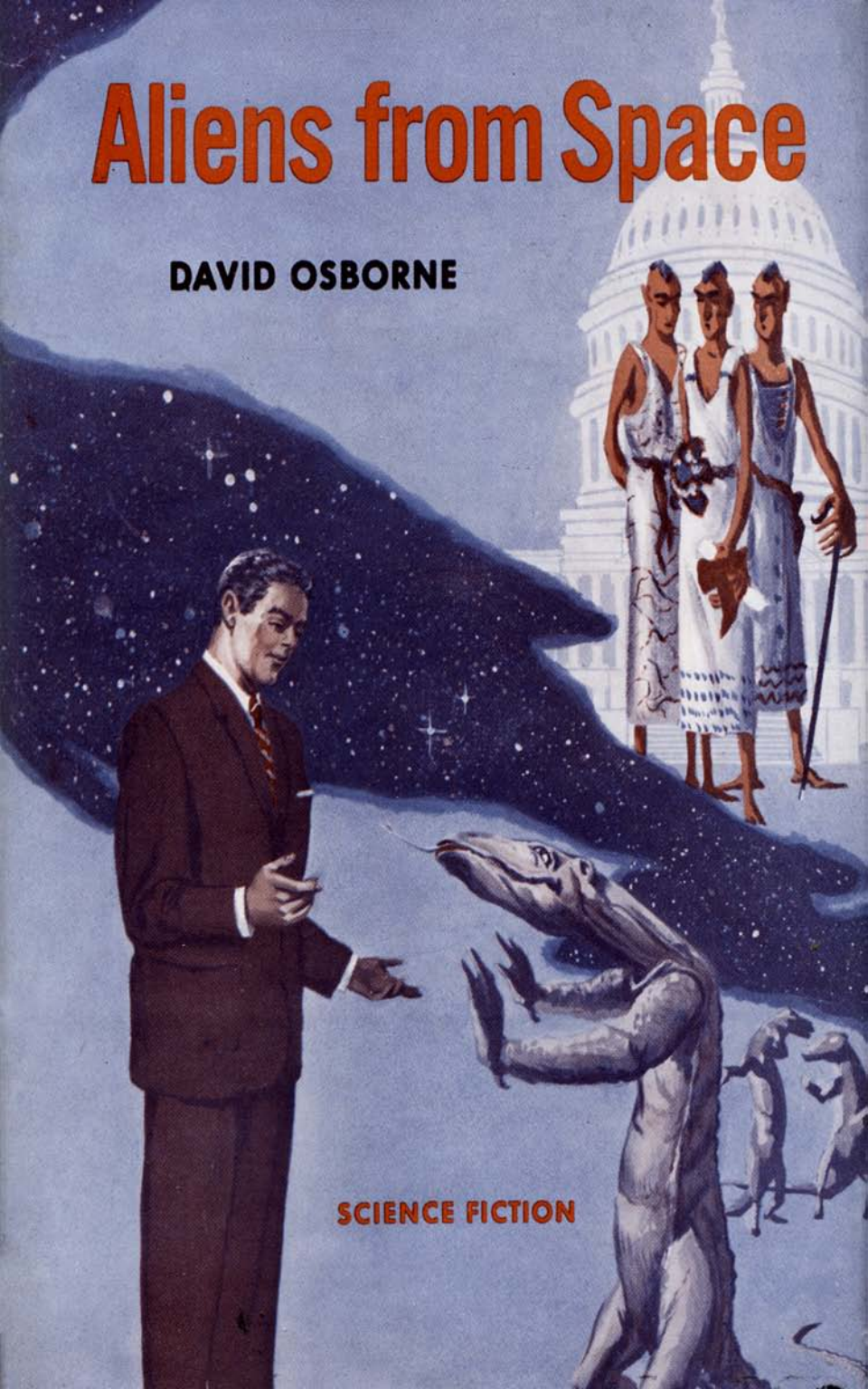
Aliens from Space

DAVID OSBORNE



SCIENCE FICTION

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ALIENS FROM SPACE

by DAVID OSBORNE

It started off like an ordinary day for Dr. Jeffrey Brewster, assistant professor of psychosociology at Columbia University. He'd been six weeks old when the first crude satellites were flung into space, back in 1957. During his childhood, there had been Moon rockets, and the space stations—then the joint American-Russian-manned expedition to the Moon in 1965, right after the collapse of the Soviet dictatorship. Mars and Venus had been reached as he grew up, and a permanent base was established on the Moon in 1973. Now the day's papers reported that an expedition was ready to leave for Callisto, moon of Jupiter. But Dr. Brewster had a class to make, and he was late.

That was when the telephone rang, and Mari, his wife, said, "Long distance from Washington."

The caller was Colonel Chasin of Unsecfor —United Nations Security Force, the global and international army that policed the world in these days of relative peace and harmony. Chasin explained that a serious matter had come up, something concerning global security, which he could not reveal at the moment. He ended with, "We feel that you can

(continued on back flap)

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(*continued from front flap*)

help us, Professor. We'd appreciate it if you'd come down to Washington today and join us in a little conference. President Macintyre will be leading the discussion."

Brewster couldn't decline—and found that all arrangements had been made at the University for his indefinite absence.

What could be going on that required the assistance of a professor of psychosociology? Brewster suspected that the book which had earned him his Ph.D. last year, *"A Theory of Communication: Notes Toward a Mathematical Formulation of Information,"* had something to do with it. But never would he have suspected what Colonel Chasin told him after his arrival in Washington.

On Sunday evening, a spaceship had landed in a Kansas cornfield. An alien being appeared, handed a metal plate to the owner of the farm, and said *in English* that he wanted to see somebody in authority. The United Nations Security Council met in a secret emergency session, early Monday morning, and worked out a program of dealing with the three aliens. And Dr. Brewster was one of the nine men selected to negotiate with the visitors from space!

The beings seemed friendly, seemed to be here with peaceful intentions, but Dr. Brewster had to find out if they were telling the truth—or the whole truth! Here is a suspenseful novel of a tomorrow which may arrive before we suspect its possibility, by the author of *Invisible Barriers.*

AVALON BOOKS

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by DAVID OSBORNE

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ALIENS from SPACE

CHAPTER I

Dr. Jeffrey Brewster couldn't say he had been expecting it, when he got the message to report to Washington at once. But he wasn't entirely surprised, either. Snooping into an Assistant Professor's background isn't something that United Nations men take up as a hobby. They'd come to Columbia to check up on him. Brewster assumed that they had questioned everyone in New York from his wife and Dean Prentiss down to the janitor of their Riverdale apartment house.

And evidently they had found what they were after.

The message reached him at ten minutes past nine in the morning, on Wednesday—the fourth of October, 1989. He had dressed and gulped a couple of breakfast-surrogate tabs, which was all he ever had in the morning, and he was on his

way out of the house. His car was parked two blocks away—on an Assistant Professor's salary you don't rent space in the building's garage—and he was going to have to remember some taxi-drivers' feints with traffic lights if he expected to make his 10:00 A.M. class at Columbia. Not that Brewster yearned to be on time today. The first class of the day was Psychosociology 101, an elementary course designed for undergraduates. Undergrads bristle with prickly basic questions that never seem to occur to more sedate post-graduate students. He thanked the Lord for the latter fact.

That was when the phone rang.

Brewster was halfway out the door, halfway into his light jacket, with his attaché-case's handle gripped between his teeth for lack of the extra arm he usually seemed to need. He nodded to his wife and grunted something that might have been, "Mari, you take it."

Mari picked up the phone, listened for a minute, frowned. "Jeff, it's for you. It's . . ."

"I'm going to be late, dammit!" (The profanity covered a touch of relief.)

". . . long distance from Washington," she finished.

Brewster lifted an eyebrow, wriggled into his jacket, put the attaché case down, and took the phone from his wife.

"Brewster speaking."

The voice at the other end was crisp, coldly efficient, slightly mechanical. "I'm sorry to have to disturb you, Dr. Brewster. This is Colonel Chasin of Unsecfor, calling from Washington."

Automatically, he made the mental translation. Unsecfor—United Nations Security Force; the global and international army that policed the world in these days of relative peace and harmony. "How can I help you, Colonel Chasin?"

"A rather serious matter has come up, Dr. Brewster—something that concerns global security. I'm not at liberty to disclose details, and I apologize for all the mystery."

"Quite all right, but how . . ."

"We feel you can help us, Professor. We'd appreciate it if you'd come down to Washington today and join us in a little conference. President Macintyre will be leading the discussion."

Brewster looked up a moment and tried to make a nonchalant face at his wife, who was indicating the time to him with frantic gestures. He shrugged instead. If he were being ordered to

Washington by Presidential command, it didn't make much difference what happened to Psychosociology 101.

He said, "I'm a little startled by all this, Colonel. You realize, of course, that I have certain academic responsibilities . . ."

"We've already spoken to Dr. Holliday. He said he would grant you an indefinite leave of absence—with pay—while you were serving with us."

Holliday was the President of Columbia University. Since he had been approached, Professor Brewster's fate was sealed, wrapped, and ready to deliver. "Very well," he said in a slightly faint voice. "When will you be expecting me?"

"I've made reservations for you on a noon flight out of LaGuardia," Chasin replied smoothly. "Flight 126, Appalachian Airlines. You'll reach Washington about 12:30 and I'll be waiting for you at the airport."

"All right. I'll see you then."

"Thanks very much for your cooperation, Dr. Brewster. We appreciate it more than you can realize."

The line went dead. Brewster stared quizzically at the enameled green receiver for a moment,

drew his thick eyebrows together in a puzzled frown, then shrugged and tossed the receiver into its magnetic cradle.

Mari asked, "What was *that* all about?"

"I wish I knew. Colonel Chasin of Unsecfor, he said. He wanted me to help out on some kind of project. Little conference down in Washington today—with the President himself in charge. All put as casually as a cocktail invitation."

He took his jacket off again and dropped it on a chair. "They've already been in touch with old Holliday, and he's granted them full use of my services. I'll be flying down out of LaGuardia at noon."

His wife moistened her lips tensely. She was twenty-eight, four years his junior; he had met her when he was a newly fledged instructor at Columbia and she a senior at Barnard. They had been married six years.

She said, "This explains all the prying, then. That man who called here yesterday and wanted to know all about your childhood—the phone call that Dean Prentiss got . . ."

"They were investigating me, of course. Wanted to see if there were any traumas in the background that would make me twitch and drop my glass when the President walked in. Have to

watch those cleaning bills in the White House." He shook his head and frowned. "But what *would* they want with me? What is so important in peacetime that an Assistant Professor of Psychosociology is urgently needed in Washington? I've never heard urbane tones that spelled u-r-g-e-n-t so clearly."

"They'll probably tell you then," Mari said.

He grinned at her nervously, picked up the phone again, and dialed Columbia University, getting the extension that belonged to the Sociology Department. Helen, the departmental secretary, answered. Brewster told her that he wasn't going to be in today, that he wasn't likely to be teaching his classes for the rest of the week or perhaps longer than that. "I've been called away on a special project," he said.

"Yes, Dr. Brewster. I've already had a memo from Dr. Holliday about you, and we've arranged for Mr. Clark to cover your classes indefinitely."

"Oh. That's fine," he said without enthusiasm. "Thanks, Helen. 'Bye."

He turned away from the phone, saying, "It's all been arranged. My classes are going to be covered by Clark. So since they know my innermost secrets, they know I'll go gracefully."

Crossing the room, he sat down on the sprawl-

ing blue freeform couch in front of the bookcase. His eye fell on the jacket of his one published book—*A Theory of Communication: Notes Toward a Mathematical Formulation of Information.* It had taken six years' work, and had finally given him his Ph.D. last year, along with a modest amount of cash and a certain quantity of professional prestige—how much prestige, he couldn't estimate.

Did the book have anything to do with this summons? Perhaps the UN had decided to sponsor research into communications theory, and wanted him to head the committee. He shook his head; it was a pleasant thought, but for such an assignment, he couldn't see them taking the cloak-and-dagger method of approach.

It was something serious, then. Something serious enough to require special precautions, and something in which the services of a sharp-witted young Columbia professor of psychosociology might be useful. Beyond that, Jeffrey Brewster could make no guesses.

"You'd better pack," Mari reminded him.

He looked up, smiling. "I guess you're right. But Chasin didn't say how long I'd be staying down there."

She sighed. "Take a toothbrush and a couple of

changes of underwear. If it's talk at the taxpayers' expense, you can count on them being long-winded down there."

He packed quickly, tossing in a couple of books in case he had free time; he took Obolenski's new book on semantics and, for lighter reading, Harshaw's autobiographical account of the first Mars expedition. Mari supervised the operation, since both of them knew he had trouble with such mundane human activities. Not that he forgot important items—just something crucial, like socks.

By five minutes to ten, he was ready to leave. The trip out to LaGuardia on the new Long Island Thruway would take about twenty minutes, which meant he had plenty of time. He didn't need to get to the airport before half-past eleven or so, if that early.

To kill time he helped out Mari with some of the housework. At quarter after ten, Donald Prentiss, Dean of the Faculty of Political Science, a friend of Brewster's since his undergraduate days, phoned.

"I hear you're leaving for Washington."

"News travels fast. How'd you find out?"

Prentiss chuckled. "Oh, I have my ways. Yes-

terday when the Security boys were pumping me about your loyalty I jabbed one of them full of pentothal and got the full story. Seems you're being placed in a one-man spaceship and they're firing you off on an expedition to Betelgeuse. You'll arrive in only eight hundred years."

Brewster tried to smile, as he tugged uncomfortably at his collar. "You aren't very funny this morning. What's the *real* pitch?"

"I wish I knew," Prentiss said. "Those fellows couldn't have been any more tight-lipped than they were."

"Any ideas?"

"Nary a one. But I'll bet it's something big—and *you're* going to be right in the middle of it."

"I deduced that in less than half an hour," Brewster said. "My guess is that it has something to do with the Callisto expedition that's leaving soon."

"You mean they may want you to go?"

"Possibly," Brewster admitted glumly, and shivered; the thought of making an exploration trip to Jupiter's frigid moon didn't appeal. "It's the only top-secret thing I can figure out at the moment."

Prentiss chuckled. "I hope for your sake that you're wrong. But good luck, anyway."

"Thanks," Brewster said. "I'll probably need it."

At ten minutes to eleven, Jeffrey Brewster decided he might as well get on his way. He and Mari rode downstairs and walked over to the street where he had left the car. It was a fine morning, clear and crisp, with a light autumn wind blowing. A good day for flying on secret and urgent missions, he thought.

They drove out to the airport along the shiny new Thruway in virtual silence. There wasn't much to say. The godlike hand of Unsecfor had reached out and picked up the form of Jeff Brewster, and there was little point speculating on his eventual destiny. Mine not to reason why, Brewster thought, as he tried to do just that.

They drove up to the main arrivals building at LaGuardia and Brewster said goodbye to Mari there. "I'll phone you as soon as I know something definite," he promised, and went inside, carrying his single small suitcase.

He checked in at the Appalachian Airlines desk.

"You have a reservation in the name of Jeffrey Brewster for Flight 126 to Washington?"

The efficient and pretty girl back of the desk

fluttered through her papers, looked up, smiled. "Of course, sir. Departure time is 12:00 sharp. The plane begins taking passengers in two minutes. If you'll take your baggage over to that counter . . ."

She handed him a paid-up ticket. He delivered his suitcase up into the maw of the automated baggage robot, which instantaneously weighed and ticketed the grip and fed out a baggage receipt for him. He watched his little blue suitcase vanish along the conveyor belt to the waiting plane, and, too late, realized he had left his books inside and had nothing to read on the trip down to Washington.

Well, it was only a half-hour flight anyway, by jetliner. Shrugging, he walked over to the newsomat in the corner of the lounge and dropped a dime in. A moment later the electronic printer delivered up a newly created facsimile of the latest edition of the *Times*.

The public address system boomed, *Attention, please! Flight 126 on Appalachian Airlines, New York to Washington, now boarding on Gate Three. Flight 126, Appalachian Airlines, New York to Washington . . .*

Brewster got in line and presented his paid-up ticket when it was demanded. Five minutes later

he found himself deep in the plush confines of a pneumocushion aboard the two-hundred-passenger jet airliner that would take him to his mysterious rendezvous in Washington.

"Nice day for flying," commented the passenger immediately at his left—a slim, calm-looking young man in a dark business suit.

"Mmm. Yes," Brewster agreed, as he unfolded his paper. There was a front-page feature on the shortly departing expedition to the moons of Jupiter. Yesterday, he might have regarded this with detached curiosity; today, it seemed as if the article concerned him vitally.

He wondered if his guess were right. This was a big thing, this expedition—the longest space journey yet undertaken by man. Space travel had come a long way, Brewster reflected. He had been no more than six weeks' old when the first crude satellites had been flung into space, back in 1957. Then had come the Moon rocket, in '59, the building of the space stations in 1960-63, then the joint American-Russian manned expedition to the Moon in '65—right after the collapse of the Soviet dictatorship.

