

# Starlight

**Algis Budrys as Paul Janvier**

**Illustration by Kandis Elliot**

The three ships were not called the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, or the *Santa Maria*. They were not called anything in particular; their radio call signs were their captains' names. Martindale's ship had a 52 painted on the hull near the bow, and Santurce's and Halligan's had their identification numerals as well, but they had not needed them. In the dark between the stars, they had simply said "Martindale," or "Santurce." They had not said "Halligan" for a long time; Halligan had been dead a long time, and his ship was run by remote control from Martindale. Martindale was the chief captain.

They were not particularly large ships. They did not have to be; their cargo was embryos, and they don't take up much room per unit, and they pack tight. Their crews were solitary--Martindale in his ship, Santurce in hers, and the late Halligan.

The late Halligan had died when a bank of embryos ruptured; they heard the sound of him trying to control the rush of cryogenics into his living space, cursing. He had not even had time to grow desperate; he was still working when he froze to death. It was too bad that an organism as large and complex as a full-grown man could not successfully be preserved by supercool fluids and gases. He was dead forever, and if the individual cells of his body in some sense continued to live, they had forever lost the ability to cooperate with all the others in the organism called Halligan.

The three ships came out of FTL beyond Pluto, and moved steadily Earthward on reaction drives. They were not particularly sophisticated ships, either. They were simply the best Earth could do at the time when a wave of popular expansionism swept over the public, and they had been fired out by the score in all directions, each laden with its embryos--sheep, cats, cows, eagles, dogs, moles, people and the like--to find a landing if they could.

Martindale's three couldn't. They had delved among the stars, searching in vain for Earthlike planets, and they had come home, finally, reaction mass nearly exhausted, FTL controllers increasingly cranky machines-- these three were failures, without even a planetfall to their credit, their captains older --well, Martindale and Santurce were old enough--the bitter taste of defeat in Martindale's mouth even though they had known that if even one ship found a planet somewhere it would count as a victory for all. He did not in fact know if victory in that sense was theirs; their radios were silent except for each other. Even now, approaching Earth.

"What's wrong?" Martindale said querulously. He sat in his chair and scanned the radio frequencies again. Still nothing. Off the port bow was Jupiter, a brilliant light. Dead ahead lay Earth, an only slightly less brilliant light because of being so much closer. And nothing. The silent constellations and gas clouds gave a glowing backdrop that he had long ago grown tired of, and nothing. "Santurce," he said, "so you get anything?"

"Such as what, Captain Martindale?" Santurce's voice simmered with suppressed rage.

Martindale sighed. "Do you hear anything on the radio?"

"My set is the same as yours, Captain. If I heard anything, you would hear it."

"What do you think?"

"I don't have to think."

Martindale sighed again. Santurce had wanted to go on; expend the last of their mass, try one more jump on the controllers, keep searching. He had vetoed her urgent suggestion. He had taken over her controls and was manning her ship by remote, as he was Halligan's. She had nothing to do all day but sit, and watch. Watch nothing.

He should not, after all, have been surprised at her attitude. And to tell the truth, he was not; she had displayed it often enough over their long journey home. But if nothing else he was going to bring the three ships home, perhaps to be refitted and sent out again . . . or perhaps not, but in any case he was home, or almost, and ready to lay his burden down. But there was nothing on the radio. He had hoped, he supposed, that Santurce would be sufficiently intrigued to participate in his puzzlement, but apparently not.

He did not know how long they had been gone, by Earthly clocks. Several hundred years, he imagined--perhaps a thousand. Perhaps--for no one knew exactly how the FTL worked--perhaps he was home before they had left. Perhaps he was before radio. It was possible, perhaps.

He did not, in fact, know much. Martindale pinched his nose. He was an average man; you did not need a genius to crew a one-man starship. He had done it because it was a good job for one of his capabilities, and he had been a bachelor and furthermore not inordinately interested in sex of any kind. Despite the media, there were plenty of others like him, of both sexes, and Santurce and Halligan had been two others.

The reason he was chief captain was that he had a couple of years on the others. An unexceptional man for a job that was mostly routine, with the chance of being the father of his kingdom, so to speak. Nurturing the embryos, watching them grow, on some exotic world, and going to his reward much revered. That was the whole of it.

They came closer. And he saw that the Moon was subtly different, and the Earth was very different indeed. He stared at them in disbelief. The ships hovered over a large land-mass that he had expected would be Africa, and looked at a Mediterranean whose coastline was all wrong. Barely recognizable . . . if, indeed, this was Earth; an Earth transformed. An Earth without space stations, without cities, without any visible trace of the works of Man.

"Oh, God!" moaned Martindale, and checked his navigational data a dozen times before he finally admitted that this was Earth, and that was the Moon, and it was all, horribly, wrong.

"Santurce!" he called, and got back laughter; hysterical, shouting laughter without a trace of humor in it. And that was all.

