

# Watch Your Step

## Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

The admiral frowned thoughtfully down at the charts. Absently, he rubbed his cheek with the blunt end of a pencil. Then he tapped the chart. "This one seems the most suitable," he said to his aide. "What do you think of establishing a forward base in this area, Cargre?" He bent to read the minute lettering. "This . . . this . . . Cargre, is that word Sol? The light is very bad."

Cargre bent forward and peered. He grimaced in annoyance and wiped his fingers over the surface. "There seems to be a smudge on the chart, sir," he muttered, bending closer. "Yes, sir," he said, straightening. "Sol. That's a foreign word--native, probably. They must have been contacted some time."

Admiral Tarlaten raised an eyebrow. "Don't you know definitely?"

The aide apologized. "I'm afraid not, admiral. It's a very minor system. I'll check the ship's references," he said, turning immediately to the intercommunicator. He spoke into it briefly, waited, received some reply, spoke at greater length, waited another, longer interval, was supplied with the additional answer, shrugged, and switched off.

The admiral had been waiting patiently, his gaze on the chart, his hand on his jaw. Without looking up, he twitched his head interrogatively.

"It's barely listed in our catalogues, sir. Ten planets, only one of them permanently inhabited. That would be Terra. We have no survey report on it--apparently, it was made quite a while ago. Someone must have decided it was too out-of-date to be retained, but no new one has yet been filed."

The admiral grimaced. He surveyed the chart again, shaking his head. "Well, there seems to be nothing else in the area. I'm afraid we'll just have to settle for . . . for--"

"Terra, sir. Of Sol."

"Yes. Thank you, Cargre." He turned away from the chart. "Awkward name to remember," he observed. "Any idea of what these Terrestrials are like?"

Cargre shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir."

Admiral Tarlaten grimaced again. "It seems we'll have to furnish our own survey." He scratched his neck philosophically. "Well, if we're ever to launch a decent campaign against the Tratens, we'll be slopping through deeper backwaters than even this . . . Cargre, *what's* that name again?"

His aide had to snatch a glance at the chart before he could answer.

Cargre stood at the main screens, one step behind the admiral, as the flagship floated down. Terra had turned out to be a drab planet, from her puffy white clouds and brilliant blue skies to the deep, heaving green of her oceans. Monotonous mountain chains, draped in every shade of green and brown, crowned with white fire, shambled along the spines of her continents. The deep, breeze-stirred grass of her plains stretched out for unrelenting miles. The natives and their inconsiderable works broke the monotonous topography only with fresh monotony.

The flagship stopped its descent at an altitude of fifteen miles and waited, hovering. Cargre felt the shock tingle up through the deck as the landing party broke away.

Admiral Tarlaten brooded at the screens. "Well," he sighed at last, "it has a breathable atmosphere. Not a very attractive place, is it?"

Cargre shook his head. "I can understand why Survey hasn't bothered to re-check it."

The admiral nodded slightly. "That central plain," he muttered to himself, "ought to make a good supply dump. Bleak place. Have to provide more than the usual amount of recreation for the quartermaster's men. Cargre, get me Captain Laukon on the phone, will you? Wonder if we can store most of our stuff in the open? Save time and work--Cargre, when you've got Laukon, get me Meteorology, will you please? Get this operation organized as fast as possible. Any chance of getting additional supplies from the natives ought to be checked. Probably have some cockeyed standard of exchange." He took the phone from Cargre's hand. "Hello--Laukon? Listen, get your men organized to discharge supplies from the transports as soon as you get a go-ahead. And--hold on a minute, will you?--Cargre, get me the Bursar, please--Laukon? Yes, I was saying, start drafting plans for a receiving base on that central plain on Continent Four. Establish a liaison with Disbursements and set up a purchasing team. Get your research section to work on finding out what supplies the natives can furnish. O. K.--call in and tell Cargre when you're set up. Hello, Drall? What's the dope on the weather?"