Then, thought Brewster—remembering the dates vividly because he had been a schoolboy when most of these things had happened—there

had been Harshaw's epic Mars voyage in '68, the Venus trip in '70, the establishment of the permanent base on Luna in 1973.

Since then, things had slowed down; the relaxation of cold war pressure had somewhat decelerated the furious pace of scientific advance. Man had concentrated on his own planet, and on developing outposts on Mars and Venus, rather than on extending his dominion any farther.

But a longer journey—to the moons of Jupiter —had been in the planning stage for over a year, and was now ready to leave. After it would undoubtedly come a similar trek to the moons of Saturn (landing on either of the giant worlds would be impossible) and eventually the voyage to Pluto, outermost boundary of the Solar System.

After that? The stars were waiting after that; but the stars were unimaginable distances away, far beyond the puny thrust of twentieth-century mankind's spacegoing vessels. Some dramatic new breakthrough in science would be necessary before voyages to the stars left the realm of fantasy.

Brewster was immersed in the editorial page when the jetliner took off—a smooth, gentle takeoff, exactly on the dot of noon. Half an hour later, they would be in Washington.

"Going down on business?" his neighbor to the left wanted to know.

Brewster stared down at the rapidly dwindling rooftops of New York. If this mission was urgent, as he'd told Mari, then they hadn't finished investigating him; they'd keep making checks. This seat-companion could be such a checker. "More or less," he replied carelessly. "I want to drop in at a meeting."

"Same here, only I'm going by full invitation. In the electronics line myself, and there's a convention down there for us boys who got to be delegates." He chuckled. "What's your line?"

Brewster sighed. "Not as interesting as yours, I'm afraid. I just teach. But, say, what about this . . ." He plunged into a strategic line of questions that no genuine electronics man could resist, and smiled inwardly when the other tried to lead back into just what the teacher taught. Brewster used various techniques which involved answering at fair length—or, rather, seeming to answer—without imparting any information. At the same time he used semantic devices that triggered the conversation in the direction Brewster himself wanted it to go.

It wasn't easy, but it was interesting; and

Brewster had to admit that either his companion was no more than he claimed to be, or the man really knew and enjoyed talking about electronics.

The jet roared south at 600 miles an hour, and shortly before 12:30 the big plane came taxiing down the Washington runway. It came to a gentle halt.

Brewster crossed the field and headed for the baggage counter to reclaim his suitcase. A moment after he had secured it, a tall, well-built man of fifty or so, wearing the blue uniform of Unsecfor, stepped forward and introduced himself as Colonel Chasin. He offered Brewster an identification card, but Jeffrey Brewster merely glanced at it out of courtesy and handed it back.

"There's a car waiting for us outside the terminal," Chasin said, in the same urbane manner as he'd used on the phone. "Sorry for all this air of mystery, but you understand—security regulations . . ."

"Certainly." Brewster suddenly noticed that his inquisitive companion from the plane was standing not far away; he caught a quick glance and a nod passing between Chasin and the other.

I was right, Brewster thought. *They put a*

Secret Service man in the seat next to me to find out how tight-mouthed I am. Good thing I decided to clam up.

He turned and followed Colonel Chasin to the waiting car.

CHAPTER II

A sleek black limousine half a block long took them quickly from Washington National Airport along the south bank of the Potomac to the Pentagon, the headquarters of the American division of Unsecfor. Individual national sovereignties had not yet melted away into global union; though a common military body policed the world, each country retained some identity within the larger framework of Unsecfor. The Pentagon, traditional nucleus of American defense, had been retained as Unsecfor headquarters.

Colonel Chasin made no attempt at explanations during the short journey. He sat back, a solid and commanding figure, and left Brewster to the devices of his own imagination. But the moment they had entered Chasin's private Penta-

gon office and had closed the door behind him, Chasin's manner changed.

He gestured Brewster to a seat opposite his desk and said, "Sometimes I detest the necessities of security. But there was no other way to get you here. I'm sorry for the secrecy."

Brewster shrugged. "As long as I'm not kept in the dark much longer . . ."

"You won't be." Chasin reached into his desk and drew out five or six glossy eight-by-ten color prints. "Do these things mean anything to you, Dr. Brewster?"

Brewster took the photos from him and examined them. They were nicely done, shots of Mars. One of them showed the object known as the Harshaw Stela, standing bare against the red oxidized wastes of Mars. Another depicted the Message Stone. A third showed the McPherson obelisk, and a fourth the Henderson Monument Statuary. The remaining photos showed various other artifacts that had been discovered on Mars by the successive expeditions from Earth.

Brewster looked up. "These are photos of the relics found on Mars."

"Exactly, Dr. Brewster. May I ask what your private feeling is about the nature of these artifacts?"

Brewster frowned. "You understand that archeology isn't my field—that my opinion isn't a learned one in any way whatever . . ."

"Naturally."

"Well," Brewster said, "I incline toward the generally accepted views. That is, that there never was intelligent native life on Mars, and that the objects found there by the expedition were left there by some race from another solar system that paid a visit to Mars centuries ago."

Brewster waited. The Colonel looked at him squarely. "You made some passing reference to the Martian findings in your book, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"You said that when a proper mathematical formulation of communication theory was developed, it should be possible to translate the messages left us by these alien beings—messages which are, as of now, totally incomprehensible to us."

Brewster felt a faint tingle of pleasure. "You've read my book, then?"

"Very carefully," Chasin said. He opened his desk drawer once again and drew out another sheaf of photos. "Would you look through these, now?"

Brewster looked at them. They were mono-

chrome prints, this time. They showed other stone objects in very much the same style as the earlier set of pictures, and there were carvings on the objects in the same ornate language. He compared the two sets of photos. "I'd say these were more of the same. Where were they taken?"

"On Venus. Those are infra-red photos taken not long ago. You were aware, of course, that some alien relics had been found on Venus too?"

Brewster nodded. "I hadn't seen any, though, until today."

Chasin looked at him closely. "Let me sum up, then, Dr. Brewster. You've seen photos of archeological findings on Mars and Venus—photos which show objects left there by obviously intelligent beings. And since Mars and Venus neither have any kind of animal life now nor seem to have any fossil remnants of any, you're fairly well convinced that these objects are traces of an expedition from some other sun that visited Mars and Venus in the distant past. Am I right?"

"That's substantially my opinion."

"Good." Chasin picked up a desk phone. "Kraft, will you bring in the message-plate?"

A moment or two later a young orderly knocked at the office door and entered, delicately carrying a flat cloth-wrapped object about a foot

square. He laid it gingerly on Chasin's desk and left.

The Colonel undid the wrappings, laid back the cloth, and nudged the object across the desk for Brewster's examination. He blinked. It was a metal plate, square, of some dark coppery metal —very thin and flexible. Inscribed on it were characters in the same style as the alien lettering in the photographs.

"What's this? A new find?"

"You might say so." Chasin grinned. "Extremely new. It was found Sunday night."

Brewster blinked. From Sunday to Wednesday—hardly enough time for a spaceship to have made the journey back to Earth from Mars or Venus. Chasin's statement could mean only one thing. "That plate," Brewster said, "was dug up on Earth. We've finally found evidence that the aliens visited Earth!"

"Not exactly," Chasin said. He leaned forward and in a low voice said, "On Sunday evening, about half-past eight local time, a spaceship landed in a Kansas cornfield. An alien being appeared, handed this metal plate to the owner of the farm, and said *in English* that he wanted to see somebody in authority. Luckily the farmer had his wits with him. He phoned the nearest

Unsecfor office and one of our men flew out in a copter to see what was going on. He found the ship, all right. It had three occupants. He wired a stat of their copper plate to us, and we had it identified as the same language found on the Martian and Venusian relics. Bluntly, Dr. Brewster, we've had another visit from the stars. The beings who left the artifacts on Mars and Venus have come back for another look round—on Earth, this time."

Brewster sat back, stunned, letting the meaning of Chasin's words crowd through the immediate smokescreen of disbelief and negation his mind threw forth. Alien beings on Earth? Spaceships landing in Kansas? His racing thoughts embraced the situation. Neither Mars nor Venus had proved to have any life; for all man knew, he was alone in the universe—except for the troublesome artifacts found by the expeditions. They seemed to imply that another civilization existed —or had existed—somewhere in the galaxy. A civilization advanced enough to be capable of the incredible feat of crossing the gulfs between the stars.

And now representatives of that civilization had landed on Earth.

"I hardly believe it," Brewster said with a wry smile.

"I had a little trouble that way myself," Chasin admitted. Once again he reached into his desk and came forth with photographs. This time they showed a spaceship, outlined against a starry sky. It was no spaceship of any design Brewster had ever seen. Its lines were asymmetrical, oddly ornamented—*alien*. It balanced on three curved fins. Several men in Unsecfor uniforms stood outside it, staring up at the ship anxiously.

"That's the ship they came in," Brewster was told.

"You don't have any photos of the aliens?"

"Not here. I've seen them, though. They're—ah—strange-looking. You'll get your chance to view the aliens, soon enough."

"What does that mean?" The thought that had nagged at him all finally erupted into words. "Just what does all this have to do with *me,* Colonel?"

Chasin exhaled tiredly. Brewster could see lines of strain in the Unsecfor man's face; possibly he had been working round the clock the three days since the surprise landing. Chasin said after a pause, "You're being drafted into Unsecfor

service, Dr. Brewster. I put it bluntly like that because I'm a blunt man, but naturally you have the option of refusing."

"And what am I supposed to do?"

"The aliens have been transported from Kansas to the District of Columbia, along with their ship. We have the ship hidden here, and the aliens are installed at secret headquarters near Alexandria. They've requested that Earth appoint a small group of men to discuss certain matters with them."

"What matters?"

"That we don't know. All they would tell us was that they'd speak freely to the accredited negotiators. The United Nations Security Council met in a secret emergency session early Monday morning and worked out a program for dealing with the aliens."

"Which is?"

"They decided to appoint a group of nine men to serve as negotiators with the aliens. The group is to consist of two Americans, two Russians, and one representative each from Britain, France, China, Brazil, and India. Five members of the group, including one Russian and one American, are to be scientists, the remaining four statesmen." Chasin stared levelly at Brewster. "This plan was

announced at about breakfast time Monday. President Macintyre and his staff went to work on its aspects immediately. We've chosen as the American diplomatic representative Senator Morris of California."

Brewster nodded. Morris had a good record on international affairs. Brewster asked, "And how about the scientific representative?"

"That should be obvious, Dr. Brewster."

It was; but still, Brewster had difficulties accepting it. In a small voice he said, "Me?"

"You, Dr. Brewster. If you're willing to accept."

Brewster knotted his hands together, trying to stem the rising tide of apprehension within him. "This is a big country, Colonel. Would you mind telling me how you happened to pick *me?*"

Chasin smiled. "President Macintyre is deeply interested in the problem of communication between intelligent beings. He happens to have read your book. It was his immediate suggestion that our scientific representative be an expert in psychosociology."

Brewster nodded. "I can see that—but there *are* better-qualified men, though. Some of them were pioneering this field when I was wearing diapers. Harris, Schoenfeld, Emerson . . ."

Chasin nodded. "All good men, and all in their

sixties. The President's idea was to have a younger man, one who has the necessary background of theory but who's—shall we say, more flexible?—than a man twice his age is likely to be. It so happens that we contacted the three you mentioned—not to approach them for the job, but to ask them to recommend a young man capable of handling it. Each of them named you for the job, Dr. Brewster."

Jeffrey Brewster rose and walked to the window. "I'm not so humble to be surprised that one of them recommended me—perhaps two. If none of them had, I'd have felt injured, if I found out." His voice dropped. "But all three—it's a little overwhelming. I—I feel like repeating one of Abe Lincoln's stories."

"Which one?"

Brewster rubbed his hand across the chin. "About the man who was being tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail. Someone asked him how he liked it, and he said that if it wasn't for the honor of the thing, he'd rather walk."

Chasin's expression matched that on Brewster's face. "That's the way you feel?"

"Just about."

Chasin nodded. "Don't we all? Want to hear more?"

Brewster returned to his seat. "Just what will my duties be?"

"If you accept the job, Dr. Brewster, you'll be permitted to have contact with the aliens. Right now we're keeping them under wraps, with a total publicity screen—but the moment our group of negotiators is complete we're going to announce to the world that we have visitors from the stars."

"And then?"

"Then you and your eight colleagues are going to have to talk to those aliens and find out what they want with us, why they've come here. Since you'll be the only member of your profession in the group, it'll be your special responsibility to extract possible hidden meanings from the statements of the aliens. You're our watchdog."

"You've got some jokers up your sleeve, Colonel—you seem a little too satisfied that I'm capable of the job. How about letting me in on it?"

"We checked pretty deep into your background yesterday—and don't forget that the University has a lot of data on you. It's a matter of knowledge, ability, and temperament—we got a sample of

the way you can work on the plane today. It's our opinion that you'll do."

"What if I didn't—or if I decide I don't want to risk it?"

Chasin shrugged. "We'll have to get someone else, of course."

"Something tells me you have someone else in mind—just in case."

"Strategy, you know, Brewster. A good general doesn't set out with merely a single objective, or route to it, in mind. So, if you decline . . ."

"All might not be quiet back at Columbia, eh?"

Chasin looked pained. "Really, Dr. Brewster —do you imagine that we want it to be bruited about that we *coerce* civilians into working with us? By no means—your job would be perfectly safe. Moreover, we'd cover you against unfortunate lines of assumption, so far as your loyalty is concerned." He looked at Brewster a moment, with just the suggestion of a smile on his face. "You know, we found out that you're not entirely the quivering plant type of professor—which we wouldn't want, anyway."

"All right, Colonel, let's hear the fiendish means you've got of insuring against my refusal. You look innocent enough to be a . . ."

Chasin interrupted with a hearty chuckle,

which Brewster couldn't translate as sadistic, however he tried. "All I have up my sleeve is some incidental information which we weren't looking for—but coincidentally couldn't be better.

"You put in six years' hard labor on a book, Dr. Brewster, and you're proud of it. Here's a chance to back up your theory. If you should fail—or worse, refuse to try—then that would lend quite a bit of weight to the thesis a certain scholar is now writing to refute you, don't you think?"

Jeffrey Brewster looked at the other man in shocked silence.

"Knowing your suspicious nature—in spite of your somewhat jocose manner—I don't expect you to take my unsupported word." He opened a drawer, drew out a sheet of paper, and handed it over. "You're free to check on this. All we were interested about, when we uncovered the fact that such a paper *was* being written, was whether the student seemed capable of making a good case. Dr. Bardell—who favors your theories, by the way—assured us that Lane Clinton could give you a rough time, particularly if you had no further data—the kind that would come from actually doing a job like this present one."

"Lane Clinton . . ." Brewster muttered.

"Oh, you might be able to beat him down, anyway. But this would undermine him quite thoroughly, I'd imagine."

"Would—would you have told me about this if I'd accepted?"

Chasin nodded. "Whenever I thought it would do the most good."

"You're a gentleman and a scoundrel, sir. . . . I was going to accept, anyway."

Chasin grinned in relief. "Thanks, Dr. Brewster. You've completed the chain, now. You were the ninth man to accept. Now we can tell the world about our visitors."

He pushed his cap to one side and mopped perspiration away. "Ever sit on a keg of dynamite for three days, Doctor? That's the way it's been for us here. No sleep, no time off—and above all, no talking. We had to watch out for a premature newsbreak. The world had to be prepared for the news. The strain we were under . . ." He stopped and smiled apologetically. "I'm a fine one to talk about strain. The tough work's over for us—but now that you're in, I'll confess that I wouldn't want to be in your boots for anything!"

Brewster chuckled. "Maybe *I* won't want to be in them soon. . . . But, you know, you had me really worried for a while. I had the feeling you

had called me down here to toss me into the Callisto expedition."

"Well, now you know." Chasin looked at his watch. "It's quarter after one. Have you had lunch yet?"

"No."

"We'll take care of that. The other eight members of the negotiating team are already here in the Pentagon, you know. There's going to be a meeting at two-fifteen with President Macintyre. But we have time to get some lunch into us first."

As they stood up, Brewster said, "Do I have time to phone my wife? She's worried."

"Go right ahead."

"How much can I tell her—about the aliens, I mean?"

Chasin said, "Nothing, I'm afraid. Not yet. We're breaking the news at five tonight."

"Okay," Brewster agreed. Chasin shoved the phone toward him and went into an adjoining office to allow Brewster a chance to phone in privacy.

He dialed the long-distance key-in, then his home number. The phone rang only once; then he heard Mari's voice, edgy and higher-pitched than usual, say, "Hello?"

"Mari honey?"

"Jeff! What's it all about? Have they told you yet?"

"They've told me," he said. "But I can't tell you, right now. It's top secret till five o'clock."

"Can't you give me a hint?"

Carefully he said, "They want me to serve on a negotiating team. It's an international group—very important talks . . . I wish I could tell you more, darling, but I can't. You'll find out tonight when they break the news."

She giggled and said, "I hate you for being such a tease, Jeff!"