He reasoned. He reasoned, finally, that the FTL controller had brought them back to an Earth. Not his Earth, which was lost forever in an infinity of Earths. And he thought to himself that they were all lost. All the ships of the armada. The lucky ones were the ones who did not return; they thought Earth still spun and hummed in the center of things, and so long as they did not attempt to make actual contact with it, they could go on believing. But his universe was wild, and infinite.

He got out the shuttle, finally. Left his living quarters, put on the suit, squeezed down the narrow corridor between the embryo banks and the fusion unit that maintained the temperature controls, came out the other end of the ship and got into the shuttle, and plunged Earthward. He still saw no trace of the works of Man.

He stood on land that was reassuringly correct; black with uncounted millennia of leaf-mold lapping like the sea around the rocky outcrop on which he had set the shuttle down. But everything else--

The sky was subtly the wrong color. The vegetation, waist-high, was green and healthy looking, but it was like no vegetation he knew, broad-leaved and pulpy. He stared about him. There had not been a trace of towns or roads; he might as well set down in one place as any other, and he had.

His atmospheric analyzers had told him the air was breathable; lower in carbon dioxide than the Earth air he knew, and a shade higher in oxygen than was normal for this altitude, but certainly breathable. He took off his helmet and stood holding it under one arm. He sniffed. It was all right; the worst of it was the unfamiliar smells, with a taint of something particularly acrid but only a taint. It was all right; he could breathe it, and for the first time in years he breathed something that had not seen a scrubber or a tank.

He turned full circle, and it was all the same. And then the acrid smell suddenly got much worse, and the vegetation nearly beside him rustled. A brown snout parted the leaves and lifted in his direction.

He stared at it as more of it become revealed. It was the size of a pig, or slightly larger, and vaguely pig-like in form as well, though its hide was segmented like that of a rhinoceros, and there was no tail as far as he could tell. It had two eyes, or what passed for them in the center of two dark spots high on its skull, and its jaw was flat and mobile, strands of vegetation still caught in its yellow, stumpy teeth. It stood on four short limbs which terminated in round pads. And it stank. And it was coming closer, and behind it, he now saw, was a whole herd of like creatures, who had been below the level of the vegetation, all coming closer, and stinking.

He ran. He fumbled the helmet back on, eyes watering, and he ran back to the shuttle and slammed the airlock shut. He sat panting in the control couch, fogging his helmet, trying to wash the horrible smell out of his lungs, and gradually succeeding, and then he took the shuttle up, without regard to whether he fried any of the creatures or not, and shuddered.

He tried several more landings; on something that might have been South America, on something that might have been Australia. It was the same--the creatures were everywhere, and they were the dominant form. And they built nothing, they understood nothing, as far as he could tell; they simply ate the vegetation and, presumably, bred. He caught glimpses of carnivores, and of lesser breeds, but none of them looked familiar, and none of them could hope to outnumber the pig-like things. The planet belonged to them. He went back up to his ship.

"Santurce," he said, "we've got a problem. This Earth went through different evolutionary things, and it isn't anything like the Earth we know." He struggled with the language; he had no vocabulary for the things of science; beyond astrophysics and home nursing. "Santurce?"

He got back laughter.

"Santurce," he said humbly, "please."

He got back laughter. And then a rustling of her getting up from her chair. He heard the sound of the door to the central tunnel being opened, and the laughter fading, and then cut off as the door closed. And

after that, nothing. She was getting into her shuttle, to check on his observations, he decided. But he knew she would find nothing different.

He sat in front of his instruments, his head in his hands. They could not leave to go elsewhere; the ships were too depleted. And what elsewhere, in any case? He looked out the observation glass at the stars, and it was as though he were the first man, standing in the first twilight of Earth--his Earth-- wondering what they were suspecting they were unattainable. Down on their Earth, they did not even wonder, he thought. The stars were, if anything, just lights.

He heard Santurce's door open again, and the rustling return to her microphone. She was still laughing, softer by a little, but still without joy. He was alone, Martindale realized. Completely alone in this universe, and the universe he had been born in was lost, forever, possibly even the moment they went to the FTL control the first time.

He raised his head: He had a shipload of embryos.

Of course! He would start a new Earth! They would have to overcome certain obstacles--the smell of the pig-things, for one, but that would not really be a problem for long. And Santurce's ship. They would each take half the planet, and--

"Santurce! Get ready to enter the atmosphere." he said urgently. "We're going down and begin deploying our nurseries."

Santurce's laughter stopped. "Ah, no, no, Captain Martindale, you can't. This Earth belongs to the creatures that live on her. You cannot simply co-opt--"

"Ten, Santurce. Nine. Eight. Seven . . ."

"Captain Martindale," Santurce said in a surprisingly clear and steady voice. "I jiggered my fusion reactor a few minutes ago. I think we have no time left."

Martindale looked at Santurce's ship. And it was blooming into a bright star, and the star was reaching out to Halligan's ship, and Martindale's ship.

"Oh, my God," Martindale cried, "She's wiped out the whole human ra--"

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