work in these freakish free-fall spinning conditions; a box supervisor and a box-dropper could.

"Hurry it up, box nine!" The voice hammered in Ward's headphones.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Box nine. That was Ward and Nkomo. Their box was a high density one, capable of transitting heavy beams, nuclear-drive components, venturi tubes, all the big stuff necessary for the construction of a spaceship in space. Box nine was wanted in a hurry.

The spaceship now lay broken down into components on some distant planet of the Solterran Federation—Mars was a favorite location. As soon as box nine was functioning that spaceship could be beamed over two hundred light years. Ward and Nkomo sweated at it as they made that scientific miracle possible.

A voice, a harsh, choked voice, full of horrible disappointment, shouted into his ears. "Red alert! Bogey showing around the planet's limb! Declination four-two-thirty! Headed this way!"

A spaceship—here!

The voice again, grating, demanding. "Bogey now identified. Gershmi light cruiser! On collision course!"

IX

REGRET FILLED Dave Ward as the Gershmi spaceship swung around the flank of the alien planet and straightened on a course for the collection of Terran artifacts and men and machinery. Regret. A profound sorrow that he was going to die.

"Snap out of it, soldier! Get box nine erected—fast!"

The raucous voice from his headphones was a part of the present that would so soon be dead. But he saw his mistake; he was going to die, the men about him were going to die; but, there would be no giving up. They would fight until the end.

"She only needs the balance panel and she's set, Dave." Sonny Nkomo's panting voice followed on the heels of the commanders. "They can start transmitting from Solmars as soon as they like then."

They swung the bulky panel across with its dangling wires looking like a Portuguese man of war back in the familiar comfortable oceans of Earth. Coupling them in with practiced fingers, Ward switched in his telescopes and took a swift sneak look towards the Gershmi light cruiser.

A silver glinting shape like a seabird diving, wings folded and beak agape for its prey, she bored in towards the haphazard straggle of men and machinery. She looked impressively efficient.

He snapped the telescopes down and as he bent once more to his task he caught a fleeting glimpse of a Marine squad floating in free fall around their a.p. weapon, its barrel snouting well tracked forward of the line of flight of the cruiser.

"They're going to have a crack," Nkomo said viciously. "They might just do it—"

"They might," Ward said, and then, sharply: "That's the last connection! She's ready to be balanced!"

He grabbed the phone on its hook beside the control position of the box and shouted down it through his radio connection: "Get the tests coming! Sharp!"

He didn't bother for the reply. Out past the Marine squad short ugly flares of fire stained the emptiness momentarily before dying and dissipating into invisibility. He saw the Marine a.p. squad vanish into spinning erratically-trajectoried gobs. He realized he was shouting with hysterical fervor, almost as though he were at a football match. Bright smears of flame glowed on the cruiser's hull. Then she had flicked over and past the clustering straggle of Terrans and equipment and men struggling to bring order out of the chaos.

"She was going too fast," babbled Nkomo. His space suit glowed bright orange from the fires of Mycenae spinning away beyond the assembly point.

"But she's slowing down. She'll be back." Ward saw the light come on and yanked open the transmitter door. A misshapen lump of metal lay within the box. "Come on, Sonny! Let's get this box balanced!"

Between them they put the matter transmitter into one

BEHOLD THE STARS

hundred percent operating efficiency. Ward forced himself to concentrate on what he was doing. Damn the Gershmi! He had his own job to do.

"She went all around the planet!" yelled Nkomo. "She'll be coming back the same way—"

"The logical thing to do." Ward slapped the phone down. When he opened the door this time the metal block showed sharp and precise and a quick but meticulous examination showed the faces and angles to be perfectly reproduced.

The next arrival through the matter transmitter was a man, a naval captain in blue space suit, with only an abrupt tumbling cartwheel, before he was caught and steadied by Ward, to show he had just crossed two hundred light years from Solmars. Ward held his arm as the Navy man oriented himself. Then more naval personnel and pieces of spaceship began to come through.

"What the hell's the Army doing out here?" grumbled the Navy man.

"I'm a civilian," Ward said. "There's a Gershmi light cruiser on the prowl. She'll be back any second now. Just pray she doesn't get you before—"

But the captain was at the phone. His voice over his outside radio connection was also picked up on his radio and Ward heard him say: "Emergency! Rearrangement of fabrication. Get the stutter gun through here first. Now!"

A brief boiling of activity by the box door and then a surge of sailors with parts heralded a fresh outburst of frenzied activity. Ward was politely asked to keep out of the way. He saw Sonny Nkomo moving off towards another box assembly, number ten, the next in line. He felt irrational annoyance—hell, these sailors acted as though they'd been here all the time!

Irrational, yes; but understandable. As a civilian his job was to erect matter transmitters so that the fighting services could go through them—to fight.

That job was done. Now he must erect another transmitter to funnel in men and supplies from the other planets waiting two hundred light years away.

BEHOLD THE STARS

The Navy hadn't even said thank you. . . .

"Bogie—bandit—here she comes again!"

The call reached everyone on the assembly site through the common frequency. Ward felt his muscles tensing up, his stomach contracting, and he felt sick.

"She's slowing, vectors opening—she's killing her speed—"

Of course. Naturally. Like shooting fish in a barrel. The Gershmi had gone through fast on the first orbit because the alien captain had no way of knowing just what the Terrans had out there. The meeting must have been a shock to both sides. Now he was slowing down and ready to take more time and trouble being precise about annihilating them all.

All the Gershmi would see would be the carrier, silent and in orbit around the unknown planet below, a spin-drifting tumble of men in vari-colored space suits, garbled clumps and chains and loops of all kinds of materials in barrels and bundles, plastic synthepacks, oxy-cylinders, tools and weapons lightly magneclamped to one another as the box phone was magneclamped to its hook. He would know that there would be a.p. weapons but he'd already destroyed one Marine squad and would be feeling confident. One thing was sure—he would not have missed the matter transmitter boxes floating around in space among the jumble—and these would be his A-one priority target.

Ward turned his back on the Gershmi and pushed off for the box to which Sonny Nkomo was headed.

He arrived there feet first in one of those casual spaceman's somersaults that made an Earthbound mortal sick—physically and mentally with fear—and, looking up, was in time to see a ripple of bright flares along the flanks of the Gershmi light cruiser. She had opened fire. Ward saw men and materials crisp and vanish, saw the explosive blasts silently devour what men had slaved patiently and with dedication to bring across the gulf of two hundred light years.

He saw the top corner of box nine disintegrate under the blast of a high-caliber shell—box nine, the box he and Nkomo had just completed. Naval space suits cartwheeled

BEHOLD THE STARS

away and smashed and glittering shards of equipment pinwheeled after them.

The naval captain who had first come through box nine must have been an energetic worker; the stutter gun came into action only minutes after his arrival.

A choking sensation of relief began in Ward as he saw the stutter gun lacerating the Gershmi light cruiser. The caliber outweighed the Marine a.p. weapons as a seventy-five overshadowed a brig. The stutter gun had been assembled with fanatical speed; now it was aimed with shrewd cunning.

The Gershmi light cruiser's nose exploded outwards in a ghostly shower of spinning, glinting fragments. Air puffed and froze. A few bodies followed, torn and shredded. The uncaring light of Mycenae blazed down upon these men of different races fighting over one of its planets. The stutter gun stitched along the hull. The light cruiser's jets flickered to life, copper orange and copper green they glowed wanly against the limb of the planet beneath.

"We've got her!"

Anyone could have spoken. The 'we' meant them all; all the men of Earth who had ventured here to stake the claim of their civilization upon this solar system.

The Gershmi light cruiser was in trouble. She trailed a long plume of smoke and debris that puffed in that curious, free-fall way detritus acts in space, as though it has a life of its own. She was going down.

All through her descent, until she passed across the limb of the planet, the stutter gun riddled and lacerated and eviscerated her.

Ward was shaking all over.

"Box nine supervisors to box nine! On the double!"