"Should I not have called at all?"

She considered that for a moment. "I suppose not. At least I know everything's okay. But—you sound just a little worried."

"Well . . . I *am* worried. It's a big job, with a lot of unknown factors."

"I wish you could—oh, never mind. I can wait till tonight."

"I'll try to call you again later," he said. "When I can speak a little more freely."

When he had hung up, Colonel Chasin reappeared. Brewster wondered momentarily whether the Colonel had been spying on him, listening in on an extension phone. Well, it didn't matter; he was Government property now . . .

There was a sumptuous restaurant in the Pentagon, for the use of high-level Unsecfor men. Brewster had little appetite; he nibbled abstractedly at the five-dollar lunch. Fried scallops and white wine didn't interest him right now, not while he was anticipating the meeting with the creatures from the stars.

CHAPTER III

The conference room was small but well-lit, an oval chamber with a group of men sitting round an oval table. The presence of two armed guards outside the door added to the tense atmosphere. They nodded at Jeffrey Brewster, staring at him intensely—as if to fix his features in their memories for good—and stiffly saluted Colonel Chasin.

Brewster recognized the man at the head of the table immediately. Even sitting, he seemed to dominate the gathering—a big, blocky man in his early sixties, hunched forward with his huge hands spread on the table-top. A smile seamed his coarse-featured, almost ugly face. He was Thomas Macintyre, 39th President of the United States. Brewster felt a sense of unreality. He had begun the morning expecting a routine day on

the Morningside Heights campus—and here, only a few hours later, he was walking into a room to meet President Macintyre.

Around the table were other men—of various nationalities, Brewster saw at once. They would be his fellow negotiators. There were also some men in Unsecfor uniforms seated at the table.

The President said, in the familiar compelling boom that had led him to his dramatic sweep of the 1984 election and his overwhelming re-election last year, "You must be Dr. Brewster. How do you do?"

"Hello, Mr. President," Brewster said abstractedly, trying to refresh his notions of the proper protocol. Chasin found two vacant seats at the table, slipped into one of them, pulled the other out for Brewster.

Macintyre said, to the others, "Dr. Jeffrey Brewster of Columbia University is the final member of your group. He's one of the world's foremost experts on communication theory. We expect him to be one of the key men of this project. Dr. Brewster, I believe that introductions are in order for you . . ."

Brewster tried to follow around the circle as Macintyre rapidly introduced the others. Senator Lloyd Morris, the other American delegate,

sat immediately to his left—a forceful, dynamic-looking man in his late forties. Next to him was a slim young Chinese, introduced as Chang Lee-hsiu—a biologist specializing in genetics.

Beyond Chang sat a French historian, Henri Lefebvre—a sprawling and rumpled heavy-set man of fifty; and to Lefebvre's left was Sir Adrian Cross, Minister of Education in Her Majesty's Cabinet. Cross was probably the oldest member of the group; he appeared to be nearly sixty—a thin, leathery man, with keen darting eyes.

At the far end of the table Brewster saw a youthful and startlingly handsome dark-skinned man introduced as Pradyot Raman—one of the Republic of India's foremost cybernetic engineers; and next to him sat Eurico Linhares, chief Brazilian representative at the United Nations—he was a swarthy, saturnine-looking person, with an enigmatic lopsided smile.

Two members remained. They sat directly opposite Brewster. They were the Russian delegates.

The younger of the pair was introduced as Alexei Pirogov, and Brewster instantly recognized the name; it was that of Russia's most brilliant young atomic physicist. Pirogov looked almost sleepy, but catlike eyes gave hint of fierce alertness.

The other Russian was older, chunky, and dressed in a poorly cut blue suit. He was Dimitri Vankovich, Vice-Premier of the Russian Federated Republic. He smiled pleasantly at Brewster as introductions were completed.

Brewster could not help feeling suspicious at the sight of the two Russians facing him. Though it was nearly a quarter of a century since the frenzied March Revolution had destroyed the Soviet dictatorship in 1965, the memory of the Communist threat still lingered in the Western world. The new Russia was a democratic state with free elections and peaceful aims, but it still maintained some of the secretiveness of the Stalinists. One could never feel sure about the intentions of the giant Nation. The traditions of democracy were still new to these people; twenty-four years of freedom is little when compared with half a century of Soviet domination and hundreds of years under the Czars.

But the group was complete. Nine men, four diplomats, and five professional scholars, assembled hurriedly here in Washington to confer with—*what?*

The President said, "You've met all of your colleagues now, Dr. Brewster. These other men here"—he indicated the three Unsecfor mem-

bers—"are observers invited at my request, and responsible only to the Secretariat of the United Nations. They won't be present at the actual talks, of course."

Macintyre leaned forward, and Brewster became aware of the magnetic personality of America's President. Macintyre said, "Gentlemen, you've all been shipped here rather without warning, I know. Believe me, I had no warning either. Only last Saturday I remarked to my wife that the toughest problem I had to face in the next few months was getting my new budget past the Senate. . . . Twenty-four hours later, something happened that made internal domestic matters like budgets very puny indeed. You've all been briefed well enough to know what I'm talking about. A spaceship landed in the middle of the United States, bearing three members of a race immeasurably superior to ours."

The French delegate, Lefebvre, raised a hand. "Sir, I'd like an amplification. Why do you say these beings are superior to us? In what way?"

Macintyre said, "Mr. Raman of India is an engineer. I'd appreciate it if he'd tell us exactly how close Earth is to developing a space drive capable of carrying us to the nearest star."

Raman said, in a soft, gentle, totally unaccented

voice, "It is wrong to speak of our being 'close.' We are so totally distant from a solution of the problem that I cannot say how many hundreds of years it would take to resolve it."

The President nodded. "Our ships can just barely make it to Mars and Venus in a couple of weeks, and we think that's good. But these people seem to have traveled an inconceivable distance in hardly any time at all."

"Is there not a possibility," asked Sir Adrian Cross, "that these—beings—originate on a planet of our own solar system?"

Macintyre shook his head. "I have it on the best of authority that there's not a chance. You see, they need very much the same kind of world to live on that we do. That is—their home world apparently has much the same gravitational pull that ours does, has an atmosphere and a temperature range similar to ours—a bottom temperature around zero and a top no higher than a hundred twenty or so Fahrenheit. None of the planets in our system come even close to matching these specifications—except Earth, naturally. So they *must* have come from a world of another star."

The Russian, Vankovich, looked troubled. He called for the floor and said, in slow but fluent English, "This point you mention troubles me. If

these beings live on a world like ours—could it not be that their purpose in coming here is an imperialistic one? Possibly this is the advance guard of a colonial mission."

"Quite possibly it is," the President said tightly. "You people will have to find this out. Gently, of course—the job calls for great delicacy. It may be that they've come here to offer us friendship and technical aid; maybe they've come to scout us out for the invasion troops. We have to know."

"But," said the Brazilian, Linhares, "if these —as you say, superior—beings plan an invasion, can we hope to withstand them? Surely if they can cross the gulf between stars they can blot out our petty strength with ease."

"Again I say, you'll have to learn this," the President replied. "You nine must sound these beings out with great care. We would like to establish friendly relations with them, of course —but not at the cost of our independence."

"How much authority do we have to make decisions?" asked Senator Morris. "I mean, suppose they want a formal agreement on some matter or other. What do we do?"

"After each session with the aliens, you'll file a report with an Executive Committee consisting

of Premier Nekrasov of Russia, Secretary-General Koskela of the UN, and myself. We'll then advise you on further steps to take."

"In that case," Brewster put in, "how come you picked us in the first place? Why not let this Executive Committee do the talking?"

Macintyre shook his head. "It was decided that the aliens might feel inhibited when dealing with heads of governments. It seemed better to appoint a committee of intermediaries to do the negotiating."

He cleared his throat. "There isn't much more I can say to you. You'll be meeting with the three aliens for the first time this evening, at half-past seven. That should give you a little time to get to know each other and to sketch out possible plans of discussion. Actually, though, I'd say that the best policy is to let the aliens take the lead. Let them carry the discussion in any direction they want to, but pin them down whenever they make a doubtful statement. Are there any further questions?"

"Yes," said Lee-hsiu, the Chinese geneticist. "You have given us virtually no information at all about the appearance or biological constitution of these beings. May we know something about them?"

"I was saving that for last," Macintyre said. "The aliens are—somewhat grotesque. They will take getting used to. I have photos here which I'll pass around to you. They were taken yesterday."

He reached into a portfolio and drew forth nine large prints, which were handed out round the table. Brewster stared at his with mixed feelings of awe, shock, and distaste.

The photo showed a creature that stood upright on two thick, fleshy legs. It was shaped roughly like a man; that is—it had two legs, two arms, and a head. But the legs were like tree trunks, while the arms were lithe, almost boneless-looking, and ended in what seemed like a dozen fingers each. The head sat on a massive neck. The head was chinless; jagged cheekbones framed the face, and two cold, lidless eyes peered out of the photo. The mouth was a mere slit, the nose weird—a pendulous organ dangling loosely and ending in five or six small fleshy tendrils. The color photograph showed the skin of the aliens as dark red in color, and heavily grained like coarse leather.

"Not pretty," Sir Adrian Cross commented after a moment, breaking the silence.

"Not pretty at all," President Macintyre agreed. "But no doubt we look just as weird to them."

"What size are they?" Alexei Pirogov wanted to know.

"Big. I'd say they average six feet five in height, weigh about three hundred pounds each."

"And they speak English?" Brewster asked.

"Perfectly. They have a gadget about the size of a hearing aid that translates languages by breaking down the sounds into symbolic forms. Dr. Brewster, you ought to be interested in this —if you can figure out how they do it. Anyway, they said they monitored our broadcasts for a day or so, long enough to get enough English to analyze, and then learned the language overnight before landing."

"If that is true," said Lefebvre, "then they are miraculously advanced beyond us."

"Advanced on a technological level, perhaps," Sir Adrian objected. "We don't have any idea how advanced—or how barbaric—they may be on the ethical level."

"We can be fairly sure they're not barbarians," commented Pradyot Raman. "A race which is so highly developed technologically would long ago have destroyed itself if it were not developed ethically as well."

"Let's hope you're right," Macintyre said. He looked tired, and Brewster remembered that all

the high officials he'd seen so far in Washington looked tired. He wondered if, after a while, the signs of strain would begin to be apparent on his own face. He knew that he was not the first—and hoped he wouldn't be the last—man to be thrust suddenly into a position where the fates of untold billions would be decided by his words and actions. He wasn't even the first to have a say over the destiny of all humanity, rather than a large segment of it. The men who had to make crucial decisions about the early atomic weapons and weapon tests had preceded him.

He looked down at the photograph of the alien being. The face—already growing a little less strange, and more acceptable as a face—seemed to be utterly unreadable. Steely eyes and tightly clamped mouth; it might tell something about a human being, but how could one try to estimate the emotions of non-humans? One couldn't; but the attitudes suggested lines of approach . . . and these creatures might find human emotions equally unreadable.

It was hard not to wonder if these creatures were implacable ambassadors come to announce that henceforth Earth was a dominion of some unimaginably vast Galactic empire. The thought

came easily, and needed no prompting from fiction; too many of Brewster's fellow beings had played such a role too often during the course of human history for men not to suspect the alien of similar ambitions.

President Macintyre said, "The time is now five minutes past three. At five tonight a world-wide press release goes out informing Earth of the presence of the aliens. At seven-thirty you nine will be having your first talk with the beings. It's scheduled to last an hour and a half. I hope that by ten tonight we can report some good news to the world."

He stood up. "I've arranged accommodations for you here in Washington, at a hotel reserved for diplomatic visitors. You won't be bothered there. And should it develop that the talks continue over a considerable span of time, we'll see to it that your wives and children will be brought here if you wish."

"You mean you don't know how long the talks will go on?" Brewster asked.

"I'm afraid not, Dr. Brewster. They'll go on until we've reached full accord with the aliens." He gestured to Chasin. "Colonel Chasin will be in charge of your welfare during your stay in Wash-

ington. Now he'll conduct you to your accommodations, and tonight he'll pick you up and convey you to the aliens."

The nine delegates rose. The President smiled tightly and said, "I hardly need to add that the hopes and fears of a world ride with you, gentlemen. Good luck."

Limousines were waiting outside the Pentagon, and the delegates filed in, three to each. Brewster rode with Senator Morris and Sir Adrian Cross. There wasn't much conversation.

At the hotel, he and Morris were given adjoining rooms. Brewster had barely finished unpacking his suitcase when he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Senator Morris entered and smiled a greeting. "You didn't pack very much, did you?" he said, looking at Brewster's small suitcase.

Brewster shrugged. "They didn't tell me how long I was going to be here. I figured I could always write home for clean shirts if I needed them. Guess I better start writing, too."

"You figure there'll be much negotiating?"

Jeffrey Brewster found that his impressions of Morris in person pretty well confirmed the opinions he'd derived from following the man's

public career. Knowing the senator's opinion of intellectuals, he let an abstract expression cross his face. "I try to avoid preconceptions, Senator. Perhaps it will be a long process, perhaps not. They do speak English, you know. But don't you think it may be a long affair, considering how long it takes to reach agreements between nations on Earth?"

Morris sat down on the edge of Brewster's bed and stared at him steadily. He was a big man in many ways—an inch or two taller than Brewster's six-foot height, and thirty or forty pounds heavier. No one could deny that the man had vigor and drive—that had propelled him into the House of Representatives at the unusual age of 28, and from there he had gone to the Senate in record time. He was now serving the initial year of his third term in the upper house; and since the Constitution required President Macintyre's retirement at the end of his second term, Morris was frequently mentioned these days as a presidential hopeful for the '92 elections. Brewster hoped the termites in this bit of presidential timber would be exposed in time. Then he realized that Morris had just asked, "Brewster, how do you feel about this thing?"

"Apprehensive, of course. Aren't you?"

The senator frowned. "I don't mean that. I mean, what's your guess about why the aliens are here?"

"I'd say the odds were in favor of its being for peaceful reasons. After all, we have fairly good proof that the same race visited Mars and Venus centuries ago, before civilization really began on Earth. Maybe they've been watching us all along, watching us develop and grow, wondering if we were going to blow ourselves up with the Bomb—and now that it looks like we've finally solved our internal problems, they've come back to offer us friendship and mutual alliance." Brewster said it all without a smile.

Senator Morris smiled, but he didn't seem amused. "It's a pretty theory, Brewster. Benevolent alien beings from outer space, keeping watch and coming to offer us the palm of amity now that we've shown our ability to get along."

"You don't think so?" He put just the right touch of naïveté in his voice.

"No. For two reasons. The first is that Earth's not so harmonious as you think. Sure, the Cold War is a thing of the past—but do you really *trust* Russia, even now?"

"Whether *I* do is rather irrelevant, don't you think? I'd say that whether *you* trusted Russia

was a more important question. Anyway, there's a difference between actually trusting and being willing to trust under particular circumstances."

"Yeah—all right. I'll buy that. But look, Brewster, don't be a child in trusting or being willing to trust. The Communists are out of business, but that doesn't mean someone else can't grab power in Russia and start waving the Bomb around again. Things have calmed down, but the millennium isn't quite here yet."

Brewster had to admit to himself that he agreed with this approach, however he might dislike the California Senator. And he realized, too, that his particular type of suspicion might be as valuable as dangerous, all depending upon how the aliens really operated.

When Greek meets Greek, they start a restaurant, he thought irrelevantly—then wondered if it might be more relevant than flippant, after all. In any event, he had to try to work with Morris, rather than arouse his antagonism from the very start. He nodded carefully.

"You may be right," he admitted. "What then?"

Morris lowered his voice. "I think those aliens have come here looking for friendship, all right —the kind of friendship you buy. They'll dish out

this technology of theirs like white men giving beads to the Indians. You know as well as I that the Indians thought they were getting a bargain, at first. . . . Well, we've got to be on our toes; we've got to remember that what looks like a bargain may be all on the other side, no matter how wonderful it seems at the moment. And I don't trust those two Russians. Might be willing to, as you put it, but I haven't seen any grounds for trusting them yet, so I don't."

"You ought to have some grounds for distrust, though."

Morris shrugged. "I have. Not something I can lay on a table, Brewster. Just call it politician's savvy. You either have it or you don't—those who get ahead in politics have it."

Brewster recognized the straight-across-the-table tone which was one of the senator's drawing points, and remembered that he'd once characterized Morris as having all the sincerity of a bedbug. "What do you suspect they'll try to do?" he asked.

"Try a quarterback sneak—try to arrange private talks with those aliens and maybe funnel some alien technological gadgets right into Russia. So we have to be careful. Get to the aliens first, make deals for the United States."

"But we don't represent just the United States. We're negotiating for the United *Nations.*"

Morris smiled. "That's college-professor talk, Brewster. If Russia's going to grab, we'll have to grab first and faster. That's elementary politics."

"But *is* this a political matter?"

"Sure it is! On a bigger scale than most, that's all." Morris laughed. "Don't let me scare you, Brewster. I'm as progressive as the next man, and more liberal than most. I just don't like to see the United States stand by and take second best."