Cargre touched the admiral's arm. "Excuse me, sir--the landing party's come back. They've got a native with them."

"Good. Good. I want to see the party's report, first. Have the native made comfortable. I'll talk to him later."

Cargre pulled the report out of the admiral's message box and handed it to him. While the admiral sat down to pore over it, he smoothly took over the job of directing operations.

The tenuous exhaust wakes of tenders and barges began to link the ships of the hovering fleet. Twinkling in the sun, the vehicles of Fleet's Messengers crisscrossed the sky. The complex, yet smoothly working machinery of Fleet Operations had begun its work.

Below the fleet, Terra revolved slowly, drifting around its sun--Sol, wasn't it?

Admiral Tarlaten closed the report and sat back thoughtfully. Despite its drabness, the

planet--here he had to leaf back until he found the word "Terra"--the planet, Terra, was an ideal site for a base. So ideal, as a matter of fact, that only sheer neglect could have kept the Traten from foreseeing the possibility and defending it.

Hm-m-m. But, no, the Traten set no traps. What they held as their own they defended from the outset, throwing up an almost impenetrable defense and extracting a terrible price for every cubic inch of territory. They had absolutely no concepts of offensive strategy--nor, to do them justice, did they need them. It followed that this system was outside the Traten "sphere"--though the very fact that no holding in space can be a sphere made this system so valuable a base, located as it was, deep within a wedge of unclaimed stars that pointed like a spearhead at the Traten Empire's abdomen.

The planet itself was populated by humanoids. This had long ago ceased to be considered unusual in the universe. But it meant that the fleet's men were unlikely to suffer the ill effects of a misfit ecology. It did mean lots of work on immunization shots, but, generally speaking, what plagues one humanoid race also plagues the others, so there was little likelihood of serious trouble with deficient antibodies.

The people were a motley lot, yet drab in the monotony of perfect variegation. No two of them were alike, either in their tastes or inclinations. They had a simple barter-system economy embracing everything from turnips to musical compositions. Every one of them was a dabbler. You could depend on it that any native, picked at random, could sing you a song, build you a chair, or weed your garden. They lived in simple, unexciting homes that might be clustered together in a village or separated from each other by the distance of a day's hike.

They were good handicrafters. Quartermaster Corps might be able to do something with that--trade them simple machine-tools for finished valve parts--something like that.

Admiral Tarlaten picked up his phone. "Linguistics, please," he said into it. "Hello, Linguistics? What have you got on the native's language?"

"Nothing unusual, sir. It's derived from the same root that all humanoid languages are. It has drifted away by a considerable amount, of course, but we've already got a keyed Translator set up, and it won't take more than a day or two--possibly three---before he's talking Freasan like a native. He's a bright enough chap: Seems quite interested in our work. Fascinated by the Translator."

The admiral's mouth twitched. Had anyone tried glass beads or mirrors on the fellow yet? The degree of fascination--and comprehension--would certainly not change by much.

"All right, then--ship him up here." He looked at Cargre. "Any trouble?"

Cargre shook his head. "No, sir. All the transports are down and unloading. Meteorology tells me the planet has a highly regular and predictable climate. It won't storm for three months, so I authorized Quartermaster to unload in the open and build shelters at leisure. As a matter of fact"-- Cargre threw a glance at a situation board-- "there goes the green light on the transports now, sir. We're unloaded."

"Any trouble with the natives?"

Cargre's fingertip traced out the complicated network of one organizational chart. That led him into another, and that to a third. "Uh . . . oh, yes--No, sir, no trouble. As a matter of fact, I

see that Quartermaster's hired a gang of them to help stack supplies."

"Well, good. Good, Cargre. Thank you."

Cargre turned back to his phones and ordered the transports into convoy for their return to Haldeja. The faster they got there, the faster they'd get back with more. Two or three ten-day trips and they'd have this base fully equipped. Once that was done, the admiral could launch the first stages of the offensive.