On the double—in free-fall space conditions. It was good for a laugh—now.

Ward and Nkomo reached box nine together. The captain swam in close to them and they touched hands lightly, magneclamps holding them in stasis so they could see each other's faces.

BEHOLD THE STARS

The captain was young—young and tough and dedicated to cunning and thought and utter ruthlessness.

"You did a good job," Ward said.

"I want a report on the box damage. Can we repair with facilities we have here—"

Ward cut across that. "No go, Captain. The box needs major service. Quicker to junk it and transmit out a new one. I'll handle that for you right now. We need your spaceship out here."

"I need replenishment ammunition for the stutter gun first."

"I'll arrange that through a subsidiary box," Ward was already breaking the magneclamp lock, pushing off, his low-slung jets flaring briefly. "You surely did a good job."

But the captain was already rousting his men into action, assembling what they already had through of their spaceship.

Ward nearly said to Sonny Nkomo: "The Navy can shift the lead outta their pants sometimes—when they get scared enough." But he didn't. Nkomo was a civilian and he wouldn't really understand.

Everybody appeared to have forgotten such interfering items in their careful preparations as marauding Gershmi spaceships. The apparent confusion was now visibly sorting itself out. The outlying Marine picket line expanded as the globe of space they guarded grew. Materials now had reached the point where the incoming flood of supplies was easing off, the various despatch planets back in the Solterranean sphere of influence waiting to transmit again when the boxes had been set up on the planets of this system and the real buildup could begin.

The biggest and most desperate job at the beginning was to build up the boxes and the forces to protect them. And they'd nearly lost. Only two boxes were left intact.

Two.

The box in the carrier had been shredded along with the carrier.

Only two boxes stood between these men out here in the

BEHOLD THE STARS

system of Mycenae being part of all other Solterrans in the galaxy, or a tiny and hopeless unit cut off two hundred light years away.

Ward contacted the commander on the general wavelength and soon stutter gun shells began to come through one of the boxes, switched out from the Drain and across to Solmars and the waiting naval station there. Then he and Sonny Nkomo began the erection of another box and soon after that the rest of the spaceship came through.

"Civilian David Ward to commander. At once."

The voice took Ward unawares. He heard Nkomo chuckle.

"They've rumbled you at last, Dave. Carry on. I can check this box out on my own, now. Thanks. It's been nice knowing you."

"I don't know what he wants," said Ward, unslinging his checking equipment and pushing it across to Nkomo. "But it's been good working with you, Sonny. If ever I'm stuck on an assembly again I hope you're around."

He meant that, too. Nkomo was what Ward could never be; a man who could contain and control his fear so that it no longer formed any part of his actions.

Command headquarters had been set up in a hundred-yard-diameter plastic bubble. There was air in there. Inside men worked without space suits, ordering and controlling the descent onto the planet spinning below. Ward did not wish to shuck his armored Army space suit—he could re-establish contact with his full augmentation gear with some difficulty himself—but he had no wish to go through that merely to talk face to face with the commander. He jetted up to a port, hung on, and put a call through on the outside pipeline.

The screen lit at once and he stared at the lowering features of blood and guts Sammy Hawkins.

In the background of the screen the desks and charts, the equipment, the communications layouts showed as a fuzzy halo to Hawkins' grim face.

"Civilian Ward?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I don't know what you're doing dolled up in one of those

BEHOLD THE STARS

over-dressed Army suits for, Ward. But you're wanted. Report at box seventeen and go through. It's keyed for you." Hawkins screwed up a scrap of paper and flicked it from him. It went straight on through the air and vanished off screen. "And hurry it up! I'm taking a nuclear reactor through seventeen and I want it for emergency power on this headquarters!"

"Yes, sir."

Ward hung the phone back on its magneclamp hook, the screen went dead, and he pushed off, checked the position of seventeen by the lights showing that number, burning amid the myriad other lights, and set his jets to a gentle thrust in that direction.

If Hawkins didn't know what this was about, David Ward certainly had no idea.

Halfway there he passed box twelve and saw the waiting lines of green camouflaged space suits hanging like bunches of grapes in space. More soldiers came through the box as he vectored up to it on a passing course.

He thumbed in his Army wavelength that so far he had had no occasion to use on this assembly, and said: "Major Tracy? This is Dave Ward."

He had used the command wavelength, avoiding the combat net, and at once Tracy's voice rasped in over his headphones.

"Dave! What's been happening out here?"

"Gershmi." Ward told him, briefly. He finished: "What are you up to, d'you know yet?"

Tracy's laugh was gentle and light, yet it carried ugly overtones. "The Gershmi should tell you that, Dave. They're here! On that planet down there somewhere. And next time they won't be sending a light cruiser!"

"So you're dropping?"

"Probably. Maybe the Gershmi haven't managed to set up a planetary defense yet. Maybe the Navy can put a ship down somewhere safe; but—"

"But what's the real use of a box at, say, the north pole?"

BEHOLD THE STARS

I see, Jack. The poor old Army's got to go down and put a box smack on the Gershmi doorstep. Well—luck, fella."

He was past the lines of waiting men now, seeing them in his rear-view mirror; but only just seeing them, their planetary camouflage efficient even in space.

"Be seeing you, Dave."

"Sure. Be seeing you, Jack."

He cut the connection. He hoped he hadn't been telling a lie. The chances bulked large that he would never see Jack Tracy again.

Luck played a big part in affairs of space. The carriers were stripped to the minimum for efficiency and expedience. It was senseless to send out a long-term ship to the stars, with a matter transmitter aboard, fully fueled. To try to work out just what amount of fuel she should carry to take her to the distant stars without refueling was an idiot's math. And to think of sending her with equipment aboard that needed a man to stay on watch was equally idiot's thinking. The matter transmitter was the key. Through that you sent the fuel as needed. Through that you sent your servicemen to keep the carrier running. Any other way was not only folly; it was a negation of the rights of man to space at all.

The luck came in that these stripped down skeletal ships were difficult to spot on all but the most sensitive radar at fairly close distances. The Gershmi had got onto the carrier fast; but not fast enough to prevent the men from Earth beginning their transits.

Already a second spaceship was taking shape out there. She was a light cruiser this time, something heavy enough to be reckoned with. Ward wondered if the commander would chance sending down a robot-controlled ship with a matter transmitter. The trouble with robots was that they could be programmed to do a job—and programmed very completely and thoroughly—but in battles the unusual and unexpected became routine. An outfit of box-droppers could almost certainly guarantee to put a box down on a hostile planet in the face of the most intense opposition; even the most fervent advocates of robots could not guarantee a half of that.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Box seventeen was in the process of disgorging a nuclear reactor's parts, and the naval lieutenant in charge was not at all glad to see Ward. He pointed an arm at the ready position where techs were removing what looked like a damper tube.

"Hold yourself in readiness, Ward. We'll transmit you back as soon as the switchman has the connection made."

Ward did as he was bid. He took a good long last look around at the scene in space above an unknown planet orbiting a sun men had dubbed Mycenae two hundred light years from Earth. In the silence he could almost hear the hum of activity. Now food and drink and supplies for men's bodies and minds were being brought through. Soon the Gershmi would be facing not a handful of Marines and a few half-completed small boxes, but a permanent Terran base. It made Ward feel good.

He turned back as the lieutenant called his name.

"You can go now. Hurry it up, man! I've a nuclear reactor to assemble and connect up to headquarters. They're running on boxed fuel and what they can pick up from this sun—"

"They'll do all right," said Ward.

The green ready light winked on. Ward stepped past the door. It shut. He crossed a gulf of light years—how many? Just *where* was he going? The door opened.

He adjusted to seven-eighths gravity. A sun shone half-way down the sky. Blue sky. Grass and trees showed to one side of him and rocks, steep and scarping upwards, on the other. He stepped from the matter transmitter and Julie smiled at him.

"I'm glad you're here, on Gerdonstoun, Dave. What kept you?"

X

HE GASPED.