Brewster saw no point in arguing the matter at present. He said, "Maybe you're right. Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to wash up now . . ."

"Sure."

Brewster looked at the closing door, and uneasiness gripped him. Morris' attitude had some aspects of common sense, but this was a global problem; you couldn't approach it in national terms without disaster.

The time was four o'clock. In less than four hours the first meeting with the aliens would be held.

CHAPTER IV

At precisely five that evening, the United Nations Headquarters in New York released a world-wide bulletin announcing the alien arrival. Jeffrey Brewster was in Chang's room at the time, discussing genetics research with the Chinese biologist. When Chang noticed what time it was, he excused himself and switched on the room's radio.

A news summary was in progress, but suddenly the announcer said, "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a bulletin released several minutes ago by United Nations Headquarters in New York." There was a pause of nearly ten seconds, and an audible gulp. Then: "Secretary-General Koskela's office revealed tonight that a spaceship from another world has landed in the United States. Three beings were aboard the ship. They

have been taken to Washington and a team of negotiators has been appointed to deal with them. We repeat: a spaceship from another world has landed in America, and its occupants are now in Washington for high-level discussions. This is not a hoax. It has just come over the wires from United Nations Headquarters in New York. Further details will follow as soon as they are received. We repeat . . ."

Chang smiled. "He is trying hard to make it sound believable. But it *does* sound fantastic, doesn't it?"

Brewster nodded. "I wonder how many people are going to believe it when they hear it. I remember once, long ago, before I was born, there was a radio broadcast that said men from Mars had landed. A lot of people were awfully angry when they found out it was just a dramatization of an H. G. Wells story."

"They're welcome not to believe this if they don't want to. But it won't do much good. We can't wish the aliens away by calling them hoaxes."

There was a knock on the door and Chang went to open it. Alexei Pirogov, the Russian physicist, stood outside. He still looked sleepy, but he was smiling.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked.

"Yes. It must be on every station," Brewster said.

Pirogov chuckled. "We are no longer under the cloak of secrecy, then. Now the world knows."

"Perhaps the news should not have been released so soon," Chang said quietly.

Brewster turned toward him. "Why do you say that?"

The slim Chinese shrugged in a very Western fashion. "It is unpleasant to learn that you are second best. The aliens undoubtedly are vastly beyond our attainments. Few people are sufficiently honest with themselves to welcome proof of their own inferiority."

"And you think the news ought to have been suppressed?" Pirogov asked.

"Perhaps. Perhaps we should have waited until we knew more about these beings and what they want with us. That might have been the course of wisdom."

The Russian shook his head in an emphatic gesture. "You are wrong. In my country, in the old days, the people were told nothing. If Leningrad were to be destroyed by an earthquake, the people of Moscow would not learn of it until the government had devised maximum propaganda

from the catastrophe. Those days are dead. Today the world must be told the truth. I don't think news of the alien landing should have been kept secret as long as it was, let alone suppressed further."

Brewster smiled. Pirogov's speech sounded deeply sincere. He wished Morris had been here to listen to the Russian's reaction. Would those words have pacified the senator—or would he have scented a rival politican behind them?

Chang said, "It is useless to speculate on what should have been done. Now we must face the consequences of what *has* been done."

Brewster nodded. "I agree. We'll have to see how the world reacts to the news. And if you'll excuse me, I'd like to call my wife in New York."

He left them still discussing the situation and returned to his own room. Picking up the house-phone, he asked for a long-distance hookup, then dialed his number.

Mari answered almost at once.

"Did you hear the five o'clock news?" Brewster asked her.

"Oh, yes, of course, Jeff. Isn't it *unbelievable?* But I don't understand. What do *you* have to do with all this? Why did they send for you that way?"

He explained quickly about his new position as member of the UN negotiating team. She gave a little gasp of surprise and said, "You mean you'll be one of the people talking to those creatures?"

"I'm afraid so. Tonight, as a matter of fact."

"How long will you be there?"

"That I don't know. But they've promised us we can send for our wives if the negotiations show signs of dragging on. I hope they let us send for you soon."

"I hope so, Jeff. Darling, I miss you already—and it's only half a day."

"I'll be—hold it, Mari. Someone's knocking at the door."

He put down the phone and said, "Come in."

The door opened and Colonel Chasin stepped in, looking even more harried-looking than he had before. Seeing the phone off the hook, he said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Brewster. Didn't mean to interrupt. Just wanted to tell you that the reporters are here and you'll be needed in the cocktail lounge at the end of the floor in five minutes."

"Reporters? So soon?"

"Everyone wants to read about you, Dr. Brewster." Chasin smiled wearily. "See you in a few minutes."

"What was that?" Mari wanted to know.

"Colonel Chasin again. A flock of reporters are here to interview us. I guess I'd better go. Damn it, I suppose I'm going to be a celebrity now."

"I'll keep a scrapbook, darling. Will they run your picture in the papers?"

"Is that all you can think about? My picture in the papers? Next you'll ask me if my tie's on straight for the photographers."

"You're a mind-reader, Jeff."

"No. Just a veteran husband, that's all."

"Good luck, darling. And don't be afraid of those—those aliens. Pretend that they're just a bunch of wise sophomores out to show up the prof."

"I wish I could, Mari. Guess I'd better get out there and face the music now."

He threw her a long-distance kiss, hung up, and took a peek in the mirror before he went outside. His hair looked reasonably well combed and his tie was knotted correctly, which wasn't always the case with him. He made a face at himself in the mirror and left his room. Sir Adrian Cross was coming out of his room, directly opposite, at the same time, and they smiled at each other and headed for the cocktail lounge together.

The interview was something that Brewster could happily have done without. There were about forty reporters present, men from every important paper and press service in the country, and the barrage of flashbulbs was atrocious. Brewster saw a stack of papers lying on a table to one side, and looked at them to discover that they were press releases—still smelling of fresh mimeograph ink—giving brief biographies of each of the nine committee members. Nearby were photographs of all nine; Brewster looked at his and found that it was his official publicity photo, the one taken a couple of years ago when he had signed the contract for his book. Either they had gotten it from Columbia or from his publishers, he thought.

He scanned the potted biography of himself. It was amazingly accurate:

JEFFREY JEROME BREWSTER. Born 14 August 1957, Topelo, Iowa. Attended Topelo High School, graduated 1975, second in class. B.A. Columbia University, 1979; M.A. in Psychosociology, Columbia, 1980. Appointed Instructor at Columbia 1980, promoted to Assistant Professor 1986, Associate Professor 1989. Married Mari Challon (b. 1961) 1983, no children. Ph.D. 1988. Publications: numerous scientific articles

and one book (A Theory of Communication, *Macmillan, 1988.*) *Currently resides in Riverdale, New York.*

Brewster read it all through without much care; then, startled, went back and read some of it again. According to the release he was an Associate Professor. But that wasn't right; he was only an Assistant Professor.

Then it occurred to him that it wasn't like Unsecfor to make factual errors in press releases. He read the date of his promotion: 1989. This year. Probably it had happened earlier today, he thought—and the University hadn't notified him yet. He grinned.

Someone came up to him and said, "Look this way, please, Dr. Brewster."

Cascades of photoflood lights were detonated. During the next half hour, literally dozens of reporters approached him, asked him questions about himself and his book and his wife and his academic career, scribbled notes frantically or took them down with a pocket recorder. At the back of the room an orderly supervised distribution of cocktails, but when Brewster finally made his way to the cocktail table and ordered a Martini he discovered that he could not have one.

"Why not?" he demanded, annoyed.

"Colonel Chasin's orders, sir. Only the guests are allowed to drink."

Brewster thought that that was a notably tight-fisted way of doing things, and said so. But the orderly remained adamant, and Brewster turned away from the table drinkless to confront another battery of questioners.

At six o'clock sharp, Colonel Chasin suddenly announced that the interview was over. Gratefully, Brewster sank down in a chair and watched the hurried departure of the Fourth Estate. He saw Lefebvre wearily mopping his forehead with a big colored handkerchief, and an equally exhausted Linhares sagging into a chair to his right.

At length Chasin shut the door of the lounge and heaved an audible sigh.

Lefebvre looked up and said, *"Cordieu,* Monsieur Colonel, is this to go on regularly?"

Chasin shook his head. "Happily, no. After this, you people will be off bounds for the press —once you've started meeting the aliens. Any news that comes forth will come by way of official releases."

"Thank goodness for that," Sir Adrian said feelingly. "I thought they'd never be done prying!"

"You men are objects of great curiosity to-

night," Chasin said. "The interview couldn't be helped."

"One thing could have been helped, though," Brewster said sourly.

"Oh? And what was that, Dr. Brewster?"

He pointed to the table where half-filled cocktail pitchers remained. "The drinks. How come we couldn't have any?" A chorus of similar comments from the others told Brewster that he was not the only one who had developed a thirst during the interview.

Chasin smiled apologetically. "I'll take the blame for that, gentlemen. I wanted you to be utterly sober when you had that interview. The reporters would be on the lookout for irresponsible statements to magnify into sensational headlines. If I gave you unlimited access to the cocktail table, there's no telling what might have been said."

"How about now?" Senator Morris asked. "All those good drinks going to waste over there."

Chasin said, "Very well. You can have one drink apiece. One. And then we'll have to hurry, because there's dinner waiting at six-fifteen downstairs and then your appointment with the aliens at half-past seven."

"Just one drink?" Vankovich asked.

"Please. We'd like you to be sober when you meet the aliens, too."

Chuckling, Brewster slaked his thirst with a Martini at last, and resisted the temptation to sneak in another one. The group ate together at a private dining room elsewhere in the hotel; it was a sumptuous meal, served by impressively garbed waiters, and Brewster began to get some first-hand confirmation of what he'd heard that the life of an important Washington figure was like. The thought came to him that a diet of truffles and grouse would lead to a rather sad letdown when this bizarre assignment was over and he had to return to the modest life of a Columbia professor.

Even an Associate Professor, he thought. The promotion had not been due until the spring. Obviously his acceptance of this assignment had pushed it along.

They had finished eating by about five past seven. While Brewster was sipping his coffee, Chasin rose and said, "The time has come, gentlemen, for the first formal meeting between the delegates of Earth and the—ah—alien ambassadors."

"Where will we be taken?" Linhares asked.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that. I can tell you that the aliens are being kept on a farm near Alexandria, but that's about all I can say. We're maintaining absolute security blankets on their actual whereabouts."

Brewster felt an odd tightness in his stomach. The moment had almost arrived. Only ten hours ago he had been halfway out the door of his apartment, on the way to his first class of the day. Now he was about to be conveyed to some anonymous Virginia farm to meet . . .

What?

The nine delegates filed out slowly. The familiar limousines were waiting—this time, with their passenger compartments shuttered off.

Brewster and Morris entered one car and were joined by Lefebvre. Brewster saw the two Russians and Raman entering the second car, Sir Adrian, Linhares, and Chang Lee-hsiu getting into the third.

Turbogenerator engines purred quietly as the big cars glided off into the night. It was impossible to see out, impossible to get any inkling of their route. But the car seemed to be moving fairly fast, which indicated that they were travelling on a major artery, probably Route 350 down into Alexandria.

But there was no gauging speed without a view of the passing countryside, and there was no telling how far they were going.

The time was nearly half-past seven when the car pulled up suddenly, and the Unsecfor chauffeur hopped out and opened the car door. Brewster climbed out and looked around. They seemed to be in open country, on a Virginia farm. A towering building to the left looked like a silo—but did it conceal the weird shape of a ship from the stars? The farmhouse itself was about a hundred yards away. Unsecfor guards seemed to be deployed in a wide circle around the entire area.

The little group assembled, tightfaced and pale, around Colonel Chasin. The Colonel said, "Just follow me. You're liable to smell a strange odor when you first enter the room where the aliens are. It's nothing to get excited about—it's simply their natural odor. You get used to it after a couple of minutes and after a while you don't even notice it." He smiled quickly, on-off. "Try to act confident without seeming to swagger. Be natural. And remember that no matter how strange they look to you, they're just *people.*"

He led the way into the farmhouse through a file of Unsecfor guards. Brewster and Morris followed him, the others clustered behind.

The farmhouse steps squeaked as they mounted them. It seemed incongruous to Brewster that the alien ambassadors should be kept in such an old building.

He followed Chasin down a long hallway to a room at the end, which was guarded by two grim-faced Unsecfor men. They stepped aside at Chasin's approach, and the Colonel opened the door, nodding to Brewster and the others to go inside.

It was a big room, high-roofed, with unpainted rafters. An old portrait of George Washington hung on one wall. There was a square table in the middle of the room—a big table—with nine chairs arranged with their backs to the door in a single line.

The aliens were sitting facing those nine chairs. There were three of them, massive, solemn-looking beings, staring at the newcomers out of those icy unreadable alien eyes. Brewster detected a curious sweet and musky odor in the room—strong, but not unpleasant. A tape recorder sat on the table in front of the aliens.

Feeling a little watery in the legs, Brewster advanced to the table and drew out a chair. His companions did the same. Turning, Brewster saw Chasin make a good-luck gesture and slip through

the door. They were alone, now—nine Earthmen and a tape recorder, and three aliens.

"Will you be kind enough to sit down," the center alien said. He spoke in a flat emotionless voice, with no trace of an accent and no expression, not even a question-mark at the end of the sentence. "There is much we have to discuss."

CHAPTER V

It was the weirdest hour and a half in Brewster's life. Sitting down at the table reminded him of nothing so much as the time he had taken the oral part of his Ph.D. exam; then he had come into a big room and taken a seat facing four of the most formidable experts in his chosen field, and for nearly an hour he had been the target for a flood of devilishly ingenious rapid-fire questions. But he had been alone that day; here he had eight companions.

Let the aliens take the lead, President Macintyre had suggested—exactly what Jeffrey Brewster himself would have recommended. But there was no difficulty in doing that, for the aliens seemed to know what they wanted to say, and set about saying it.

The big one in the middle appeared to be the spokesman.

He said, in a strangely unaccented voice that rumbled up from the depths of his great chest, "We have come in friendship, men of Earth. Our journey has been a long one. We are many weeks distant from our home world, Morota. But we come seeking the love of Earth, and no journey is too great if love is its motive."

Fine words, Brewster thought. *Carefully chosen for immediate appeal on the emotional level.* But he wondered how many of his fellow negotiators could so easily be stirred on the emotional level. None, he hoped, under the circumstances.

The alien speaker said, "It would simplify contact if you referred to us by our names, would it not? I am termed Domrain. My colleagues"—he indicated the other two, one by one—"are Khuriel and Tisonor. In due time we will learn your names too, it is hoped. You will facilitate this by stating your names when you speak the first time, please?"

Domrain paused. It was obvious that he had planned this interlude to allow one of the Earthmen to speak. Brewster stirred uneasily, not

wanting to be the first. He realized there was no formal chairman of the Earth group, and so they would have to be extremely careful not to interrupt each other when speaking.

The silence was suddenly broken by Sir Adrian Cross' voice—slightly halting and self-conscious, something like a schoolboy before his masters. "On—on behalf of my colleagues here and on behalf of the billions of people of Earth, I welcome you to our world, men of Morota, and I trust you will find here the love and friendship that all men seek."

A nicely turned speech, Brewster thought. And astute of Sir Adrian to have put it off that way—"all men seek," rather than, "you seek." The Englishman added the identification at the end of his statement: "I am Sir Adrian Cross of Great Britain."

"Thank you, Sir Adrian Cross." Domrain scanned the row of Earthmen facing him, letting his strange eyes light on each one in turn. "No doubt you have many questions to ask of us before we begin our negotiations. It is only logical that we should devote this initial session to providing you with such information about us as you may wish to know."

Instantly Chang said, "Chang Lee-hsiu of China. Would you tell us exactly where your home planet is, and how far from Earth?"

Domrain glanced to his left. The alien named Khuriel, speaking in precisely the same tone of voice as his companion, said, "The question is not simple. Our home planet lies thousands of light-years from Earth—in the system of a star that is not visible from this region of space. Our home star is a small one, scarcely larger than your own."

"Pradyot Raman of the Republic of India. How long exactly, in our units of time, did the journey from Morota to Earth take you?"

Khuriel said, "We have computed it as nearly seven weeks."

"Thousands of light-years—in seven weeks!" Raman exclaimed. "Then obviously you have a spacedrive which negates time and space—something which many on Earth have believed is impossible."

"We have such a drive," Tisonor, the third alien, said.

Raman persisted, "Could you tell us briefly the principle behind which the spacedrive works?"

Tisonor laughed—at least, Brewster thought

that the rumbling sound he heard was laughter. "The principle cannot be explained briefly. But in any event it is one of the things we would prefer to discuss at the conclusion of our negotiations, not at the beginning."

The implication was obvious. The aliens weren't giving anything away too fast. Eurico Linhares leaned across Lefebvre to whisper something to Raman—evidently a word of caution, telling the young Indian not to rush ahead too fast.

Brewster said, "Jeffrey Brewster of the United States of America. Have your people ever visited this solar system before?"