The annunciator on the cabin door chimed softly. Cargre looked up from his charts, caught the admiral's nod, and opened the door.

The native stood just outside, waiting. A Fleet courier, holding the Translator, stood beside him. Cargre shrugged and got back to his work.

The native looked like an ordinary humanoid being, with absolutely no distinguishing features. His hair was cropped close to his scalp, and his face was weatherbeaten into a permanent brown mask. Hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes were all bleached out to the shade of straw. His undistinguished pale-blue eyes glowed like cold steel. He could easily have passed unnoticed in the average Freasan crowd.

Cargre was far too busy to pay him any further attention. The native seemed to understand that. He turned toward the admiral, his eyes roving inquisitively over every detail of Tarlaten's features and uniform.

The courier set the Translator down on the admiral's desk, plugged it in, saluted and left to wait outside the door.

The admiral looked up at the native. "Sit down, please," he said, indicating the chair beside his desk.

As he sat down, the native shook the admiral's hand. "How do you do, admiral," he said. "My name's John Smith. Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Smith," the admiral replied politely. Actually, he had absolutely no feelings in the matter. As long as the landing party had brought the man back, well and good. But there was no real reason why he should waste his time. The native's mental horizons could not possibly coincide with his own. His conceptions of the universe could not help but be narrow and provincial. There was very little likelihood of their finding a common ground broad enough to be of any help.

The admiral sighed inwardly. Ah, well--What had he told Cargre ? "We'll be slopping in deeper backwaters than this"--something like that. Looking at this native--this... Smith--the admiral wondered if he hadn't been wrong.

Smith had been peering curiously at Cargre's situation boards while the admiral had been musing. The admiral caught his eye and smiled. "Complicated business, wouldn't you say?"

Smith nodded slowly, obviously awe-struck at the complexity of blinking lights and Cargre's continual barrage of orders into one phone or another.

"I don't suppose you people have ever seen a spacefleet before?"

Smith shook his head. "Not that I can remember."

"Well, we've been here before, but it must have been quite some time ago. You're listed in our catalogues. It seems to me there was an indication that you possessed interplanetary travel at the time."

Smith shrugged. "It's possible, I guess." He was plainly fascinated by the cabin, his eyes rarely remaining directed at the admiral. His glance roved around the furniture and appointments, stopping to stare wide-eyed at the screens and the panels of instruments and indicators.

"I suppose you're wondering why we're here?"

"I was told you were fighting a war with some other race."

The admiral nodded. "That's right. The Tratens. They're a nonhuman race, and they've been giving us trouble for centuries."

Smith shook his head. The admiral could not decide whether he was expressing sympathy or bewilderment. One was as unimportant as the other. The man, like his race, was completely incapable of being important to any scheme of things but his restricted own.

"Well," the admiral said, completely bored and searching for a conversational topic, "what do your people think of our establishing a base on your planet?"

Smith spread his hands. "We don't mind."

And that seemed to be that. The admiral sighed inwardly once more. Why in the name of all space had he bothered to let himself in for this?

Smith had reverted to his first love--the Translator. He had abandoned his ocular examination of the cabin and was twisting his head at uncomfortable angles, his eyes prowling around the Translator's case. He noted the microphones that picked up the conversation between them, the speakers from which the Freasan-to-Terran and Terran-to-Freasan translations came. He ran his fingers over the metal of the case. "Good workmanship," he muttered. He fiddled with the grommet around the line-cord entry. "Mighty nice plier work."

The admiral, with a vision of a towering drop-forge turning out Translator cases by the thousands, could barely restrain his impatience.

"Well. Well, Mr. Smith, I want to thank you for giving me your time. I'll see to it that you're given passage back to your village."

Smith stood up and extended his hand again. "Oh, that's all right, Admiral. It's been a pleasure. And thanks."