Of all things, he had not expected this.

He swung around sharply. Perched on the green alien grass a matter transmitter box stood in splendid isolation. The

BEHOLD THE STARS

door had been quickly painted over with olive green; but here and there a streaky glow of fire-engine red showed through.

Through that door lay a gulf of one hundred and sixty light years and a group of men from Earth forging a weapon, a tool and a plan to open up to themselves a new solar system. Through that door lay space and his job.

"No, Dave," Julie said, softly smiling, her face gentle and reproving. "No. Your job is here, on Gordonstoun. Not back there into whatever vast chaos that door leads."

He became aware he was still wearing his full augmentation Army suit. He switched off his air supply and opened the visor and the transparent faceplate.

"No need to waste air," he said, idiotically. "And I'll be needing a fresh supply when I get back on the job."

"Here, Dave," she said again, impatiently, losing that gentle smile. "We've got to find Steve Jordan. You know that. He's disappeared because he's found out the answers or knows enough for us to piece the answers together."

"I suppose you arranged with Marshal Levy the details of all this? The box here on Gordonstoun? The call to take me off shift?" He chuckled, harshly. "But for Pete's sake—why deck me out in an Army suit?"

"Where you're going, Dave, you'll need it." She gestured casually along the slant of the hill. "Oh, and you were talking about fresh air. Plenty has been brought along."

He saw a cluster of Army air cylinders stacked, green and dulled, against the rock.

"Where am I going?"

With a quick angry gesture at her clothing, he said again: "Where am I going, Julie? I take it you won't be along?"

For she wore a pair of scarlet briefs that left her long tanned legs bare, a white nylon deep-cut blouse and a fawn-tanned plastic-kid-leather bolero. He thought of Miss Venus, the little Venie girl who was going to marry Silas Slattery. Instead of a massive old point-five blunderbuss rifle, Julie carried a crisply efficient Massenet Nine strapped at her

BEHOLD THE STARS

waist, matching the one at Ward's thigh, among all his other weaponry and equipment.

"No, Dave. I can only act under the orders of Marshal Levy. You know how men like him think of women—"

"Yeah. I surely do. China dolls. All peaches and cream—sure—he thinks women shouldn't fight—"

"Do you?"

"I don't know. They always used to fight along with their men, of course. Girls like you would probably fight better than most men—"

"Thank you. But I didn't bring you here to chat about the way matter transmitters changed women's status. They did, and if anyone had had half an eye they'd have seen beforehand that they would. You can't colonize a galaxy with women and expect them to produce the children too. Now, Dave. Steve Jordan—"

"I want to find him. I'm now told I must. Right. Where is he?"

"In those hills, somewhere. Venus didn't know exactly where Slattery was going—"

"You've spoken to her?"

"Yes. To search in those hills with ordinary planetary hunting equipment would take days. Months, probably. But with an Army suit the job could be done quickly—"

"I see!"

He did see, too. There had to be a reasonable explanation for everything done by a Marshal of the Army, in these days of consistent conservation of energy, funds, material and people. A hunting team would take time. An Army full-augmentation suit could cut down on time.

"I didn't ask Venus," he said. "Do they have a radio with them? I should have asked, I suppose; but she sounded so direct, so confident nothing would bring them back, and I knew Steve hadn't gone there of his own free will—"

"And she was a Venie," Julie finished softly.

"All right, then, yes." He tried to sound belligerent, but failed. "It kinda—threw me."

BEHOLD THE STARS

"They don't have a radio. And why should you imagine Steve has not gone of his own free will?"

"Well—he's been kidnapped, hasn't he?"

"Maybe. I think he went on this trip as part of his job. They may have detained him forcibly—that means Slattery—or he might be simply doing a further piece of field research. We don't know what is up in those hills."

"Spare me the opera. All right. Where can I contact you?" He added sarcastically: "Or, as you will probably contact me, I won't bother."

"I'll wait here," she said with surprising demureness. "Or down at Slattery's house. And take that suit off before you come in. I don't want Venus—hurt."

He didn't have to ask what she meant.

"Well, what are you hanging around for?"

Suddenly he smiled. "Now who's giving the orders in a brass-bound tongue—"

"If I could kick your seat without busting my toes, I would!" she snapped. "Get started!"

She swung away and slapped a lock on the transmitter box. No one could use that until she keyed it open. Then she swung on down the path to where Slattery's house showed an angled roof between the trees. Ward shouted: "Have some tea ready!" and shoved in his full-augmentation gear.

His first stop was the oxy-cylinder pile. After he had brought his air up to full again he deliberately clamped down his visor over the fastened faceplate. He stared up at the hills.

With a box trooper's eyes he scanned the layout, the harsh eroded forms of rock protruding through the softer folded outlines of the hills, the way the watersheds would lie, the slant of the land, the likely riverbeds, and the whole formation of the land gradually shaped up. This was work he understood. He set up a standard search pattern on the board he swung out from its chest cavity, keying in heights, minima and maxima, speeds, ditto, search extents, and regulated the overlap at a hundred yards. More would be unnecessary

BEHOLD THE STARS

here and less might be chopping it too fine. He was in a hurry; but too much haste could lose him the prize.

Finished with the search flight pattern he slammed the board back. He took a deep breath and carried out a final preflight. All his equipment worked; everything checked out as functioning sweetly. Very well. From now on he was in the hands of his jets, his spring boots, his exo-skeleton and full-augmentation devices, all operating under the final arbitrament of the flight search plan he had set up.

Steve Jordan and Slattery would probably be wearing ordinary hunting clothes—leather boots, pants and shirts fabricated from artificial fiber, probably wearing normal soft hats. They would have metal—buckles, weapons, things like that. Better be safe.

His armored fingers set the pattern for: Flesh and blood. Subdivision, human, Homo sapiens.

Now, at last, he was ready.

Without another thought for Julie or why he was doing what so clinically absorbed him, he shoved in the start button.

At once his jets flared and his suit bounded like an enormous gray-green frog high into the air. His legs pumped under the thrust of the exo-skeleton in unison with the thrust from the jets. Bounding in a series of huge sponge-rubber-ball bounces, he cavorted across the fields and swooped furiously high towards the hills. Slipstream crashed past his closed helmet. His full-augmentation devices here on a planet with only seven-eighths Earth gravity had no need to compensate for high g or intolerable pressures. They simply boosted his heart, re-circulating his blood through the heart-pump, enriching with oxygen the bloodstream through the phased oxygenators, taking all strain from heart and lungs and bodily functions, as the exo-skeleton lifted load from his muscles. Cocooned in a mechanical and electronic womb he pranced through the foothills and only a very high-yield nuclear weapon would be capable of stopping him.

He kept his own eyes open, and searching as his radars and detectors, scanned every nook and cranny of the rocks

BEHOLD THE STARS

and riverbeds and inviting glades and open space where hunters would stand to shoot.

In a matter of minutes he covered a search pattern that stripped away all concealment from three square miles. Nothing registered—nothing, that is, that he was looking for.

The suit that David Ward wore as he searched the barren hills and woods of Gordonstoun for his friend was a very good suit, a very good suit indeed. Like the Massenet Seven that had been uprated to the Nine, this full-augmentation suit had been uprated from those suits Ward had worn in the Venie War. He felt the cold and pitiless ferocity and fervor of absolute power sweeping over him. He felt the lure of invincibility.

His radar blipped and the search pattern chunked out of gear and his jets hurled him down—no—rather, the suit was hurled down and, like a child within the womb, Ward went willy-nilly with it. The suit hit the ground on spring boots and marched at once into the shelter of a clump of wispy trees. The telescopics raked out and Ward saw four men and two girls quietly sitting fishing in the bubbling roar of a narrow-gutted river. Fish quivered and leaped and were caught. The sun—the alien sun—pierced the trees and glanced back from the river and the hair of the girls.

No good. Not Steve.

He reset the search pattern and at once the suit took off, slantingly, behind the trees, the jets muted to a faint insect drone.