"Yes, certainly," Domrain said. "Our first visit took place more than seven thousand years ago on your time-scale."

"And you visited Earth at that time?" Brewster went on.

"Only briefly. We set up an outpost on the fourth world of this system—the one you call Mars—and systematically visited other planets of the system in search of intelligent life. Earth was the only planet where such could be found —but civilization on Earth was in a highly primitive state, and we deemed it best not to interfere with its development."

"Some time later," Khuriel said, picking up

the narrative from Domrain, "our people returned again—locating our base this time on the second planet, known here as Venus. This was some four thousand years ago as you reckon it. We again observed the civilization of Earth and found that some areas had indeed made great achievements—but that in general Earth was not yet ready to meet us."

"And this is the first time you've been back since the year 2000 B. C.?"

"There have been other visits," Khuriel said. "We have never established a base in your system since our second visit, but we have sent scouts here approximately every four hundred years. The last such observers reported that a scientific era was at last about to begin. We came to check on your progress—and were astounded to discover that in four short centuries you had not only mastered the sciences but had actually reached other worlds of your solar system!"

Brewster felt cold prickles on the back of his neck. It was chilling to think of these beings looking in on the first fumblings of primitive man, watching the building of the Pyramids perhaps, the rise and fall of Rome, the discovery of America, the first clumsy precursors of the Industrial Revolution . . .

"Henri Lefebvre of France. You say 'you' had visited Earth before. I take it you refer to your race collectively, and not to yourselves as individuals."

"Partially," Domrain said. "Khuriel and Tisonor have never entered this area of space before. I was part of the observing team that visited Earth in what you call the Seventeenth Century."

In the confusion that followed, Chang asked quickly, "May we ask the average lifespan of your people, then?"

Domrain said, "Between seven hundred and a thousand of your years. I myself was born in your year 1432. My colleagues are somewhat younger."

Again there was a hubbub of reaction around the table. Brewster heard Morris, sitting to his right, mutter harshly, "They're lying! Born sixty years before Columbus—what do they think we are, children?"

"Quiet," Brewster whispered sharply. "Maybe they can hear you. You're supposed to be a diplomat, remember?"

The Californian scowled sourly at him and muttered something under his breath. Chang said, "Would you submit to a medical examination to demonstrate the age of your bodies?"

Domrain said, "If you find such proof necessary for belief, we would willingly submit."

Linhares said, "Eurico Linhares of Brazil. What I would like to know is this: are there many other races of intelligent beings in the galaxy besides your race and ours?"

Domrain seemed to pause thoughtfully before answering. "Yes," he said at length. "Many other races—some more primitive than yours, others nearly as advanced as we are."

"The Morotans are the most highly advanced race in the universe, then?"

"We are," Domrain agreed with no trace of boastfulness.

"Have any of these other races ever visited our solar system?" Brewster asked.

"Not to our knowledge," Domrain said.

"But they *do* have the ability to travel between stars, then?"

"Some of them do. As I said, some of these races are nearly as advanced as we."

Sir Adrian Cross said, "Where would you say we stood in relation to the other intelligent races of the universe, on a graduated scale?"

"Slightly above the mid-point," Domrain said.

Brewster sat back, thoughtful. His ears, trained to detect underlying semantic connotations, had

picked up a number of curious hints—*or am I,* he wondered, *just reading too much into what's been said?*

Other intelligent races in the galaxy—some with the ability to travel between stars—and a certain reluctance on Domrain's part to discuss the whole matter. That might imply that Morota had serious rivals in the galaxy, rivals against whom they might want to sign a friendship pact with Earth. It was a thought to be filed away for future reference.

Lefebvre said, "Since you have such an extraordinary span of life, and since you say your people visited Earth as far back as seven thousand years ago—this implies that you've had the star-drive a great while. Could you give us some idea of the age of your civilization?"

Tisonor said, "We of Morota trace our civilization back for the equivalent of eighty-five thousand of your years. Fifty thousand years ago we had reached the stage of development you are at today."

"Fifty thousand years . . ." Lefebvre murmured incredulously. Brewster felt the same feeling of shock. It was hard for the mind to grasp the fact. Neanderthal man had walked the Earth when these beings were building their first space-

ships. And they must regard Earthmen as hopeless primitives, being fifty thousand years more advanced.

But another idea occurred to him. They traced their history back 85,000 years—and it had taken them 35,000 to reach the equivalent of 20th-century Earth. But Earth itself traced its history of civilization back only seven thousand years, to the early settlement of the Nile Valley. Which meant—Brewster computed quickly—Earth had reached the space-travel stage roughly five times as fast as the Morotans!

That was another interesting fact to file away for future reference, he thought.

The rest of the session went along smoothly enough—with most of the Earthmen asking questions designed to uncover facets of Morotan civilization. It developed that they had a fantastic technology, studded with such accomplishments as universal personal communication via wrist-crystal, near immortality thanks to medical developments, freedom from mental illnesses, automatic and practically instantaneous transportation, and on for a long and impressive list.

They gave the population of Morota, a planet roughly the size of Earth, as nearly three billion —which, after a history of 85,000 years, meant

that they had undoubtedly arrived at a workable system of population control, since Earth's own population, after a brief drop in the 1965-80 period, was again on a seemingly uncheckable upswing. Domrain disclosed that the Morotans had also colonized ten previously uninhabited planets in their area of space, and that there were some twenty billion Morotans altogether—a figure that substantially changed the estimates Brewster had been making of their strength.

The time was coming round to 9:00 o'clock when Domrain said, "This session must reach its close now. We find conversations of longer than ninety minutes' duration difficult to sustain in this atmosphere. I believe we have answered most of your immediate questions about ourselves. At our next meeting, tomorrow night, we will begin to touch on more direct matters for discussion."

The alien leaned back, indicating the meeting was over. The door opened. Colonel Chasin entered, looked around at the Earthmen apprehensively, nodded to the aliens, and shut off the tape recorder. Quickly he removed the reel and placed it in a leather pouch he was carrying; he snapped a magnelock closed and touched his thumb to the sensitized plate, insuring that the pouch could not be opened except by himself.

Brewster and his companions were shepherded out into the hall, where Chasin said, "Well? How did it go?"

"Not bad at all," Brewster said. "They seem friendly enough."

"I hope you're right," Linhares commented. "Beings so far beyond us on the scale of civilization might appear friendly—and conceal some deadly trickery."

Chasin said, "Tomorrow morning the President and Secretary-General Koskela can listen to the tape and make their own interpretations. But I'd like one of you to come with me to the White House now and give the President a brief oral summary of the meeting. Brewster, suppose you do the job tonight. You can rotate the briefing assignment from night to night."

Brewster waved goodbye to his eight colleagues and went off with Chasin to be driven to the White House. He slumped back in the car, thinking over the night's events, realizing that the hour-and-a-half session had left him drained and weary.

But he had almost become accustomed to the nightmarish appearance of the aliens, and he hardly noticed their odor by the end of the ses-

sion. He could almost think of them as human beings—almost.

The President looked tense and apprehensive when Brewster was shown into his White House study. But he managed a warm smile and said, "Well? What's the good word, Dr. Brewster?"

Brewster shrugged. "I wish I knew. They seem friendly enough."

"Tell me about tonight's session."

"It was mostly question-and-answer. We got a lot of information about their home world. Colonel Chasin has the tape of the session. Briefly, Mr. President, they're a vastly advanced race." In concise sentences Brewster sketched out the facts he had learned about the alien lifespan, technological marvels, and previous visits to the solar system. He didn't touch upon possible interpretations of their statements.

Macintyre looked even more worried when Brewster had finished his recitation. He frowned and said, "I feared something like this, Brewster. I dreaded it. And the worst is yet to come."

"I don't understand, sir."

Macintyre held forth a sheaf of typed-on sheets of yellow paper. "See these? They're reports—flooding in from all over the world. Reports on

worldwide reaction to the five o'clock newsbreak about the aliens. And the reaction frightens me, Brewster."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this: the majority of the people of the world are afraid—afraid and *angry*. We were all getting a bit smug about ourselves, the way we had unified humanity and reached the other planets. We thought we were pretty hot stuff. And now aliens from another star come along to deflate us, to let all the air out. We aren't such hot stuff after all, are we? Just a medium-smart primitive race on an insignificant world. And when word gets out about the Morotans and how they live hundreds of years, it'll be even worse."

The President shook his head bitterly. "The world is getting a huge inferiority complex from these beings. It's a kind of shock reaction, no rational basis. Look at the news: riots in Ankara, mobs shouting in Berlin, demonstrations in Buenos Aires and plenty of other places. Trouble's brewing, Brewster."

"And can't we avoid it somehow? Convince the people that it's wrong to feel hate toward the Morotans?"

"I wish I knew what that 'somehow' was. But the feeling is sweeping round the world tonight.

Fear and hatred and anger—all the old terrors let loose."

Brewster said hopefully, "It's simply the initial reaction."

"I hope you're right." He clenched his big fists. "I wish they hadn't landed in America, though. Some of the smaller countries are grumbling about it. They think we're going to profit by it in some way. Damn it, Brewster, why couldn't they have brought their ship down in Luxembourg?"

The President looked up suddenly. "I'm tired, Brewster. You'd better go. Thanks for telling me about tonight's session."

The trip back to the hotel took twenty minutes. Brewster sat silently, thinking about this strange thing that had happened to the world today.

Aliens from another star—bringing with them the seeds of distrust and hatred. A quarter of a century of peace and security on Earth—and now, would the coming of the Morotans destroy all that overnight, by reviving old fears and feuds?

But there were bigger questions beyond these, and tonight's session had not answered them—only underlined them. Why had the Morotans come to Earth? What did they want from us? Why

were they seeking our friendship now—and what did "our friendship" mean to them?

Senator Morris was waiting for him at the door of his hotel room.

"You see the President?"

Brewster nodded.

"What's the outlook?"

"Bad. The world isn't reacting well to the Morotans at all."

Morris scowled. "I know. I've been listening to the broadcasts. Every network has a special program analyzing the arrival." The Senator put his mouth close to Brewster's ear and whispered, "Did you notice those Russians tonight at the meeting?"

"What about them?"

"They didn't say one word. Not one single word!"

Brewster maintained a poker face for a moment, then let a thoughtful expression replace it. "Now that you mention it, they didn't. What do you make of that?"

Morris smiled triumphantly. "They're schemers, those two! While we were busy popping off with questions, they sat back and let us do the work. They were listening, though—listening damned carefully. Taking everything in and lay-

ing their plans!" The senator seemed more pleased than indignant—as if this meant that everything in the world was going exactly as he anticipated.

Perhaps if he was busy sniffing out Russian plots, Morris would have less "savvy" to spare the aliens, Brewster thought. And this was a good thing. The aliens had given away considerably more than they may have realized; and if Earthlings didn't show open suspicion yet, the visitors might let still more slip out. It was better, for the moment, that they underestimate their hosts.

Brewster snorted. "Anarchists behind every tree, eh, Senator?" He yawned. "Well, I suppose you'd better tell the President all about it. As for me, I'm going in to get some sleep."

CHAPTER VI

It took Brewster a long time to fall asleep that night. He was in a strange bed, in a strange room, in a strange city—and in a strange situation. He lay awake, letting the tumultous events of the day relive themselves in his mind. But when he finally dropped off to sleep, hours later, he slept soundly. The session with the aliens had been like a ninety-minute duel.

He woke early, before eight, and was shaved and dressed by the time Colonel Chasin phoned at nine to let Brewster know the time for arising had come. Chasin told him breakfast would be ready in the hotel's dining room any time he wanted it.

"What's on the agenda for today?" Brewster asked.

"You nine are supposed to meet this morning

to discuss last night's conference and to prepare yourselves for the talks tonight. Other than that, you're free all day, till conference time at half-past seven."

By Chasin's order someone had thoughtfully deposited the morning newspapers outside the door of his hotel room. He found the Washington *Post* and the New York *Times* there, and took them into his room to scan them before going down for breakfast.

The fact that the Callisto expedition was going to blast off this afternoon had been all but squeezed off the front pages of both papers. The best they could manage was a small headline in the lower left-hand corner; the rest of both front pages was given over to the arrival of the Morotans.

Both the *Times* and the *Post* gave big plays to the nine-man negotiating team. Both papers ran the official photos that had been distributed at yesterday's mass interview, as well as expanded versions of the mimeographed biographies. Brewster was both startled and amused to see his own face staring up at him from the third page of the *Times* and the fourth of the *Post*. They had all the facts straight, including the Associate Professorship.

He skimmed rapidly through the pages and pages devoted to the aliens. There were expressions of opinion from statesmen, politicians, scientists, baseball players, video stars, and just plain men-in-the-street; there was a lengthy survey of the Earth's own achievements in space flight, by way of comparison with the accomplishment of the Morotans in travelling from some far star.

And above all, there was coverage of the worldwide reaction.

The world was unhappy. The world was suspicious of the aliens, distrustful, petty, overcautious. "Who are these starmen anyway?" asked a Chicago housewife quoted in the *Post*. "Why did they have to come bother us? We were doing okay on our own."

Brewster was no longer surprised at the reaction. He himself was greatly interested in the Morotans, and deeply impressed by their superior attainments—but he felt no hate for them. They were an older race; they had done more. What of it?

When he reached the dining room he found almost no one there. Pirogov, the young Russian physicist, was sitting alone at one table.

"Mind if I join you?" Brewster asked.

"You're welcome here."

Brewster pulled out a chair. "Where is everybody this morning?"

Pirogov said, "Lefebvre and Sir Adrian were leaving as I came in. I believe they've gone out for a walk. Vankovich and the Chinese breakfasted long ago. I suppose the others must still be upstairs."

Brewster gave his order to the waiter. He eyed the dark-haired Russian closely, wondering if Pirogov was as insidious as Senator Morris seemed to think he was. He doubted it, but realized that Morris could be right in this specific instance. If you suspect *all* Russians, you can't help being right about some.

"The news is unpleasant this morning," Pirogov said, as Brewster's soft-boiled eggs arrived. "Riots here, riots there—deplorably emotional reactions."

"I didn't anticipate it."

Pirogov shrugged. "People are like that. I wonder how our alien friends will feel when they find out how Earth's people regard them."

Brewster looked up from his breakfast. "You think they'll find out?"

"Of course! Last night Colonel Chasin told me the Morotans insisted on receiving several dozen

newspapers and magazines regularly while they are here. Also television. They intend to keep close watch on Earth."

"And the negotiations will go on for quite a while, I imagine."

Pirogov nodded. "It looks so. I hope they will permit us to bring our wives soon."

Brewster remembered now that Pirogov's newspaper biography said something about a wife. He smiled and asked, "How long have you been married?"

"Two years," the Russian said. "My wife is the daughter of a minister in the last Bolshevik government. He was released from prison ten years ago, but he still keeps photos of Stalin and Lenin in his home. He will have nothing to do with Tanya since she married that despicable democrat, myself." Pirogov chuckled—the first sign of warmth he had shown. "Tanya forgives him, though. He is old, and set in the old ways. Is your wife attractive?"

The sudden question startled Brewster. He blinked a moment, then grinned and said, "Why, yes—yes, I like to think she's attractive. Would you like to see her photograph?"

"Very much."

Brewster drew out his wallet and handed Piro-

gov the tridim snap of Mari that he always carried. The Russian studied it with great care for almost a minute, then nodded and handed it back. "She is very lovely."

"Thanks."

"This is Tanya," Pirogov said, drawing a photo of his own from his breast pocket.

Brewster took it. It showed a dark, wide-eyed girl of twenty-three or so, shy-looking, extremely pretty. Brewster said so.

"In the old days," said Pirogov, "she would have been condemned as being not strong enough. Our Soviet grandmothers were used as soldiers and tractor-drivers and laborers, did you know that? But times have changed, and in Russia a woman is allowed to be feminine once again. For which I am very happy."

The Russian smiled and put his photo away. Brewster realized that Pirogov could be very likeable.

"Do you remember much about Communist Russia?"

"Oh, no—very little. I was only seven when the March Revolution ended the tyranny, and I have read little of its history. In Russia today we prefer to look forward, not back."

Brewster finished his coffee and stood up. The

time was half-past nine. He was free for about an hour.

"Shall we walk outside a while?" Pirogov asked.

"A fine idea," Brewster agreed.

They left the dining room together, and rode downstairs to the hotel lobby. As they stepped out into the fresh autumn morning, Brewster noticed that a Unsecfor guard had unobtrusively slipped up behind them and was following them at a distance of about ten paces.

Catching the Russian by the arm, he murmured, "I think we've got a shadow." Turning, he said to the Unsecfor man, "Are you going our way?"

The guard reddened. "Colonel Chasin's orders, sir. None of you people are to be allowed out without an escort from now on."

"How come?"

"He feels you might get into trouble, sir. A lot of bad blood's around this morning."

"Bad blood—against us?"

The guard shrugged. "Afraid so, sir. Some people feel we shouldn't negotiate with the Morotans, you see. There's a lot of noise being made downtown."