Cargre let him out, and made sure he was safely in the hands of his courier. Then he exchanged a sour glance with the admiral.

The admiral got to his feet and stood in front of the screens, looking down at the planet

trudging along below him.

Why had he come to this particular planet--granting that he had to put a base in this system? There was absolutely nothing special about this world. Its features were dull, its natives uninteresting. The men would grumble and do their work shiftlessly.

The thought occurred to him that he might have made a mistake in favoring this planet. It might be best to set the base some place where the men would have an environment that kept them busy.

"No wonder the Tratenes never bothered with this planet," he said aloud. "They'd have died with boredom before the first battery was in place." He shook his head. "I think we ought to move out before we do the same. What about those transports, Cargre?"

Cargre looked at a board. "They've already left."

The admiral grimaced. "Well, let's get them back as fast as possible. What's the name of the next planet in?"

"Venus, sir."

The admiral nodded. "That's right, Venus. Comes easier than the name of this place, doesn't it?"

"It does seem to, sir."

"Yes. Get me Laukon, will you please?"

The admiral was already balancing factors in his mind, calculating elapsed time for the transports to turn back, land, load, get to Venus and unload. Then there were the additional factors of underground storage depots to be blasted out, oxygen extractors to be set up, dormitories built--"Hello, Laukon? Look, get set to load the transports. Hold on a second--Cargre, how long before the transports get back? Laukon, you'll have ships in two hours. That's right. Call in and tell Cargre when you're set. Cargre, get me Meteorology, will you? Wonder what the effect of wind-driven formaldehyde will be? Cargre, before you give me Drall, get me Artificers, will you? We'll need something special in the way of suits--"

Sunlight shimmered down the flanks of the ships as the Fleet moved spaceward. Below it, the abandoned planet revolved slowly around her sun, left to her own devices.

The name is Terra, isn't it?

Yes, Terra. A hard name to remember.

Once you got him away from the stultifying atmosphere of his home planet, Smith was an interesting person to talk to. Quite often, after the day's punishing work of supervising the establishment of the base, the admiral found it relaxing to invite Smith up to his cabin and spend an hour or so in conversation. Smith had brought along one of his native musical instruments, and he sometimes sang for the admiral.

As a matter of fact, it was the first time Smith sang that they achieved their first really

intelligent conversation.

Smith had been sitting in his chair, idly strumming the instrument. Probably because of the perpetual sound of Venusian winds rumbling by aboveground, he had begun to hum in a low voice, and, as the song tightened its grip on his consciousness, had broken into words. His voice was not good by Freasan standards. Nevertheless, the native had a gift of pitch and delivery.

*"Oh, blow ye winds a-mournin'--  
Blow all ye winds--cry oh!  
Ah, cry, ye winds a-mournin'--  
Oh, oh, oh! . . ."*

He sang in Terran. Even so, the admiral, who had looked up sharply, asked: "Is that a native song?"

Smith nodded absently, his head bent over the instrument

"Odd," the admiral mused. "I know a song very much like it."

Smith shrugged, his fingers stroking muted sounds out of the tight cords.

"And . . . and that instrument-- what's your word for it?"

"Guitar."

"Yes. Now, it looks very much like a Freasan instrument called the *iter*. Smith--have you ever wondered why you and I look as though we were descended from the same stock ?"

Smith twitched a shoulder.

The admiral found himself deeply taken by the idea. "Could it be because we are? Look--there are so many similarities. Our languages are based on the same root tongue. You shook my hand when we first met. That is no unfamiliar custom to a Freasan. So many things--

"Consider, Smith. It has been thousands of years since our race first developed space travel. We have had it as long as our history goes back. The history of our race, of any race--is a fragmentary thing. There are disasters, dark ages--times which might be centuries long when men are not concerned with anything more than sheer survival. Who is to say that we did not, some time unimaginably long ago, leave a colony on . . . on . . . excuse me, Smith--"

"Terra."