The four men and two girls did not even know Ward had been there.

Anyway, like me, Steve isn't a man to waste his time fishing in so-called sport.

The suit gamboled on through the air, springing in great leaps and bounds across the serrated hills, peeking and prying and laying bare every secret of the life teeming within those folds of ground beneath the graceful alien trees.

A suit like this cost—oh—how could you put a price tag on any construction of such marvelous exactitude? This suit cost so much in construction that there were never enough to

BEHOLD THE STARS

go around and only the personal authority of a Marshal of the Army could ever have pried one loose for a personal mission like this. And, of course, in the normal affairs of space they would be superfluous and the regulation Marine and Navy and orange civilian suits would do all that was required. Only the Army—and only the box-droppers—could lay a genuine claim to a full-augmentation suit of this capacity.

Even so, as Ward knew to his sorrow, a man was not invincible wearing a full-augmentation suit. He had seen men die under the Venie weapons wearing a suit that had failed. Perhaps the fact that the suit had failed struck its wearer with more force than anything else in those final moments. Failure of a full-augmentation suit must reach a man's mind much as the sight of the sun cooling to clinkers would affect him.

For the second time his radars cheeped and the suit zoomed him to the ground and the cover of rocks and a low-growing thornily desiccated line of bushes. His telescopes showed him a sight he at first failed to comprehend. Above him a snow-capped peak shouldered against the afternoon sky and shadows streaked dun and patchy away towards the foothills and forests far below. From this angle of vision a corner of the growing town lay exposed, tumbled with building construction and busily whirring machinery—but distant, distant and microscopic, as though belonging to another world, a world that had no part in the high peaks.

He could not understand the rest of the scene, for he had no previous experience with which to measure this new event and no reliable guides to enable him to make even a half-informed guess. He was at a complete loss.

A gray ring of megalithic uprights circled and delimited the area within the bowl of rock, the afternoon sunlight streaking their surfaces with rust and amber. Like an alien Stonehenge the great ring brooded. This, like Stonehenge of Earth, must date from far back into this planet's past when people had spawned here and lifted on their hind legs and looked at the stars and wondered. Where those people were

BEHOLD THE STARS

now no one could tell, for Hildesheim had been a virgin system when men had first landed from their orbiting carriers.

Shadows pooled thickly against the ancient stones and broke into the open compound with reaching fingers.

For long moments Dave Ward stared out on the scene presented to him in that megalithic amphitheater. Then, slowly, he stripped off his green Army full-augmentation suit.

XI

HE BEGAN to understand what he was seeing.

Over the amphitheater hung a malformed, smoky, undulating camouflage screen, a series of projections from widely-spaced sources, some tucked into tree branches, others spread out over the rocks and moss and grass. They left a twenty-foot-high gap between the lower edge of the projected illusion screen and the ground. Any observer flying in an aircraft over this site would see merely another rocky bowl amid the mountains.

Now Ward could see more clearly. The boiling swirl of confusion within the bowl echoed in grotesque pantomime the purposeful activity of the Drain and of the assembly point in the Mycenae system.

Here men—and women, too—were packing up a camp, breaking down building units, sectionalizing power sources, carting supplies. He could see where they were headed, a bank of matter transmitters across the clearing from him, and by the way the people were working and the vigor of their movements, they were racing against time.

Slowly, he began to walk down towards the bustle.

This place could be found by normal means; but the time involvement would have been prohibitive. As he descended into the bowl, the distant prospect of the town far below sank and vanished beneath rimrock and as he passed under the camouflage screen the sensation of suffocation and of being buried alive fleetingly possessed him. He pressed on.

If he had entertained any idea he would be allowed to

BEHOLD THE STARS

penetrate clear through to the transmitters he was quickly disabused. A dream-like quality hung over the scene; it seemed to be an episode cut from a child's book of fairy tales. The people moved about their tasks with intent absorbed concentration. Through the transmitters item after item vanished, to be replaced by the next in line and to have that vanish too. He walked ploddingly on, hoping that Steve would not have gone through before he reached him. No thought of shouting occurred to him. The lessening of light and the softness of sounds beneath the camouflage screen induced a strange euphoric quality.

Two men wearing normal everyday business suits accosted him. Looking at them, their calm pale faces and soothing hands halting him without any need for gesture or command, he felt the touch of embarrassment, almost of shame, at the feel of the Massenet Nine at his waist and the personal radio in his pocket.

"Can we help you, friend?" asked the older of the two, a man whose face, despite the marks of damage and the careful surgical work, radiated an aura of reassurance and friendship.

"I'm looking for Steve Jordan—"

Insane. Weird. To talk like this in a place like this, asking by name for a man supposedly kidnapped.

"Steve? Sure, he's around. He's been doing great work—"

"Friend of his?" asked the younger man, tougher of face, cropped hair, a man who could have been a fighter but for that radiating inner compassion and understanding.

"Yes. Yes—a good friend—"

"Come on, then. We can catch him before he goes through." They began to walk past the outer bundles of records and files, office equipment, supplies, bundles and bales lashed roughly together, awaiting their turn to be transmitted. "We have to be out of here by nightfall."

Should he ask why? Or even where? He felt again that strong magnetic compulsion to go on as though wading mind-deep into a folk tale; but nearly all folk literature was violent, hateful and ultimately deadly, ridden by the hag-

fears and superstitions of primitive men isolated in a world they did not understand. Starkness and brutality and the lowering breath of primordial fears surrounded this place—and yet these men and women smiled and laughed and worked happily and quickly with no fear in them. The antithesis of surroundings and character intrigued Ward.

Whatever installation had been here was now rapidly disappearing into the waiting maws of the transmitters. Ward noticed that the system, if not as efficient as that used in the Drain, showed planning and forethought of a high order. Now the outer transmitters in their turn were being broken down and fed through other boxes like Cheshire cats, until, at the end, only one box would remain.

If these people followed the system used by the Army on retreats (Ward had been involved in one retreat and had no wish to repeat that traumatic experience), the box would vanish in a gout of flame after the last man went through. Then no one would know where they had all gone.

Steve Jordan walked lithely around the corner of a lashed bundle of stores, check list in hand, face alight and competent and enjoying handling this transmission—for, watching him, Ward saw at once that Steve was giving orders and hurrying progress. Ward let out a sigh of relief. This, then, must be more of Marshal Levy's work, although not tying in with Julie's recruitment of him.

"Stevel" he called, the frustrations of the past days lifting his voice.

Jordan looked up, his corn-blond hair thick and wavy, gleaming in the last rays of the alien sun striking beneath the camouflage screen. His round broken-nosed dog-eared face smiled widely, astonishment, pleasure, determination, following one another like ripples across a pond.

"Dave! Of all the incredible luck! I need you!"

"What's so lucky about it, then?"

"Why—we're shorthanded of men with operational experience learned the hard way. They're striking down boxes now to transmit. If you'd just lend a hand there we'll have 'em all boxed out in half the time."

BEHOLD THE STARS

No frills, no wasted words of greeting, no sentiment that was unnecessary—these two, Jordan and Ward, had been through the mill together. Wasted words were not for them.

“D’you know where you’re supposed to be right now, Steve?”

“Huh?”

“If I mentioned a Javanese shadow-play, would—”

“Stella!” Jordan slapped his check list against his covered leg. “Oh, well, she’ll understand! You know, Dave, I’m glad you tagged along. There’s so much to be done and so many detractor units to be turned out, we’ll take years covering the known routes if we don’t step up production. Well, come on, boy, jump to it!”

“What about the reunion, Steve; why weren’t you there?”

“For Pete’s sake! Here we’re engaged on the most important mission there’s ever been and you prattle about a gaggle of war-hungry ex-soldiers! They’re the very sort we need to work on most.”

Ward let this insane conversation drift along.

“If you say so, Steve. But Stella’s been worried—”

“Didn’t her old man brief you, or what?” Jordan was no fool. He stared keenly at Ward, a tiny frown grooving his forehead. “How did you get here, Dave?”