Brewster and Pirogov exchanged glances. Chasin hadn't told them of this.

Pirogov said, "You mean these people think we should hide our heads like the ostriches, and wait for the Morotans to leave? The fools!"

"Sir, I can't do anything about that. But the Colonel told me to keep an eye on you in case you left the hotel. You don't want me to get into trouble, sir."

"Very well," Pirogov muttered. "Follow us if you must. But please to stay ten or fifteen feet behind us. Give us at least the *illusion* of freedom."

He nodded to Brewster and they resumed their walk, heading toward the slim white column of the Washington Monument standing tall in the distance. They fell silent for a while, their thoughts unhappy. Public hatred of the aliens meant that popular resentment would turn against *them,* as collaborators with the Morotans.

He said, "The world is full of people who think with their emotions instead of their brains. Their idea, no doubt, is that we should turn our backs on the Morotans and ignore them."

"Do you think the Morotans mean what they say about friendship?" Pirogov asked.

"I'm sure they want *something* from us. Maybe friendship, maybe a military alliance."

"Oh? You believe the Morotans have enemies elsewhere in the galaxy?"

"I don't have any idea. But I find it hard to believe the Morotans came all this distance just to embrace us in brotherhood for the sake of brotherhood."

"I feel the same way. But we must remember that they are alien beings, who do not think the way we do. After all, we ourselves are of the same species, of the same planet—and yet Russian and American do not think in exactly the same manner."

"A good point." Brewster glanced at Pirogov and said, "You speak English very well, you know. Remarkably well, in fact."

"Thank you. But I have studied it from childhood. In Russia we begin to learn a foreign language almost as soon as we have learned our own. I chose English—it is the language of science today. And even then, I knew I would be a physicist some day. I—*look out!*"

Suddenly Brewster found himself being pushed off balance by the Russian; he staggered and fell to the ground just as a well-aimed rock whizzed through the space where his head had been a moment before. Looking up, he saw Pirogov rubbing his right forearm where a rock had struck

him—and, on the far side of the street, a group of angry-looking men and women were pointing at them and muttering.

Then a moment later the group broke up and started to flee in all directions, while at the same time Unsecfor men miraculously appeared from everywhere and began to collar the rock-throwers. It was all over in a moment. Seven angry-faced men stood huddled together across the street, while a Unsecfor man took their names.

Their own bodyguard had approached and was saying, "I told you there was some ugly stuff going on. You'd better come back to the hotel with me now."

Brewster rose shakily. He wasn't accustomed to having rocks thrown at his head.

"Just a minute," Pirogov said. "I'll be right with you."

Brewster watched as the Russian crossed the street, joined the little group over there, and said a few words to the Unsecfor man who was doing the arresting. There was some exchange of speech; then Pirogov nodded in satisfaction and crossed the street again.

"What was that all about?" Brewster asked.

"I was requesting him not to arrest those men."

"Not to arrest . . . ?"

"No. Why increase their unhappiness? They are stupid, agreed, and they are taking out on us their resentments against that which they do not understand. But perhaps a positive act will win them over better than a negative one. Arresting solves nothing."

They began walking quickly back to the hotel. Brewster said, "I owe you thanks. If you hadn't spotted them and pushed me out of the way I could have been killed."

Pirogov smiled. "I was a boy during the Revolution. I learned to be quick on my feet during a time of trouble. I had been watching that group more than a minute before they threw their rocks."

"But they hit you. Is your arm all right?"

"I have suffered worse pain in my life and survived. It is merely a light bruise."

They reached the hotel ten minutes later. A worried-looking Chasin waited for them in the lobby.

He said, "I just heard about the incident outside. I phoned the President and you should have heard him! He's going to make a worldwide appeal for sanity tonight on video at eight."

"Unfortunately, we will miss it," Pirogov said. "We will be in conference then. But luckily we are already sane, or so I like to think."

Chasin said, "Your wife phoned, Dr. Brewster. I said you were out for a walk but would call her when you came back."

"You didn't tell her . . ."

"No."

Brewster called New York from a lobby phone. As always, Mari answered right away, as if she had been hovering over the phone waiting for it to ring.

She said, "I've been reading the papers and listening to the news till I can recite everything by heart! But why are people rioting, darling?"

"They always riot when they can't understand a situation," Brewster said. "When a cat's confused, it gives itself a bath and waits for matters to settle down. People riot. It's the same kind of reaction."

"You're getting more cynical in your old age, darling. But how was the big meeting last night? What are the—the Morotans like? I saw their pictures in the paper this morning, and they must be horrors."

"They—take a little getting used to," Brewster

said. "But they're not bad sorts at all. We have a second session with them tonight."

"How lucky for you," Mari said. "Well, I'll be arriving around two this afternoon, so I'll see you then. No use running up the government's phone bill."

"You'll—what? Arriving?"

"Didn't the Colonel tell you? I asked if I could come down to stay with you, and he said it was perfectly all right, that arrangements were under way to bring the wives of all the delegates to Washington by the end of the week, so . . ."

Brewster nibbled his lip. "That's—wonderful," he said, without conviction.

Mari caught the tonelessness of his statement. "I didn't like the way you said that. Don't you want me to come down? Have you met some pretty Washingtonian already, Jeff?"

"No, nothing like that. But . . ."

"But what?"

He didn't want to tell her that it might have been a "pretty Washingtonian" who had thrown a rock at him half an hour ago.

Chasin drifted by and said in a low voice, "Committee meeting upstairs in ten minutes, Dr. Brewster."

Brewster nodded and said to Mari, "I was just caught by surprise, that's all. Of course I want you here, darling. And now I've got to go—there's some kind of meeting I have to attend. They really keep us busy on this job. See you at two, Mari."

CHAPTER VII

Having Mari down there meant more to him than he had suspected. Now there was someone he could talk to without having to think about possible political repercussions, or worry about giving away some vital point. The feelings of loneliness and frustration vanished not long after she had moved into the hotel, full of campus gossip—she had brought a copy of the daily campus newspaper along to show him the play he had gotten there—and full, too, of questions.

He introduced Mari to Pirogov, not mentioning anything about the rock-throwing incident; he could be fairly sure that Alexei wouldn't bring the matter up himself, since the Russian wasn't the sort to drag his own heroism into a discussion of something else. Pirogov greeted Mari with courtly grace, and remarked that his own

wife, Tanya, was being flown in by intercontinental rocket tonight from Moscow. Also that the other delegates would have their womenfolk on hand shortly as well—except for Vankovich and Lefebvre, who were bachelors.

"So we'll all be one big happy family," Mari said with a hint of edginess in her voice. "Living down here and sitting around watching the video, while you men gab with the Morotans."

Brewster laughed. "It looks that way. But I hope it doesn't last long."

"It won't last long if we can stick to the agenda we drew up this morning," Pirogov said. "We intend to make the Morotans come right to the point about their visit here," he explained to Mari.

Brewster said, "In view of the unstable world situation that's building up, we'll have to dispense with diplomatic beating-about-the-bush and get right down to the main topic."

Eurico Linhares wandered by to join the little group in the hotel lobby. Brewster introduced the Brazilian delegate to his wife, and Linhares asked, "Have you heard the latest news?"

"What now?" Brewster asked.

"It was on the two-fifteen telecasts. The President's talk tonight has been canceled."

"Canceled?"

Linhares nodded. "He will not speak. Instead, Domrain himself will address the world at ten tonight."

"You mean the chief alien?" Mari asked.

"Indeed. He will give a speech assuring the world of his benevolent purposes. The President feels that this will help to dispel the uncertainty caused by the arrival of the Morotans."

"I hope he's right," Brewster said, glancing at Pirogov and thinking of an ugly little group of rock-heavers. "If something isn't done to keep tempers down, we're liable to have a fine old-fashioned lynching."

"Of us or of the Morotans?" Pirogov asked.

"Both."

"I thought I understood my fellow men," Linhares remarked, smiling lopsidedly in that curious way of his. "But I never expected the reaction to take the form of resentment and hatred."

"It must give the Morotans a fine opinion of Earthmen," Mari said.

"They're wise enough to realize that the forces speaking against them are the forces of ignorance," said Brewster. "The Morotans don't regard us too highly, anyway—to them we're only precocious primitives, tens of thousands of years

behind them in development. They make allowances for us; they *expect* us to react emotionally to their sudden arrival."

"If they're so vastly superior to us," Pirogov said, "why do they wish to win our friendship? Do we plead to sign treaties with the mice of the fields?"

"The mice of the fields don't have space travel," Linhares pointed out. "We do. We are closer to the Morotans than the field mice are to us."

"But still," Mari protested, "a race that superior doesn't *need* our friendship, does it? I don't understand their motives."

"Neither do we," Brewster said. "But we hope to find out something about them tonight."

Shortly before seven that night, Colonel Chasin rounded up his nine negotiators and packed them into the by-now-familiar limousines. Tanya Pirogov had only just arrived, weary after her forty-minute rocket flight from Moscow, but it was impossible to delay the meeting with the Morotans on her account. Brewster got a quick look at her: she was a slim, delicate woman even prettier than the photograph had shown her. Mari went upstairs with her to help her unpack.

This time he rode to the Virginia farmhouse in

the same car as Pirogov and Pradyot Raman; Morris slipped into the second car between Vankovich and Sir Adrian. Brewster thought wryly that Senator Morris was determined to find treason whether it existed or not. He had decided that the Russians planned a secret deal with the Morotans. Twice during the day, Morris had urged Brewster to make use of his acquaintanceship with Pirogov to pry forth details of the Russians' intentions. Jeffrey Brewster had assured the Californian that he would do the best he could to uncover any deviltry the Russians planned.

As the sleek government car sliced through the night, Brewster felt his uneasiness return. Tonight was the night for the showdown.

No doubt it would have been preferable to let the talks continue for days—or even weeks—before coming to any definite point. But with the people of Earth in a ferment over the aliens' unexplained presence, it was essential to pin the visitors down to a definite statement tonight.

The world has been at peace too long, Brewster thought. *Nearly a quarter of a century without the threat of war. No wonder everyone's so jumpy about the Morotans.*

They filed out of the shuttered cars and into the farmhouse, were shepherded down the hallway into the big room on the end of the floor. Domrain, Khuriel, and Tisonor were waiting for them, staring patiently into nowhere. The tape recorder had been turned on a moment before and sat spinning slowly on the table.

The aliens did not look so forbidding tonight. Grotesque, yes—three ponderous weird creatures sitting with their dozen-fingered hands clasped in a very human posture, their cold eyes fixed straight ahead, their bizarre dangling fleshy noses swinging gently from side to side. But they were familiar shapes tonight.

"We greet you," Domrain said resonantly.

The nine Earthmen took the same seats they had taken the night before. Brewster occupied the second from right, with Chang Lee-hsiu on the end, and Senator Morris to his left. Tonight there was little hesitation on the part of the Earthmen as they took their seats. They had met for two hours before lunch, planning their strategy for the evening's discussion.

Part of the plan was to allow the aliens to begin the meeting. It would always be possible to change the subject of discussion if necessary.

Domrain said, "We have been studying the news reports of the reactions to our arrival. We are somewhat surprised at the global hostility."

Pirogov asked, "Have you never experienced such a reaction before when visiting a world that has had no previous contact with another race?"

"We have experienced somewhat similar reactions. But never such outspoken hatred."

"Perhaps," Sir Adrian said, "I can explain. The reaction you mention is a fear reaction."

"Fear? But we have made no threats."

"Your presence on Earth is a threat, Domrain. You have not made clear to the people of Earth your reason for coming here. And in the absence of any explanation, they conclude that you Morotans—a vastly more powerful race than we—must intend us harm."

Tisonor said quickly, "But we explained at once that we came to cement ties of friendship between Morota and Earth!"

"Friendship," Sir Adrian replied, "is an abstract concept. We're interested in concrete details."

It was a cue. Brewster put in, "Yes. We'd like to know specifically how you intend to 'cement ties of friendship' with us."

"This is hastiness indeed," Khuriel remarked. "We would have come to this matter in time."

"We're a hasty race," Brewster said. "We move quickly, and we have little patience. When your lifespan is seventy or eighty, instead of seven or eight hundred, you tend to avoid delay in all matters."

Domrain said, "There is truth in what you say. We are greatly troubled by the unfriendly reception we have received—not from your government, to be sure, but from the people. For this reason I have decided to speak to the people of Earth tonight after this meeting is concluded."

"And what will you say?" Morris demanded.

"I will tell them how we of Morota have watched over Earth for centuries, waiting for you to reach a level at which we might negotiate. I will tell them that the time has come now for Morota and Earth to join in harmonious union, two mighty civilizations."

It rang false to Brewster. Domrain seemed to be treating Morota and Earth as equals, which they emphatically were not. Not when one planet had an interstellar space drive and the other had barely managed to reach its nearest neighbor worlds.

He said, "You still fail to be specific, Domrain. What does this 'harmonious union' consist of?"

The alien emitted something that might have been a sigh of resignation. "You force us on to a point in our discussions we would rather have saved for a later meeting, Dr. Brewster. These matters should be discussed when we know each other better—when we are aware of each other's traits and habits."

Pradyot Raman said, "It is impossible to hold back the essential points now, Domrain. We must know immediately why you Morotans have come to Earth, and what you hope to gain by our friendship."

"Gain?" Khuriel asked. "Why, one gains friendship by friendship—friendship for its own sake. Is this not worth while?"

The aliens were hedging, Brewster thought, in hopes that their ninety minutes would run out before anything definite had been said. Apparently the aliens had a rigid plan to follow, and the Earth negotiators were upsetting their psychological timetable by demanding specific points so early in the game.

Lefebvre cleared his throat and said, "Friendship for its own sake is highly virtuous, good sirs.

But we feel there is some more pragmatic reason underlying your visit. Is it asking too much to wish to know what it is?"

"Very well," Domrain said with a trace of bitterness in his booming voice. "You compel us to —how is the expression?—place our cards on the table right now."

"We do," Vankovich said. Several of the Earth delegates exchanged smiles.

Domrain shut his steely eyes for a moment and passed his spidery hands over his face. Then he said, "There are many races in the galaxy. Some, like we of Morota, are benevolently inclined. Others are not so virtuous. In this latter category falls the race that calls itself the Zugloorans. They are a reptilian race, cold-blooded and not mammalian as we are. They are vicious, utterly without morals and without honor. They are the sworn enemies of civilization.

"For more than eight thousand of your years, we of Morota have fought to keep the Zugloorans from overwhelming civilization. The battle has had its tides. Zugloor has conquered hundreds of worlds, and we have reconquered many of them, several times over. But you of Earth are in no danger from this conflict. The galaxy is huge, and

the sphere of battle is hundreds of thousands of light-years away. Even the Zugloorans do not dare to spread themselves too thin.

"It is our belief that some day, however, the Zugloorans will strive to extend their evil empire into this sector of the galaxy. Probably this will not happen for many thousands of years—they are amply occupied in the present battle area now. But we of Morota wish to be prepared. Briefly, we have come to you for this reason: we wish to establish on Earth an outpost, a detector base from which we can observe the movements of the Zugloorans toward this part of the galaxy. In return for this trifling concession, we will undertake to defend your world from Zuglooran conquest should it ever threaten. This is why we are here. To swear brotherhood with you of Earth, and to ensure your safety."

There was silence for a long moment after Domrain had finished. At length Sir Adrian said, in a choked voice, "Fantastic! A battle raging across space, trillions of miles from Earth . . . unbelievable!"

It *was* unbelievable, Brewster thought. Domrain had been right; the idea had been sprung too soon. The people of Earth would be stunned to learn that their world was only an insignificant

pawn light-years away from the real battle zone —if they believed this story at all.

And the Morotans wanted a sort of mutual defense treaty. Earth to allow them to establish a warning base, and in return to be defended by the Morotans in case of Zuglooran attack.

"I don't understand one thing," Brewster said almost before he realized he was speaking out loud. "If all you wanted was an outpost in this solar system, why didn't you go ahead and build one on Pluto? We'd never know the difference, anyway."

Domrain shook his head. "We do not believe in such actions. Your ships reach as far as Mars now. Before many years have gone by, you will reach Pluto. How would you react then, if you discovered that a Morotan military base had been established in your solar system without your knowledge?"

"We are ethical beings," Tisonor added. "We maintain those beliefs that set us above such creatures as the Zugloorans."

"For thousands of years we have waited for the civilization of Earth to develop to a level at which we could approach it," Khuriel said. "Had this system been uninhabited, we would have built our base without further delay. But since intelli-

gent life inhabited Earth, we waited until we could approach you."

"And now you want permission to set up this detector base here," Morris said. "What will this involve by way of cost to Earth?"

"Absolutely nothing except the grant of a few square miles of land. We will underwrite all construction costs. Your permission is all that is needed."

A thought sent prickles of apprehension racing up Brewster's back. It was a thought he did not care to voice at this session. *The Morotans want that base on Earth pretty bad. That much is obvious. But as a demonstration of good faith they take the trouble to ask our permission.*

Only—suppose we don't give them permission? Suppose we turn them down flat and say we don't want to get involved in any wars on the other side of the galaxy. What then? Will they shrug and pack up and go back to Morota empty-handed, or will they build their base anyway?