"Yes. On your planet. Who is to say that when communication was interrupted, perhaps by the Tratenes, perhaps by something else, your people did not forget their heritage and live on as though they were an entirely separate race?"

Smith nodded slowly. "Sounds logical."

"Yes, it does. Very much so," the admiral mused. "Play something else for me, will you

please?"

"Sure." And Smith had played while the admiral pondered, the sound of an unfamiliar--and yet hauntingly reminiscent--phrase occasionally bringing a slow, speculative look into the admiral's eyes.

Cargre, Smith, and the admiral stood bulkily encased on a ledge, watching the transports struggle down on their third trip from Haldeja. The grimace on Cargre's face was reflected in his voice over the radio as they watched the ships whirl and dip like balloons on a gusty March day.

"We'll lose one, at least," he said.

The admiral kept his eyes locked on the descending green-and-gold of the transports. "I'm afraid so," he sighed. "Well, it couldn't be helped."

Smith watched silently, his face a brown-and-straw blur behind the diffusing curve of his faceplate.

In the howling hell that served Venus for a sky, two ships touched.

"No!" the admiral moaned in agony as they burst apart. Fragments whirled down out of the sky, shearing the storm. The admiral paid no attention to them. He was half crouched, counting the very few escape-pods kaleidoscoping in the sky. Cargre was cursing steadily, blind with rage. A jag-toothed hull section screamed silently down at them, followed by a shower of broken metal.

An unexpected gust of wind caught it, throwing it up like a shield from which the dozen small pieces suddenly rebounded like shrapnel. Then it fell vertically, scarred by the impacts, and dropped to the ground well short of Cargre, the admiral, and Smith.

That night, the admiral sat brooding in his quarters. He talked more to himself than he did to Smith.

"Five ships, so far," he muttered. "Five ships before we're fairly started." He clutched a thigh with his angry hand. Then he sighed.

"Well, we knew it would cost us." He turned to Smith for a sounding board. "This is only one fleet. There are six others, equally big, working their way around the Traten periphery, setting up bases from which to supply the final attack. And we don't expect more than five or six percent to come back. What d'you think of that?" He found the shock he was looking for in the native's face. "What d'you think of sitting here and talking to a man who won't be alive next year? And yet we've got to do it.

"Listen--we've been at war with the Traten for almost a thousand years. War! I don't think a disinterested observer would call it that--it's been going on too long.

"They hold their stars, and won't let us come into them. There are stars beyond in which they have no interest. They don't attack us. But they will not let us go through. We've sent fleet after fleet against them. We can't let them block us. We'd stifle. You can't have two empires in space.



"They're like a steel wall in the sky. One fleet after another's smashed itself against them.

"We've had enough. It's taken us a long time to reach this almost suicidal point, but we *have* reached it.

"It'll bankrupt our economy, and decimate our race. It'll throw us back a hundred years. But we'll smash them, this time. And, after those hundred lost years have passed, We'll be back. We'll have a clear sky to travel in, and the Tratens will be out of our way at last.

"But what do you think of that? Has anyone on your world, in your society, ever imagined war on that sort of scale? What do you think of my people--of your people, perhaps, as well--who have been able to reach that kind of decision?"

Smith looked at him for a long time, his eyes sad. His fingers plucked at the strings of his guitar.

*"Blow all ye winds--cry oh!  
Ah, cry, ye winds a-mournin'--  
Oh, oh, oh! . . ."*

The days went by in a stink of formaldehyde. As the base grew nearer to its intended function, the admiral's eyes seemed to inch back under his brows, taking on a darker coloring. His nightly sessions with Smith began to lengthen, as though he had no hope of sleep, however the time was spent. One by one, the days whipped away and were gone over the ugly horizon.

When Smith stepped into his quarters on the last night, the admiral smiled at him wanly.

"Tomorrow's the day," he said.