Smoothly, and yet feeling a cheat for lying to his friend, Ward said: “Usual drill. You know.”

“Well, that’s all right then. You’re one of us now. And about time, too. Now let’s get with it.”

The “usual drill” meant what Jordan thought it meant, and that would be arrival via Ransome Stellar’s box. He couldn’t know about Julie and Marshal Levy making secret arrangements for Ward.

The inferences were obvious. This whole setup was not Army, had nothing to do with Marshal Levy. Therefore—therefore Steve Jordan, his best friend, was working for those people who were destroying Solterra’s armed forces.

It was insane, monstrous; but it had to be the answer, for it was the only explanation to fit the facts as Ward interpreted them. He felt sick.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Ward said: "I saw Ted Zukowsky. He has something hot on the stove for you. Wants you to get back there right away—"

Steve Jordan laughed. He laughed as at a good joke. "That's rich!" he said. "Poor old Ted. The Old Man decided not to let Ted in on the Great Plan, as a last minute decision; he told me. Old Ted's one of the best; but he might have balked at this one. The Old Man worked out all the details of the detractor units himself, you know, every last detail.

"Yes."

Jordan sounded openly admiring. "He's a great old guy. Did it all himself and then set it up. Gerald Mikardo goes in awe of the old boy, and I don't wonder. They got this thing off the ground right under the noses of the tech staff at RSC. That must have been a big deal."

"Big deal," said Ward. Then: "It sure must have, Steve. I—ah—didn't get to talk to Mikardo. I suppose you know he's running around after Stella?"

"You didn't talk to him?" Jordan frowned, then clapped Ward on the back. "Well, I guess the Old Man filled you in. Now, c'mon, let's get these boxes stripped."

At least having something familiar to do with his hands gave him cover to think about his next steps. As he broke down the outermost boxes and readied them for transmission he tried to reason out what was happening. Steve Jordan had been sent by Army Intelligence to find out why members of the Solterranean armed forces were being turned into cowards, and for his sins David Ward had been instructed to follow and report, when Jordan had vanished. He'd turned up in a place and a manner that should have been completely unexpected to Jordan; yet Steve had welcomed him offhandedly, as though waiting for him, and had set him to work as though that was the most natural thing in the galaxy.

The only answer could be that Steve had defected to whoever was responsible, and assumed that Ward had done the same. All this made interesting thinking; but it brought Ward no nearer to deciding what he should do. He couldn't risk

BEHOLD THE STARS

using his radio to call Julie now, for that would make even a blind man suspicious.

Manhandling a box door across the darkling shadows of the rocks Ward spotted Jordan supervising the last of the other bundles through a waiting box. He altered his angle, and the three other men, one at each corner of the door, followed him as he made for Jordan.

"Can you take this door next, Steve?" he called.

Jordan swung around. "Sure, Dave. We're nearly through now. Take a breather while we wait for the green ready light."

"I suppose you'll be time-setting the last box?" Ward said casually, as he lowered the door to the rock.

"Yeah," Jordan replied, equally casually, staring up at the dead light over the box architrave. "Don't want anything left on Gordonstoun. A pity we had to move from here, the work has been going well, but the town below is growing fast, like towns all over the planet, and someone was bound to spot us, sooner or later." He snapped his check list down. "It's better we move to a planet where we're not likely to be interfered with by expanding Terrans. There's your ready light."

"What about the Gershmi, Steve?"

"That's the great part of it all," Jordan said enthusiastically. "Now we can go out and be real friends with the Gershmi."

"I'd like that," Ward said, meaning it. "But I've a suspicion that they don't want to be friends with us."

"Then we'll just have to convince them we are honest and sincere about friendship. They'll understand that. After all, they may only have three fingers and a thumb, but that's a trifle; they are human beings like us."

"That's true. But—"

"But nothing, me old goat!" Jordan was excited that his job was nearing a successful conclusion. "You know interstellar wars are only too possible by use of matter transmitters. Unhappily only too easy. But they are insane. No consciously rational human race is going to fight among people like themselves—"

BEHOLD THE STARS

Ward licked his lips. The three men helping him moved off for fresh parts of the box for transmission.

When they were out of earshot, Ward said: "Hold on a minute, Steve. What about Marshal Levy?"

Jordan turned a blank face towards him. "What do you know of Levy?"

"I thought you were—ah—helping him?"

Jordan smiled. "I was. That's how I had the incredible luck to find the Old Man and get in on this. You were, too?"

"Yes."

"What did you think of our Julie? If Stella wasn't—that is—she's a real woman, Julie."

"Yes."

The three men returned with part of the balancing box, staggering under its weight. "Hi, Dave," called one. "Your muscles afraid of a little healthy exercise?"

Ward helped heft the box-balancing panel into the waiting transmitter. The green ready light shone out.

"You guys go grab the rest of the box," Jordan said. "Dave and I are going to fix the time-setter."

"Sure, Steve," the one who had spoken called back as they walked off. "I'll hump boxes. You heroes can play around with that high explosive. Have fun."

The darkness now lay under the camouflage screen like the blot of emptiness beneath an unlit street lamp, and Ward felt an irrational desire to hold his hands before him as he walked. They went across to a hollow scraped beneath a rock and Jordan began to hand up the small plastic charges. "You set 'em, Dave, and I'll come after and time 'em." Jordan chuckled, a rich, deep, satisfying chuckle. "The bangs will sure wake up the town down there."

"Say, Steve," Ward said, obediently packing charges into a convenient-sized bundle for carrying. "What about the Gershmi, though? I mean"—he put a serious, concerned, worried tone into his voice—"suppose we *can't* make 'em see sense?"

"We will, don't you worry. Here you are, the last charge.

That should be enough to blow the box into this hypothetical hyperspace the FTL boys dream of."

"Sure, I know, Steve. But, suppose? I mean, just suppose?"

"Act your age, Dave! No culture that has reached the stars is going to fight another! It just doesn't make sense."

"What about the Venies, Steve?"

"Those. Well—well, I feel—ashamed. To think what we did—it was monstrous, savage, barbaric. Why, Dave, we used to do things that—"

"We did. And so did the Venies. But just suppose the Gershmi won't talk peace with us. Suppose they insist on making war. What then?"

"What then?"

"That's what the man said."

"I—I don't know. I didn't think about it." Jordan watched the sky brighten as the camouflage projectors were brought in and transmitted through the last remaining box. Now any stray aircraft could see them. But, apart from the single box and the few men, there was nothing left to see.

"Think about it now."

"Oh, come off it, Dave! So maybe cultures can reach the stars a little young—ourselves and the Venies, now, maybe we went off half-cocked at each other's throats, like infant kids squabbling over a candy bar. But that's all over now. We've grown up, we've matured among the stars. It's axiomatic that if a culture has the nous to fabricate means of space travel in interstellar terms, then that race has forsaken warfare—"

"It just isn't axiomatic, Stevel I'm asking you what you'd do if the Gershmi, despite all our protestations of friendship and our genuine desire for peace, persisted in attacking and fighting us."

"But they just wouldn't, Dave. What could they hope to gain?"

Ward laughed. A harsh, grating laugh that he had intended to sound coldly amused and which came out like a tortured man's cry on the rack; a laugh of anguish for his friend.

"The Gershmi and ourselves are physiologically similar, apart from the trifling three finger business. There are only a certain number of yellow type-G stars in the galaxy and there are only a certain number of oxygen-water worlds in the zone of habitation around those stars."

"I take your point. But you're thinking in terms of the old Earth before stellar travel, when mankind found itself multiplying at a fantastic and frightening speed and saw the land running out; not enough land, not enough food, not enough freedom—*lebensraum*, wasn't it?"

"We of Earth, Steve, are deliberately multiplying at a rate that makes the old pre-spatial Earth rate look trifling by comparison. Once we found that other races in space were also out colonizing the galaxy, we re-oriented our approach. Birth control is now only used when a woman can no longer bear children in complete safety. We encourage large families—my God! You've seen the women lining up for the family allowances and all of them pregnant again!"