How much free choice do we really have in this matter?

But he said nothing. Too much had already been revealed in this session; now they had to go more slowly, sound the Morotans out, search for hidden traps in their pleasant-sounding speeches.

There was silence. Domrain said, "You are all obviously shaken by this revelation. You see now why we had planned a more circumspect approach? You forced us into bluntness, when we would have preferred to deal more gradually with this problem."

"Just what do you plan to say on that video broadcast tonight?" Brewster asked. "You aren't going to tell the world about the Zugloorans yet, are you?"

"No. We simply will stress our peaceful intentions. Your world must have time to accustom itself to our presence here before we can proceed with formal public announcement of our full intent."

Morris said, "Look here: you tell us it won't be for thousands of years yet before this Zuglooran bunch makes trouble for us. Yet you want to set up a base right away. Why should we get involved before it's necessary?"

"Preparedness is important," Domrain said. "But we have rushed along too fast. Our purpose is not entirely military. We propose to help the people of Earth by sharing with them our more advanced technology."

Brewster thought, *I wonder why they're so anxious.*

"A technical-aid program, you mean," Sir Adrian Cross said.

"Correct."

The clock on the wall gave the time as nearly nine. The session had raced along, leaping from point to point with frantic haste. Now the time was almost over.

Domrain said, "We must adjourn now. Tomorrow night we will discuss more fully the extent of the relationship we of Morota wish to establish with Earth. It is our hope that my video talk tonight will serve to dispel the hysteric fear which has sprung up among the people of Earth."

The hand reached nine. The session was over.

Chasin appeared once again to collect the tape and help the delegates find their way back to the limousines. Tonight it was Sir Adrian's turn to report to the President. Brewster realized Sir Adrian had a lot of talking to do; tonight's session had been highly productive.

Brewster stood for a moment in the cool October night, looking upward. The moon was full, and the sky was speckled with stars. A raging battle, millennia old, was being fought out there in the stars. And now Earth, hardly begun on its own conquest of space, was suddenly asked to become,

in effect, a satellite of one of the contending powers.

A grave decision faced Earth. The Morotans, with their promise of bountiful aid, desperately wanted a foothold in the Solar System. . . .

Desperately? Brewster smiled at the thought. If he could be sure of that . . . but he might be reading an emotion that wasn't there. How urgent was this deal to the aliens, really? They wanted it. They wanted it very much. But he had to learn more about their true feelings on the subject before he could guess at the consequences of refusing.

CHAPTER VIII

An hour later he was looking at Domrain again. The delegates had gathered in one of the hotel lounges to watch the Morotan's talk, on video. By now the group was somewhat larger, thanks to a few arrivals on the late intercontinental rockets. Raman's wife had come from India—a handsome young woman with the characteristic dignified beauty of her people. Chang's wife was there, too, quiet in the corner, a lovely girl, and next to her was Sir Adrian's wife, Lady Cross—a woman in her late forties, poised and elegant.

Senator Morris' wife had flown in from California, too; she was younger than Morris—no more than thirty or thirty-five—and she had a forceful, pushy manner about her that was not much different from Morris' own. Completing the group was Mme. Linhares, an attractive and

heavily tanned Latin American. Tanya Pirogov and Mari Brewster, old friends by now, sat together; Tanya's English was limited, but she could get along well enough in a simple conversation.

Domrain addressed the video audience for about half an hour. The cameras remained focused almost squarely on the alien's face. Brewster wondered how the hundreds of millions of viewers were reacting to the sight of the Morotan in color, live.

He spoke simply and straightforwardly, phrasing his statements with a good command of English. (As was customary on a world-wide video hookup, an interpreter's voice replaced Domrain's in non-English-speaking countries.) He told of how sorry he was that the coming of the Morotans had provoked unrest and discomfort, and of how anxious he was to assure the world that Morota intended only the most peaceful of relationships with Earth. He said nothing about the Zugloorans or about the proposed Morotan military outpost to be set up on Earth; it was dangerous to let the public have too much jarring information too fast. Domrain painted a glowing picture of a time when Earth had totally entered into the community of worlds, when travel between stars was a commonplace for Earthmen,

when aliens of all descriptions would be greeted as friends by Earth.

It was a good speech. Brewster and the other viewers in the hotel lounge were moved by Domrain's passionate sincerity, his apparently genuine anxiety over Earth's unhappiness, his deep desire to end mistrust between Earth and the Morotans.

The speech would make its intended effect, Brewster predicted. It was bound to win over large numbers of the people who had feared the aliens.

Sir Adrian, who had gone to the White House to report to the President after the evening's conference with the Morotans, arrived at the hotel a few minutes before the end of Domrain's speech. Brewster murmured to him, "How did the President react to the idea of the Zugloorans?"

"He seemed worried. He doesn't know whether or not to trust the Morotans."

"My feeling exactly."

"Nor is he sure whether it's wise to get ourselves involved in this galactic war," Sir Adrian went on, in a low voice.

"I'm not sure it is myself," Brewster said. "But I wonder—do we have any choice?"

It was a good question, but it didn't have any

good answers. After Domrain's speech was over, somebody got up and switched the video set to another channel. Dancing girls appeared, one long line of hoofers stretching out to an electronic infinity. Somebody else said, "We might as well shut it off," and Lefebvre elbowed out of the pneumochair in the corner and jabbed the cut-switch.

There wasn't much anyone could say about anything. Sixteen people from various parts of one small world sat faced with the knowledge that their world was a dust-mote in the galaxy, that inconceivable forces struggled back and forth across the blazing suns and had contended with each other since long before Cheops raised his pyramid in Gizeh.

After a while the group began to break up; it was past eleven, and they began drifting off to their separate rooms. Brewster and Mari remained a while, talking with Pirogov and Tanya of unimportant things having nothing to do with the fate of Earth, and when that vein of chatter ran dry there was nothing else left to do but go to bed.

Mari had spent the day fixing up their room. She had brought down several suitcases of clothing, including another suit for Brewster—he was

grateful for that—and the room looked infinitely more pleasant than it had the night before, when he had occupied it alone.

Mari said, "Jeff, I have a funny feeling about your alien—Domrain. I know how you talk about intuition—but still, I'm worried."

He managed a playful grin. "What dire dangers do you intuit?"

"I don't know. But this business of a galactic war, and another race that's so terribly evil . . . it doesn't seem convincing, somehow."

"You aren't the only one who thinks that, honey. But what can we do? Put the aliens through a lie-detector test? They tell us what they tell us. We have to accept it."

"But suppose they're lying? Suppose *they're* the aggressors, and the—the Zugloorans are on the right side in this war? Should we plunge into this thing without knowing? Should we let them build their base here without even knowing what kind of beings the others are?"

Brewster took her hand. "That's a good point, honey, but I'd have thought your intuition would go a little further. How do we know there *are* such things as Zugloorans in the first place? We have only our visitors' unsupported words for it."

"Do you think it's all a complete fraud then?"

He shook his head. "I dare not make any such conclusions without further evidence. All I can do is suspect—because there's good reason for it —that our would-be friends haven't told us more than some part-truths."

"And some part-lies?"

"We'll have to accept the existence of the Zugloorans, and the struggle between them and the Morotans, on a provisional basis. But let's say that the Morotans aren't lying—that they're telling us the truth *as they themselves believe it.* They could still be mistaken about the 'innate evil' of the Zugloorans."

He took her hand. "But you see our situation? How can we reach the Zugloorans? How can we check up on them ourselves? We can't even get as far as Pluto. It isn't just a matter of dropping them a note asking them to stop in for diplomatic talks."

"Then we shouldn't have anything to do with the Morotans," Mari said firmly. "We have no business helping any side in this war until we know all the issues at stake, Jeff."

Brewster nodded tiredly. "I'm right with you on that, darling. But look—suppose we go talking that way to the Morotans? Suppose we tell them we don't want any part of their war, that

they should get packing right away. You think they'll listen? All they have to do is send out some ships armed with Morotan superweapons and *make* us give in."

He rose and walked to the window. Nudging the control, he unsealed the blinkers and looked out at the star-flecked sky. So many unanswered questions, he thought. Man wasn't ready for the stars yet. Not yet.

Mari said, "Why did this have to happen to us now, Jeff? Man was just beginning to work out his problems. We weren't prepared to take on new ones like these yet. Another hundred years, maybe, with the whole Solar System colonized, Earth unified under one government . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Asking why would do no good now. The obstinate fact remained that the Morotans *had* come, bringing the complex thread of galactic warfare to a civilization that had hardly even begun to think on the planetary scale yet.

He closed the window again with a brusque slap of his hand. "We can't settle the problems of the universe by kicking them around in here, honey. Let's go to bed."

The newspapers the next morning were encouraging. It seemed Domrain's speech had made

a good impression; much of the violent emotional hostility toward the aliens had died down, and people all over the world were taking a more realistic approach toward the presence of the Morotans.

There was also an interesting front-page item about the Callisto expedition. It seemed that the United Nations Space Authority had developed a secret high-power fuel which was being tested for the first time in this expedition. It had been a successful test. The expedition, only one day out into space, was already nearly to the orbit of Mars, and would reach Callisto five or six times as fast as it would have had conventional fuels been used.

At any other time, thought Brewster, this would be a monumental bit of headline news. After all, if the new fuel proved safe, Mars and Venus would be only two or three days away by ship, instead of—as now—nearly two weeks. More important, it would now be possible to outfit an expedition to distant Pluto, farthest outpost of the Solar System.

But yet the news seemed to be eclipsed by the Morotans. Who cared if we could now reach Pluto five times as fast, if the Morotans had ships that could cross the Solar System between two winks of an eyelash? Nobody seemed to realize that

Morota had an incalculable head-start in space travel. Nobody seemed to care about that.

The meeting with the aliens that evening was inconclusive. Domrain and his two fellow Morotans repeated much of what they had said the night before; they also remarked that they were greatly cheered by the lessening of tension on Earth.

"After all," Domrain said, "it was not our intention to bring unrest to Earth."

Negotiations progressed about three inches toward the ultimate goal. The heads of state—President Macintyre, Secretary-General Koskela, Premier Nekrasov—had held an emergency meeting earlier in the day. They had authorized the negotiators to make no statements—either positive or negative—about the establishment of the Morotan base, but merely find out how much the Morotans wanted and how much they were prepared to give.

Khuriel made clear that no more than a few square miles of Terran territory would be needed. "You would not have to sacrifice anything. The area we would want can be in the Antarctic zone, which is uninhabited. We will make ourselves responsible for clearing the ice and building the base."

"This would mean total Morotan sovereignty over the base, then?" Sir Adrian asked. "No Earthmen would be permitted entry?"

"Not necessarily. You would be allowed to observe our activities. We are merely *borrowing* the land, not taking permanent possession of it."

"And in the event of a Zuglooran attack," Senator Morris wanted to know, "what sort of aid could we count on from you?"

"We will dispatch one planetary-size defensive force to Earth at the first sign of hostilities."

"This means troops will be quartered on Earth until the Zugloorans arrive?"

"This would be necessary, of course."

"In other words," Morris persisted, "in case of attack you would turn Earth into a Morotan military camp."

Domrain looked troubled. "The words you choose are not precisely what we have in mind. Please remember that you would be under attack by the deadliest foes of civilization. Naturally, conditions will be severe. But without our help you would undoubtedly be conquered overnight."

Brewster said, "You mentioned technical aid to Earth. Would you amplify that?"

scale program of assistance for worlds not so for-

"Of course," Tisonor said. "Morota has a full-

tunate as herself. Your cooperation in the matter of the base would make you eligible to receive this aid."

"Which consists of what?" Pirogov asked.

"Making you aware of those technological advances which we have made, and offering assistance to you in reaching our level of accomplishment."

Quietly Raman said, "You would give us the interstellar spacedrive, too?"

Domrain said, in slightly startled tones, "Not right away. Our practice is never to give a race a tool it cannot handle."

"And you feel we couldn't handle interstellar travel?"

"Not immediately," the Morotan said apologetically. "A race that has not known space travel more than half a century is not ready for the stars."

"But we would be given other help, though?" Lefebvre asked.

"Tell us concrete examples," Chang added.

"Medical help. Assistance in perfecting the use of thermonuclear power sources. Weather control. The things we can offer you are all of value to you—and possession of them would not

upset the balance of your civilization. Premature interstellar travel might."

By the close of the meeting, the Earthmen had a clear idea of the general picture. The Morotans were offering what amounted to a substantial technological bribe for the acquisition of some useless land in Antarctica. Also, in event of a Zuglooran attack, they would undertake to defend otherwise helpless Earth.

And all they wanted in return was the right to build a base from which they could detect the movements of the Zugloorans.

It sounded like a good bargain for Earth, Brewster thought. *Too* good. Though the Morotans seemed outwardly calm and self-possessed, it was obvious that they were fearfully eager to have Earth come into the battle on their side.

If only we had some inkling of what the Zugloorans were like, Brewster thought. *How can we decide which side is right when we haven't seen the other side at all?*

The next day was Saturday, and negotiators and aliens both were given the weekend off. The Morotans explained that they wanted to spend Saturday and Sunday studying facets of Terran culture. The nine Earthmen were glad of the chance to relax.

Cars were placed at their disposal, and they drove into the nearby country—always with a Unsecfor bodyguard not far behind. Jeff Brewster and his wife spent most of Saturday with the Pirogovs. They tried to forget matters of cosmic importance, just have a good time.

But it wasn't easy. The shadow of the Morotans seemed to lie across the world now. Conversation kept coming back to the same topic, expressing fears, doubts, hopes . . .

The newspapers reflected the uncertainty. President Macintyre had made a speech Friday night, telling the world about the Zugloorans, and explaining how the UN was considering an alliance with the Morotans. Perhaps, Brewster thought, it had been unwise to make public the news—but on the other hand, possibly it was a good idea to treat the public fairly and let them know what was going on.

Nobody seemed to hate the Morotans any more. Particularly in the United States, the feeling was spreading that they were our friends, almost our big brothers, come from the distant stars to help us along the road to planetary maturity. Very few people seemed to be asking the question that tormented Jeff Brewster: *how do we know that*

the Morotans are trustworthy and the Zugloorans evil?

Sunday's paper contained a new and exciting story. The Callisto expedition had made a triumphant landing on Jupiter's moon early Sunday morning. It had covered the huge distance in a mere four days—an astonishing feat. It was too soon for any detailed report from them, but it was expected that the first close-up photos of mighty Jupiter would be on their way back to Earth soon.

Sunday departed, and Monday came. Another meeting with the Morotans was scheduled for half-past seven Monday evening.

The Earthmen held their usual morning conference and decided to stall for time again; about all they could do was wait and see, hoping that the Morotans would tell them more. At the moment no one knew what the outcome of the talks would be; the Morotans *seemed* sincere, but Brewster was not the only one to doubt the wisdom of getting involved in a pact with a galactic power. Earth was still very much a small-time planet, hard as it was to face that humiliating fact.

Monday passed slowly. At about five, Brewster and Mari were dressing for dinner when the room phone rang. Mari answered.

"It's for you, dear. Colonel Chasin."

Brewster took the phone from her. Chasin sounded agitated. He said, "Dr. Brewster, how soon can you be ready to leave the hotel?"

"I'm almost dressed now. What's the matter?"

"There's an important conference at the White House in fifteen minutes. The entire negotiating team has to be there. We'll stop by to pick you up at ten past five."

Brewster frowned. "All right. What's going on, though? Can you give me a hint?"

"I wish I could," Chasin said. "But I can't. This is *strictly* top secret. I don't even know what's going on myself!"

CHAPTER IX

It was the topmost of top-level meetings. Not only President Macintyre was there—but also the two other most important men in the world, Premier Nekrasov of the Russian Federated Republic and Secretary-General Koskela of the United Nations.

They looked like three worried men. Very worried.

Nekrasov was the oldest of the trio—nearly seventy, a veteran of years in the Russian underground that had finally overthrown Communism in 1965. He was a small, almost gnomish man, with the brilliant eyes of a dynamic leader. Secretary-General Koskela was a rangy Finn, currently in his sixth year as presiding officer of the world governing organization—tall and dark, in his late forties. All three, Nekrasov, Koskela, Mac-

intyre, had a grimness about them that set an immediate tone for the meeting.

Nine chairs had been set out. Brewster took one, and Pirogov drew out the one next to his. They waited. A moment later, President Macintyre said, "I'm sorry to have disturbed your dinner plans, gentlemen. But something of great importance has come up."

Brewster fidgeted impatiently. The President went on, "As you know, the Callisto expedition made a safe landing at three A.M. Washington time yesterday morning. Since then we've received hourly bulletins from them on their progress in establishing living quarters there. At two P.M. this afternoon we received the following message from Commander Donovan on Callisto."