Smith nodded, sitting down. "How do you feel?"

The admiral twisted a corner of his mouth. "Glad it's finally gotten past the spadework stage.

"You know," he mused, "I find myself wondering what I'm doing here." He shrugged helplessly "I've had opportunities to retire. I used to think, sometimes, that if I ever came to a quiet, peaceful world--some place with mountains to hunt in and rivers to fish--But, let's face it. There aren't any places like that. And the Tratens have got to be broken, once and for all."

He broke himself out of the mood and laughed. "Tomorrow I'll be standing on my bridge with blood in my eye, happy as a colt that I'm finally off this God-forsaken place and moving." He turned to Smith. "You know, I'll admit I had you tagged as a pretty dull specimen, back on . . . your planet. But I'm glad you came along. I'll tell you the truth--I'll be sorry to see you go. I've arranged for a patrol boat to take you back. You wouldn't want to be with us when we get where we're going."

"You're right. I wouldn't."

"I'll miss you. Which is more than I can say for this solar system. Let's face it, and no insults intended--you people may or may not have as much claim to being Freasan as I do, but there's no real intellectual tie between us. I come from a complex culture that's been evolving for thousands of years. We don't even visit most solar systems any more. We know you're there. We've got you catalogued and surveyed--most of you, anyway. But there just isn't anything about you to . . . to *interest* us. D'you see what I mean ? Your motives--your actions--they're important and meaningful to you. To us, no. We've had them, and done them. We're beyond them."

Smith nodded slowly. "Sounds logical."

"I'm glad you see it." The admiral was walking back and forth animatedly. "Look--we've got mechanisms and sciences you don't know anything about. If we were competing with you for something, you wouldn't stand a chance. So what's the good of competing? We just leave you alone. I wish I could say that the average Freasan feels he's following a carefully thought-out 'hands off and let 'em evolve for themselves' policy. Maybe some of our theoreticians do, and, certainly, that's the effect. But the blunt truth is that the average Freasan would no more become involved with you than he would with a bunch of kids solving kindergarten problems."

Smith pulled his fingers across the strings of his guitar.

The admiral put up his hand as he walked. "No. Quit trying to spare me embarrassment. I'm keyed-up as a bridegroom the night before the wedding, and I've got to run down." He swung around and faced Smith.

"Look--as one Freasan to another, and to hell with where the chips fall--if this system wasn't located in a little enclave of space that's managed to somehow stick itself into the middle of the Tretan empire, we wouldn't have revisited you in a million years. Maybe more. But from here we can cut 'em in two. So here we are, in spite of the fact that we would ordinarily have just as soon set up housekeeping in the middle of a desert.

"Now---how do you feel about Freasans ? Still feel sorry for me ?"

The admiral stopped to look at him again. "You're one prime example of a cool customer," he said with a certain tinge of admiration. "I still haven't figured out how we forgot to drop you off when we left . . . uh . . . did you deliberately pick a name nobody could remember for your planet?"

Smith chuckled. "Terra."

"Terra. All right. It could just as well be any one of a hundred other planets in a hundred similar systems --none of which I can remember."

Smith nodded quietly to himself.

"What'd you say?" the admiral asked.

"Me? Nothing."

"Could have sworn I heard you say 'I know.' Well, anyway--you get my point. We're evolving. We're moving up. We're leaving things behind, sure, but we're gaining other things--better things--to replace them. And, some day, we're going to find out where the human race is

going. This thing with the Traten is going to set us back. But not permanently. We'll come up again."

"This time," Smith said with complete conviction, "I *will* say I know."

"Right. One of these days, the galaxy is going to be Freasan from end to end."

"Except for the solar systems that bore you."

"All right, except for the solar systems that bore us. But what's a solar system or two when you can walk across the suns?"

Something--nothing he could see as he looked down to search for it-- made him stumble. '

Smith grinned dryly. "Careful," he said.

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