"I know. It is good that we of Earth shall populate the galaxy—"

"If I didn't know you better, Steve, I'd say you were deliberately parodying that! We've all our work cut out to have a look at the few thousand or so stars in our little bit of the spiral arm we're in! But it's got to end one day, one day, perhaps, when we meet up with *real* aliens. The Gershmi want to colonize the galaxy and they want every world of use to a human being they can lay their hands on. . . ."

Jordan paused as Ward straightened up with the last plastic charge in his hand, face flushed from bending over and working in the confined space and from the vehemence of his words. The look Jordan gave Ward chilled; had he, perhaps, pushed too far, too hard?

They were alone, now, alone in the megalithic circle with the single box standing four square in the center, waiting for them to go through and leave a time-bomb to blow up that gateway for ever.

The shadows deepened now as the alien sun of Hildesheim slid below the rocky rim and drenched the bowl in indigo.

BEHOLD THE STARS

Ward could only just make out Jordan's face in reflected light. His friend looked worried, undecided, nervous—and insecure.

"We're doing right, Dave." Jordan spoke harshly, filling the growing night with a confident pulpit sound. "The way of friendship is the only sane way among the stars."

"I know," Ward said softly. "But suppose . . . ?"

Jordan shook his head. "I can understand why you are saying this, Dave. And I can understand what you are saying. But, surely you realize that I cannot feel it at all? You know the detractors take away all combative feeling for aliens? I just *can't* envisage what you're suggesting; and the effort to achieve the impossible makes my head ache. . . ."

Ward sucked in a dry breath.

Hesitatingly, lest he say the wrong word, he said: "You're building the detractor units with the installation we've just transmitted so you must understand their operation. Doesn't that give you any inkling at all that you could see the problem in the round?"

"No. I can't really understand just how you're able to talk about it so glibly. I suppose you've only been through a box once and everything hasn't gone yet. That can only be the answer. Some men who've been through a score of times cannot envisage any alien at all as an enemy—"

"Gone through a box once!" Ward felt dismay. He'd been through a box as many times as Jordan. He wondered for a moment if his friend had lost his memory. That might explain it—but he talked of the Venies. . . .

"I've been through a couple of times or so; but even I can still feel a little surge of enmity towards these hypothetically real aliens we all talk so glibly about; things with tentacles and scales and bulbous eyes—abortions of the galaxy. But even if they are friends. . . ."

"Sure. Sure they're friends if they don't try to push us around—"

Jordan caught Ward's arm. "You've been talking most oddly since you joined us, Dave. Almost as though you haven't been changed, although how that could be I don't know. For you couldn't have reached us here without going through

BEHOLD THE STARS

a RSC box and that would have changed you." He gripped Ward's arm, tight, then relaxed. "The detractors took away all your pugilistic and hateful thoughts toward aliens, Dave. That's for sure."

"Sure." Ward's mind opened like a flower in spring, sensitive, seeking, awaiting the touch of truth. "Y'know, the detractor unit is a wonderful device. You're the brain of the outfit; you always were. Just how does the thing work?"

The green ready light over the box glowed out, flushing an emerald tide of shadowed light down the metal door and their faces and clothes and picking out a single jeweled drop of fire from the Massenet Nine. Jordan opened the door and stepped in. If Ward wanted the answers he would have to follow. He slapped the last charge down as Jordan finished the final connection.

"That's easy," Jordan said. "H'm. I think I'll give her five minutes. No slipups that way." He set the time-bomb mechanism and slapped over the key. "She's set."

All along Ward had felt himself poised on a tightrope of peril; one false move and he would be branded as a spy. From all that he had learned he now felt convinced that Jordan and his new associates would not kill him, for that type of thinking had been sucked out of them by these mysterious detractors. Oh no. He knew what they would do. They'd make him go through a box fitted with a detractor unit and he'd come out the other end with half his brains missing.

Jordan confirmed that grisly thought. "All we do when we transit a man is break him down and beam him to the reception box. So the old man figured he could fix a gadget that would take out parts of the human being he didn't like. He could tailor what went through. He built the detractors to do just that and remove the hatreds and fears and alien xenophobia that tormented humankind. Now we can't fight the aliens." Jordan began a technical description that Ward only half followed. The box door shut behind him, trapped him in a world of ghastly understanding.

He had the picture now in its entirety.

BEHOLD THE STARS

He felt old and ill.

His Army full-a augmentation suit lay behind the rocks beyond the megalithic amphitheater. But he stood in a box and the transit light glowed and he was being broken down and flung as a beam of immaterial instantaneous transmission ergs across the light years to—where he had no idea.

Jordan was talking enthusiastically of the Great Plan now, confirming everything that Ward had dreaded.

Ward leaned back against the box wall, folding his arms across his chest and smiling warmly at his friend to conceal the chaos of his mind. He could not use his gun on Steve Jordan. They were flung across the parsecs and he had to return to this box somehow before the five minutes were up and it exploded, to shatter for all time that gateway between the stars. But he couldn't use a gun on Steve.

The far door opened.

"We're here, Dave!" Jordan bounced out through the door, half turning his head over a shoulder, smiling, bubbling with confidence and the eagerness to begin construction on this new planet. "We have to build detractors to fit all the boxes we can reach!" Ward moved to the door sill. He felt cold. He had, perhaps, three minutes or less left. He could do it—just.

The he understood what might have happened to him and in a congealing fear he wondered if he need bother—if he would want to bother.

He felt the shock of failure—for a detractor fitted to this box would have tampered with his own brain. . . .

XII

THROUGH LIPS that stiffened with fear so that he had to make a forcible effort to speak, Ward said: "What's the name of this planet, Steve?"

"Huh? Name—why—Coblentz IV . . . Come on, Dave, we must turn out these detractors fast. The Old Man wants every single one he can get for the new routes we're opening.

BEHOLD THE STARS

We've got to make everyone understand the aliens and feel friendship for them all—"

"Even the Gershmi?" Ward said and waited for what his brain would signal down, what his thalamus would make of that alarm signal, how he would react within himself to the name of the aliens he hated for what they wanted to do the men of Earth. . . .

And he felt a loathing for them, a feeling that unless they were prepared to show their friendship he would withhold his own until they were truly ready. . . .

He reached out and began to pull the box door shut.

"Hey! Dave! What are you doing? That box is due to explode! Have you gone mad? You'll kill yourself!"

Then the door shut and Ward sagged with the transit light washing a ruddy glow over the sweat drenching his face.

He roused himself with a feverish effort and thrust at the far door. The box doors could not be opened until the green ready light shone outside; but from inside the transmission appeared instantaneous and at his violent push the door slammed open. He had about a quarter minute or less left.

He found the time setting where Steve had fused it and with fingers that he willed not to tremble lifted the cover and clicked the little arms back to the safety position. Then he sat back on his heels in the darkness of that megalithic stone ring and shook. After that he readied the lock and in a single motion slammed the box door shut and rapped the lock into place, barring and bolting the door solidly. Now, no one could come through that transmitter from the other side.

Coblentz IV, hey? Well, he'd see about that.

Wearily he walked across to his army full-a suit, feeling the physical hunger in him. He swallowed a couple of pills and a drink of water and felt a little better. He put on the full-a suit, strapping on the exo-skeleton but not bothering with the full-augmentation devices, the heart-recirculating pump, the boosted oxygenators, letting the leads coil back into their neat recesses. He set the suit to half power and started the trip back to where Julie was waiting.

BEHOLD THE STARS

He thought he was all right.

He felt no different from the way he'd felt before talking to Steve Jordan.

Complete certainty was too much to hope for; but he was reasonably confident. Certainly, he could think and talk about aliens in a rational way, neither hating obsessively and irrationally nor mewling and slobbering over them and their friendship. If a detractor unit had been attached to that last box its effect had been so slight as to be non-efficacious. Probably—and he clung to this thought—probably there had been no detractor unit. After all, this was an internal box system used by Ransome and anyone who went through it would already have been converted. They couldn't waste units, Steve had said as much.

So encouraging himself he went back to Silas Slattery's white house and Julie.

"I transmitted here on a GBI box," Julie said, awed. Her slender hands pressed her face, her eyes wide and shaken at the understanding of what might have been. "The devils! The cunning devils! They've got it fixed so anyone—anyone at all—who goes through a RSC box can have no feelings against any aliens!"

She had spared him no word of thanks or encouragement, no word of praise. To her, he had done the job she had sent him on.

Ward's reactions to that he felt to be of no great importance right now. Later on, he told himself with a dry quirk of humor, she could go and draw the family allowances. He'd enjoy her doing that. The duty of every Terran citizen was to produce future Terran citizens to populate the new worlds opening up in space. He intended that he and Julie would do their share.

Still wearing his Army suit he walked with Julie back up the hill to the box through which she had had him brought here from the assembly around Mycenae.

"I'll go through to Earth and see Marshal Levy right away," she said, dialing the box network and asking for her destination to be set up by the switchmen at the central switch-

BEHOLD THE STARS

board. This box operated on the civil service network and she must have keyed in trunks to connect up to the SSA network operating out to Mycenae. "You'd better come back with me."

"If you say so."

The strange aftereffects of what he had been through and learned were affecting Ward in a peculiar way. He actually wanted to take off the full-a suit. He hadn't worn his own orange civilian suit in a long time, it seemed, now. He was dog-tired. But Julie was pushing him along, demanding, ordering. As the Army's Chief of Staff's secretary she must be used to handling unruly young shavetails just as easily as she managed fussing old colonel generals. Quite a girl.

She went through the box. The green ready light glowed. Ward stepped through and out the other door into the wide glass-floored communications foyer of the Army building on Earth.

Julie led him, still wearing his monstrous suit, through an electric bustle and scurry of activity towards Marshal Levy's private suite on the penthouse level. Quiet descended behind them as the final doors closed, the soldiers on sentry smiling with stiff cordiality at Julie, straightening with blank faces at sight of an officer wearing the combat suit reserved for the privileged few.

Throughout that small portion of this spiral arm of the galaxy men called the Milky Way, an interlocking system of matter transmitters operated at all times to keep open lines of communications. Chief of these was the civil service system, maintaining lines of communications for the Army, the Navy and the Marines. Then there was the great expanding system operated by the SSA, working out of the Drain, spear-ing out to the advance guard of Solterranean civilization reaching for the stars. And there were the privately controlled systems—Galactic Bridges Inc., Trans-Galactic Corporation, the Ransome Stellar Corporation. There were others, specialized systems catering to minority needs. But of them all only Ransome carried a new and awesome power, the capacity to alter men's minds.

BEHOLD THE STARS

They waited in a private room while Ward took off his full-augmentation suit.

Then Julie led the way towards a door. When Ward looked at her questioningly, she said, "What did you think—the Chief of Staff has his office on the penthouse level of a skyscraper?"

"You could have fooled me."

"That's the idea. This box leads to an underground warren nearly as complex as the Drain. It's an internal box and you have to have a key." She unzipped a pocket in her bolero and lifted a key on a golden chain. "Here's mine."

They went through the box and were transported from the penthouse level to an underground cavern a good number of miles beneath the planetary crust. Down here even planetary smasher bombs would have a job reaching them.

There was no waiting to be ushered into Marshal Levy's office. The Chief of Staff rose from behind his desk as Julie entered, waving to their seats the ring of generals and marshals who automatically rose with him.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said Marshal Levy in that metallic, easy-paced voice. "This may take some time." He smiled at Julie. "This the young man, Julie?"

"This is the lieutenant colonel I told you about, Dad. He keeps up a good front that he's still a civilian; but his heart's in the right place. Lieutenant Ward."

Levy stuck out a hand. Dazed, Ward shook it, feeling the ridged muscle and smooth skin. Dad, had she said? *Dad?* Levy sat down, smiling beneath the white brushed moustache that had become the trademark of the military. His leathery, good-conditioned face with the big nose, beaked and strong like a Roman's, and the strong fine bone structure certainly carried overtone's of Julie's—except for the nose and the good-humor. Levy could be a martinet when he wanted to be—but then, so could Julie. . . .

"Tell me," said Marshal Levy.

Julie—Julie Levy—told the Chief of Staff what had happened. Levy reached out to the phone, his face bleak. When he had his connection, he rasped: "Top priority order. No

BEHOLD THE STARS

personnel, repeat, no personnel to transit via any RSC box. Utmost disciplinary action against offenders." He looked up savagely, in an aside to those sitting in his office. "Not that that'll make any difference to them. It'll be too late by then."

"This is shocking . . ." said a Marshal, whey-faced.

Levy bent to the phone again. "Repeat that order to the Navy and the Marines. Explanations follow. Set up a top level Chiefs of Staff conference, top priority, emergency—it doesn't matter but just get the Navy and the Marines and the SSA here!"

The aide on the screen digested all this blank-faced.

"Yessir," he said, waiting for more.

"Send a detail to the RSC building. Bring Old Man Ransome and Gerald Mikardo here. On the double."

He slammed the phone down on the aide's: "Yessir."

Levy stared about like a dinosaur heading up out of the swamp smelling blood. "The police will have to be informed but I want a word with Ransome myself, first."

Another phone chirruped and smoothly Julie answered. She could be Levy's secretary, at that, Ward decided sourly.

A soldier in smart uncreased greens showed on the screen. His face showed traces of alarm. "Emergency coming in from the Mycenae assembly, sir. I'm putting them on now."

The screen blanked. A voice spattered from the speaker, a voice Ward recognized despite its passage over two hundred light years. Major Jack Tracy.

" . . . down okay and got a box assembled but they knocked the first one out. The second party were all lost. There seems to be a new Gershmi tactic . . . I have no information yet on whatever it is but we are trying . . . Yes, all right, Sergeant, contract that perimeter on the east . . . Hold it!" A distant concussion and banging like idiot monkeys banging on garbage cans rode in over Tracy's voice all the time, rising and falling as the carrier wave beamed through the various boxes brought it in at varying gains.

"What is your situation?" shouted Levy.

"Position bad." Tracy's voice, for all the inferno that must be erupting around him now, down on that hostile unknown

BEHOLD THE STARS

Levy, Ward saw the ruthless lines of lip and nostril, the icy stare of habitual command; but he saw more. He saw that these men did what they had to do because this was the only way they could be sure, absolutely and without a hint of failure, that Earth and all her billions of sons and daughters out among the stars could feel safe from threat from those very stars.

No one liked war. Ward had been a box-dropper and he knew what war was like at first hand and the experience had left him with no illusions about that facet of life. These men had dedicated themselves and perhaps they had grown calloused and rough but also they had sacrificed themselves.

Salter saw Ward and walked across. "So you're mixed up in this, Ward." He looked shaken by the news. "It seems we owe a vote of thanks to you—again. But I just can't understand what Old Man Ransome was thinking about. It just isn't like him at all."

Ward was about to make some inane remark when the doors opened and burly Army guards ushered in Old Man Ransome and Gerald Mikardo. Ted Zukowsky had been brought along, too, for good measure.

Out of imminent chaos Marshal Levy brought order in his metallic drawling voice, organizing seats for everyone. The office of the Army Chief of Staff suddenly took on the air of a court of law. Levy sat self-appointed judge. The watching admirals and colonel generals and marshals constituted the jury. In the dock were Old Man Ransome and Gerald Mikardo.

And prosecuting counsel would be David Ward.

He swallowed and looked around for a defense. The only defense, he realized, could be brought forward by the accused themselves.

Marshal Levy leaned forward, clasping his hands together, forearms resting on the edge of his desk, and glared at Ransome.

"Now, then, Ransome. What's this all about?"

Old Man Ransome had sat lumpily in the chair indicated.

BEHOLD THE STARS

planet orbiting Mycenae, remained steady. "Colonel Fordyce lost. Half the men out of action. We have one small box erected but the ring is closing and we're not putting through men fast enough. If this box goes—"

This is always the worst time, Ward thought bleakly. Whether to send men through your singleton box or chance it that those you have can hold out while you send through another box.

Jack Tracy was facing that agonizing decision now.

Levy said forcefully: "This is Marshal Levy. I know you're doing all you can down there. We need that planet. It's up to you to hold it for Earth."

Big words. Easy words. Yet Levy's face showed the sick sweat of compassion and fear and a desperate driving desire to help his men—his men—up there at the sharp end.

"I'm sending out another box-dropping outfit. They can drop antipodes from you, help take some of the weight off your backs. Keep fighting."

"Thanks, Marshal." Tracy's voice still retained that incredible calm. "We sure need a little help right now."

One of the marshals rose hurriedly from the table. He crossed to the auxiliary screens and began to rap out orders, marshalling another box-dropping troop to transit out to Mycenae and to drop down into that inferno below.

The line from Mycenae went dead. Levy hoarsely shouted into his phone to have the connection remade.

Perhaps it never would be. Perhaps Jack Tracy had bought it along with his men—and the box.

The door opened and men stormed in, tough, belligerent men wearing Marine and Navy uniforms. Ward saw Salter, enter just as dominating as the other in his civilian clothes.

"What's all this about—?"

"Tell 'em," snapped Levy at Ward, hungrily cradling the phone line to Mycenae.

Ward explained. He was greeted by silence. These men knew an emergency when they saw one. Everyone waited for the arrival of Ransome and Mikardo. Looking at these Marine and Navy commanding officers of similar rank to

BEHOLD THE STARS

Now he lifted his old head and glared right back at the marshal.

"You know me, Bryan. I don't play the small time. I've done what I've done because it was the only sensible thing to do. I'm raging angry you caught on as soon as you have. Another few months and we'd have made war between ourselves and aliens impossible . . ."

No bluster, Ward saw with curious respect for the old man, no indignant demands about why he had been brought here, no facade, no covering up. Old Man Ransome knew the answers—and he simply said he was sorry he had been unable to finish his Great Plan.

Words chopped like hacksaw blades across the office.

"No sane civilized people will tolerate war . . ."

"They used to organize Earthly wars a neat generation apart; but you can't do that in space. You never know when you're going to bump into a hostile alien race . . ."

"When Earth was split up into national groupings every group envisaged the future as being run under their own pet system, but it didn't turn out like that . . ."

"We are men of Earth and we must remain in command of our own destiny"

"That is blasphemous pride . . ."

"Listen!" shouted Mikardo across the cutting, scything, wounding words. "We've all lost friends and relations in hideous spatial wars. That must cease! We have by the Great Plan turned animalistic tendencies into peaceful ones. We have made people lose their basic drives of hatred and anger and fear of aliens—"

An aperture in Levy's recorder coughed a yellow signal form. He read it, the lines deepening in his face.

"And you listen to this report!" he shot back at Mikardo. "We're in serious trouble around Mycenae. Our men are being killed after we won through a shaky start. The Gershmi were there waiting for us. We were winning—d'you hear, winning!—when a bunch of newly arrived Marines refused to fight and tried to contact the Gershmi under a white flag, to be friends with them!"

BEHOLD THE STARS

"The only sane thing to do!" snapped Ransome.

"Sure. I'd agree with you if the Gershmi weren't in the middle of killing Terrans. That's what they did. They slaughtered that entire detachment of Marines. So now we're in trouble and all those devoted years of work will go for nothing—"

"So that's how the lads caught their packet!" said Ward, shocked.

"You're wrong!" Old Man Ransome leaned forward, his face flushed with victory. "The Gershmi were there first. It was their planet!"

A rocket soared to burst in Ward's skull. "They were there first!" he shouted passionately. "And we would have talked to them, tried to arrange an agreement—if they'd had complete claim to the planet then we'd have withdrawn. We've done that before. But they just attacked us blind, slashed out at us as soon as they spotted us! They didn't give us a chance to talk!"

"You can't take away a man's right to defend himself," Levy said heavily. "The aliens will have no respect for a race that cannot talk to them as equals, yes; not as whining curs who wish only to lick their—"

"Report from Mycenae, sir!" An aide's voice chopped across. "Sitrep coming in from Major Tracy!"

"Thank God he's still alive," breathed Ward.

" . . . second box now functioning. The perimeter is being pushed out. Another division going through. General Kramer taking over command and advancing. I think we have the Gershmi licked . . . "

The weird thing about it all, Ward realized as he listened with joy and relief, was the simple fact that these people in this room safely underground on Earth were separated by a mere nothing from the bloody battle out there two hundred light years across space. By merely transmitting through a few boxes they could be in the thick of the fight almost instantaneously.

If the stories about Marshal Levy were true—and he believed them—the Chief of Staff would box out there himself

BEHOLD THE STARS

in no time at all. Ward made up his mind to go with him.

Ransome and Mikardo sat like dummies. They were conditioned now, unable to share the feelings of the normal men and women in this office, cut off from their fellow Earthmen. Ward thought of Steve Jordan and he felt a great and sorrowing regret. But Steve was a good guy; he'd make out.

"Report in from Coblentz IV, sir." The screens were alive now with reports and figures. "Colonel Stephen Jordan and all the—uh—people with him have been arrested and are on way back to Earth. All RSC boxes impounded."

"We can undo the damage you have done, Ransome," Levy said softly. "But only just in time. What would have happened if you'd set up your chain of devilish boxes around the Earth, penetrated the Drain, infiltrated the civil service, I shudder to dream. Now we can go out to the stars whole in mind and spirit once again—"

"You go out to the stars with bloody hands—"

"And much of that blood is our own."

"Major Tracy on the line, sir!"

"—cease fire. The Gershmi are sending in a truce party. Every indication is that they want to call a full-scale armistice. Awaiting further instructions."

Marshal Levy lumbered to his feet. His face beamed. "That's what I've been waiting to hear! Now we can talk friendship to the Gershmi! Now we can talk about allocating the planets in dispute. We are two strong alien races talking as equals and neither side will suffer. We shall reach an equitable understanding." He walked around to the bowed form of Old Man Ransome and put a hand on his shoulder. "This is what you wanted, I know. So did we all. But there are right ways and wrong ways of getting it. Not until every single thinking being in space is prepared to be true friends with every other can your philanthropic wishes come true. Until then we must go on as we are, standing up for our own rights and respecting those of others."

"But war . . ."

"Is hateful and vile. One day we'll do without it. But with instantaneous matter transmission as the normal method of

BEHOLD THE STARS

communication in the galaxy we're going to bump up against people still thinking in barbarous terms. We of Earth must be ready."

He nodded to his assembled henchmen and the officers of the Marines and the Navy. "I'm going across to Mycenae now. We can use this as a beginning to make allies and friends of the Gershmi. Our way."

Ward rose too. He popped a couple more pills in his mouth and swallowed hard. Julie was smiling at him. All in all, he still hadn't finished. There was still work to do.

"You just be around when I get back, Julie Levy. There are a few things to be straightened out."

"If you think you're getting away from me now, young Dave Ward, you've another think coming. I'm going along, too."

His future father-in-law was busily arranging with the various ministers and secretaries of the government for the mission to talk peace with the Gershmi. Everybody was rising and busily arranging the immediate future.

Old Man Ransome just sat numbly. "I believed we were doing the best thing," he said, shaking his head, not comprehending.

Ward crossed to him, feeling the waste and despair of fine aims deflected from a true purpose. "Think of Stella and Steve," he said gently. "They are the future for you now."

Then he turned back to Julie, as she slipped her arm through his, going with the others out to the banks of matter transmitters that would send them out to the stars to talk peace.

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