Macintyre unfolded a slip of yellow paper and read: " 'HAVE FOUND EVIDENCE ALIEN LIFE VISITING CALLISTO STOP DEFINITELY NOT SAME RACE AS VISITED MARS-VENUS STOP EVIDENCE INDICATES RECENT VISIT POSSIBLY LAST FEW WEEKS OR MONTHS END RELEASE.' We got this at two P.M.," Macintyre repeated. It came in over the telegraph pickups. At half-past three we got a more detailed report, via radio, along with some wirephotos."

He moistened his lips. "I won't read the full report to you. Briefly, it says that the Callisto explorers stumbled across signs of a recent camp not far from their landing-place. They found implements of one kind or another, refuse, written material. The language of the written finds bore no resemblance to the language on the Martian and Venus relics, which we now know were left ages ago by Morotans. At four-ten another message arrived by wire. I'll read it. 'FOUND BODY OF ALIEN BEING BURIED IN SNOW STOP LOOKS LIKE TWO-LEGGED LIZARD SIZE OF A MAN STOP MEDICAL REPORT SAYS DEAD TWO TO THREE WEEKS END RELEASE.'

Macintyre looked up. "A different race—a dead reptile-like being . . ."

"The Zugloorans," Brewster said immediately.

"So we believe," said Secretary-General Koskela in a crisp voice.

The nine negotiators exchanged startled glances; a low hubbub of conversation began, dying away quickly. The President said, "Dr. Brewster's guess may be correct. We have no description of the Zugloorans other than the fact that they are reptilian—but we can reasonably assume that the beings who visited Callisto and buried a

member of their party there several weeks ago were indeed Zugloorans."

"And if they were on Callisto no more than a few weeks ago," said Sr. Adrian, "then obviously they must be still somewhere in the Solar System . . ."

"Possibly hiding out on Pluto and waiting for the Morotans to leave earth," Brewster suggested.

"We ought to notify the Morotans right away!" said Senator Morris. "This may be the advance scouts for the Zuglooran invasion."

President Macintyre held up his hand for quiet. In a weary voice he said, "We've considered all these things. We feel fairly sure that these new aliens are the Zugloorans of whom our current visitors have spoken. We also believe they are still in the Solar System, possibly even still on Callisto. One small party of Earthmen can't search an entire world, even a miniature world like Callisto."

"But," Premier Nekrasov said in his thick English, "we do not lean toward informing the Morotans immediately of this new development."

Brewster came sharply to attention. "That's definitely the best policy. If they *are* the Zugloorans . . ."

"If they are," Morris broke in, "we ought to let the Morotans know right away. What happens if the Zugloorans carry out a sneak attack on Earth because we haven't notified . . ."

Again President Macintyre held up his hand. "I assure you we've given these points ample contemplation."

Koskela said, "We have listened to the tapes of your interviews with the Morotans. Only on Domrain's say-so do we know that the Zugloorans are hostile. We feel it would be rash to condemn the Zugloorans without knowing anything about them. We will wait. Perhaps they will come to Earth and state their side of the case. But we will not inform the Morotans of their presence in the Solar System."

"Is this to be our official policy?" Linhares asked.

"It is," President Macintyre said. "We felt it best to let you people know how the situation stood. But we don't want any hints given to the Morotans about the new turn of events. Is that agreed?"

One by one, the negotiators nodded. Brewster heard Morris mutter something inaudible.

"No word of what you have learned tonight is to be repeated outside this room," the President

warned. "We'll keep you informed about any later news from Callisto. And now, with apologies again for having interrupted your day . . ."

"What was *that* all about?" Mari wanted to know, when Brewster returned to the hotel.

He shook his head. "Can't even hint. Top-drawer classified."

"It must be, if you can't even tell *me*," she pouted. But Brewster knew the pout was in good humor. Mari respected the importance of his position; she also knew he believed in keeping confidential matters confidential.

He felt a current of annoyance. This view of the cosmic chessgame with Earth as pawn was hampering other possible outlooks. But if it *were* correct, then concealing from the Morotans the fact that the Zugloorans were in the neighborhood could be very dangerous. The reason for the decision was clear enough, however; from that viewpoint, informing the Morotans would virtually put Earth on the Morotan side in the galactic conflict, without so much as a chance to consider Zuglooran claims.

But there was an underlying wrongness in the whole viewpoint. Earth did not have to be a pawn in the cosmic game—and the entire approach of

the Morotans suggested that Earth was far more important. They should be told the facts.

He was pondering over this at dinner in the restaurant, when a thought struck him, and brought a smile. He didn't have to worry about the Morotans not being told. He chuckled, just in time to coincide with something witty that Mme. Linhares, who sat at their table, was saying.

The brighter mood stayed with him as, after dinner, he kissed Mari goodbye and was herded into a limousine to be taken to the Morotans. The time had come to resume the negotiations after the weekend lapse. But now things were changed. Now the "dread Zugloorans" were not hypothetical beings but creatures who had been on Callisto recently and might still be camped somewhere on one of Earth's neighboring worlds. Creatures who lived and breathed and who left refuse and who—in one case, at least—had died far from their home.

Creatures who might not be evil and destructive, as the Morotans claimed they were.

As Brewster took his seat near the end of the long conference table, he thought, *If Domrain and his friends are half as smart as I think they are, it should take them about two seconds to*

figure out that something big has happened. Just one look at most of our faces and you can tell we're holding something back.

An air of crackling tension was in the room. For a moment the only sound that could be heard was the steady, insistent humming of the tape-recorder on the table. Then Domrain said, with deceptive mildness, "We hope you have spent a pleasant and enjoyable weekend. Our time was passed very instructively."

Again a moment of silence. Brewster said, "Perhaps we should recap our first two discussions. Over the weekend we've relaxed; now we have to get back to business." He paused. "You offer to give us certain technological aids in return for the grant of land to build a detector base to watch for the Zugloorans. You also offer to defend us in case of Zuglooran attack. Correct me if I'm wrong in any statements."

"These are indeed the terms we have offered," Domrain said.

Brewster ran his tongue quickly over his lips. "You realize that our acceptance of these terms would mean a virtual declaration of war by Earth against the Zugloorans, of course."

Domrain chuckled. "A declaration of war? Dr. Brewster, an undeclared war already exists—be-

tween Zugloor and the rest of the universe! Any step you might take would only serve to protect yourselves against these marauding criminals."

"But how," Pradyot Raman asked softly, "can we judge which side of the conflict to take? You say Zugloor is evil and Morota good—but how do *we* know this to be a fact?"

Domrain smiled ironically. It occurred to Brewster that the Morotans were getting better and better at imitating Earthlike gestures and expressions, since their first stiff conferences. No doubt these three Morotans were highly trained for the purpose of winning the friendship of other races.

Domrain said, "What better proof of our intentions do you need than the fact that we came to you in peace bearing gifts? The way of Morota is peace; that of Zugloor, conquest. It has been this way for thousands of your years."

"Can you *prove* that to us?" Pirogov demanded.

Khuriel answered, saying, "We hardly thought it was necessary. We thought you people of Earth were advanced enough to grasp our essentially benevolent nature at once. We are not accustomed to being accused of—of not telling the truth."

Like hell you aren't, Brewster thought. His semantic training provided an immediate analysis

of Khuriel's statement. Boiled down and translated, the alien was saying, *We were confident that primitive barbarians like you Earthmen would take our word for truth simply because we're so superior to you.*

Domrain stretched forth his many-fingered hands and said, "Friends! Friends! Why has there been this sudden change in your attitude? You seem hostile today, suspicious, cautious." The alien's strange eyes seemed to pierce deep to the core of each of the Earthmen. "What has happened to alter your views? Why are you hiding something from us?"

"We are hiding nothing," Brewster said easily.

"But I see by your manner that you hold back some vital information," Domrain said.

"Not so," Brewster answered. "And we are not accustomed to having *our* truthfulness doubted, either."

It was a telling thrust. Domrain seemed to give ground. "Very well. We seem to have reached an impasse, then. As matters stand, our offer to you remains—full protection against the Zuglooran raiders, and intensive technological aid."

"I'd like to ask a question," Morris said. Brewster turned to stare at his fellow American del-

egate. There was something strange in Morris' voice as he spoke. "Suppose there *were* a sudden Zuglooran attack. How soon could Morota defend us?"

"If there were an attack tomorrow," Tisonor said, "we could do nothing. But you are not in danger of this. Our most recent intelligence reports show us that Zugloor has no plans of invading this region of space for many years to come. This would give us ample time to build up a defense network before any attack."

Brewster noticed that the senator's face was pale and sweat-flecked. Clearly, the Californian was undergoing a severe inner crisis. Morris swept the entire group with his eyes, and Brewster grinned slightly when their glances met.

"No—attack—is expected," Morris said haltingly. "Not for hundreds of years."

"In all probability."

"I see," Morris said, subsiding.

Domrain said, "I call on you, men of Earth, to safeguard future generations. We have come to you in peace. We ask to be allowed to protect you."

"Will there be any Morotan influence on internal Terran affairs?" Vankovich wanted to know.

"We are protecting—not establishing a protectorate. Your government remains in your own hands."

"May we ask," Tisonor said, "whether the heads of your governments have shown any favorable reaction to our proposition?"

"They reserve comment," Sir Adrian said. "They are studying the matter."

"Very well," Domrain replied. "There is no hurry. It is not as if Zuglooran attack were imminent. We are enjoying our stay on Earth, and we have no desire to hurry you into so serious an alliance."

The clock was running out. Brewster said, "We intend to give your offer every consideration. Naturally we won't rush into anything without thinking about its implications for a while."

"Naturally," Domrain agreed smoothly. "That is a wise attitude."

On that relatively harmonious note, the third session ended. Brewster was deep in thought as he left the conference room—but not so deep that he didn't notice something the others had overlooked.

How long could this keep up? The initial points had been covered. Earth knew what the Morotans wanted, and the only thing to be settled was

whether Earth would accept. But Earth did not intend to decide until the Zugloorans had arrived to state their case.

Provided the Zugloorans *had* a case; the possibility remained that these beings might be exactly what the Morotans claimed they were—but this was a better risk than entering an alliance blindly.

The limousines were waiting. Linhares, Raman, and Chang entered the first one. Pirogov, Sir Adrian, and Lefebvre got into the second. That left Vankovich and Brewster to ride in the third car. No one had noticed, yet, that Morris was missing.

Brewster's assumption had been right, then. But he remembered now how often the senator had spoken of beating a march on the Russians, of somehow speaking to the aliens in private and obtaining special concessions for the United States.

He'd had time enough to do the essential. But Morris mustn't be allowed to use it as the basis of any private deals.

"If you'll get in here, Dr. Brewster . . ."

"Just a minute, Colonel. I have to tend to something inside."

Without waiting to see Chasin's reaction,

Brewster turned and raced up the steps of the Virginia farmhouse once again. Behind him, he heard Chasin say, "Dr. Brewster—come back!" And then— "Has anyone seen Senator Morris? Senator Morris?"

Astonished guards watched as Brewster raced down the long creaky hallway of the old building toward the meeting room. They had orders, but Brewster was a delegate, and they weren't sure how to react as he came running past them. By the time they had realized he should have been stopped, he was past them and almost to the end of the hall.

He flung open the door of the conference room. Morris was at the table, leaning forward, talking with great intensity to Domrain, Khuriel, and Tisonor. As the door opened, Morris turned and stared up guiltily at the advancing Brewster.

For an instant their eyes locked, then guards were pouring into the room, surrounding Brewster and Morris.

In the midst of the confusion, Brewster heard Domrain's level voice clearly.

"Senator Morris has given us some very interesting information. Why did you not tell us that the Zugloorans were approaching?"

CHAPTER X

The next few hours were hours in which Earth's fate swung dizzyingly between the opposing poles of Morotan and Zuglooran. Hours in which time seemed to stand still while newer and deadlier conflicts rose into being with each new moment.

The hours began at five minutes past nine, Eastern Standard Time. Colonel Chasin was looking around the room a bit wildly and saying, "What's been going on in here? Why did you dash back in, Brewster? And why was Morris in here?"

"Morris just spilled top-secret information to the Morotans," Brewster said. "Get in touch with the President at once. Tell him we have to have a top-level meeting right away."

Domrain had come out from behind the table and now stood looking down on Brewster, Mor-

ris, Chasin, and the Unsecfor guards. The Morotan towered over all of them. His bulk was oppressive.

"We must indeed have a conference," Domrain rumbled. "Earth has concealed a matter of vital importance from us. We are now in a state of emergency."

Chasin looked about ready to collapse. Brewster pitied the Unsecfor man, who knew so little of what was actually going on but who knew enough to realize that an entire framework of negotiation had just collapsed with a loud crash. Chasin's face was livid with strain.

"Brewster, what's he talking about?"

Brewster said, "It's a matter for the President. Let me talk to him at once. And keep an eye on Morris."

Flanked by two Unsecfor men, Brewster strode through the hallway to the alcove where the telephone hookup was. He waited while a man in uniform put through the call to the White House. He took the receiver finally and heard the President's voice, tired and with the harshness of overwork: "Brewster, what's happened there?"

"It's Morris, Mr. Macintyre. He—he sneaked back to see the Morotans and told them about the Zuglooran camp on Callisto."

There was an instant of shocked silence. "You're joking!"

"No. I'm not."

"I don't believe it," the President murmured. "Not Morris . . ." Then he seemed to pull himself together. "How did the Morotans react?"

"I don't know. Domrain seemed to be pretty excited about it."

"Not surprising. Look here, Brewster: you stay right there at the farm. I'll round up Koskela and Nekrasov and bring them out, too. We'll have to thrash this thing out with the aliens tonight—and do it on top level. Let me talk to Chasin."

"Yes, sir."

Brewster put down the phone and said to the Unsecfor man, "He wants to talk to the Colonel."

One of the men guarded the phone while the other returned with Brewster to the conference room. The aliens were engaged in a discussion with each other; Morris stood by himself in the corner like a small boy in disgrace at school, while Chasin sat at one of the conference-table chairs with his hands over his face.

Brewster nudged the officer. "President wants to talk to you."

"Thanks," Chasin said.

Brewster took a seat at the table, not looking

either at the aliens or at Morris. Moments later Chasin returned, bringing with him the other seven delegates who had been waiting, puzzled, in the limousines outside. "The President will be here immediately," Chasin said.

Immediately turned out to be thirty nerve-wrenching minutes. The President arrived, and with him were the UN Secretary-General and the Russian Premier. They entered the room guarded by a glittering convoy of Unsecfor police, but no sooner were they in the room than President Macintyre turned and dismissed the guards.

"Wait outside," he said.

The doors were closed.

The three top-level men took seats facing the aliens, with Brewster and his companions sitting to the side. Macintyre said, "Senator Morris, I understand you've revealed certain information to the Morotans."

"That's right, Mr. President."

"You were under orders not to discuss these matters, Senator. You did not have the authority to reveal them. Can you account for your action?"

Morris nibbled at his lip. "Sir, the Morotans are our only defense against these other aliens. We *had* to tell them. We couldn't hide it."

"Senator Morris is correct," Domrain interposed.

Macintyre shot an angry glance at the alien and said, "For the moment please consider this an internal affair only." To Morris: "Your actions are treasonable, Senator. No matter what your motives, you had no right to expose classified information during negotiations. You'll be dealt with later."

He returned his gaze to Domrain. "What has Senator Morris told you?"

Domrain said, "Simply that a space expedition to the moon of this system's largest world has discovered traces of recent Zuglooran visits."

The President nodded sharply. "Very well. What Senator Morris said is substantially correct."

"There has been no contact between Earthman and Zuglooran?" Tisonor asked.

"None so far," the President said, stressing the last two words. "May I ask how you intend to act now that you know your rivals are present in this Solar System?"

Domrain chuckled. "The path of sanity is the only one to choose, is it not?"

"Which means?"

"Which means that you must sign a treaty of mutual alliance with us *now*—tonight—before the Zuglooran threat becomes more serious."

In the instant of silence that followed, Brewster saw the President's face grow even more grim. He realized he was eavesdropping on one of the most tense moments of human history.

President Macintyre said sharply, "Although we are the heads of state, we cannot sign agreements without consulting our governing bodies. No agreement is going to be reached tonight."

Casually Domrain said, "It takes time to notify the forces on Morota that an enemy attack threatens. We can bring our forces to your defense—but not without a treaty."

"And time is short," Khuriel added. "Possibly the Zuglooran forces are mobilizing for a mass attack on the Earth tomorrow—or tonight."

"In that case," Secretary-General Koskela said, "your help would be too late, wouldn't it?"

"In seven weeks Morotan ships could be here. But first the treaty must be signed."

Brewster, from his position on the sidelines, felt sweat dripping down his body, and realized the tough position the President must be in. It was the old squeeze play. The Morotans, learning by accident of the nearness of their age-old rivals,

were trying to sew Earth up in a pact before there was any chance to discuss matters—and a possible treaty—with Zugloor.

Slowly, Premier Nekrasov said, "You appear to be rushing us into making our decision, eh?"

"We have Earth's welfare first in our minds," Domrain declared.

"I'm certain of that," the Russian replied, with only a trace of sarcasm. "But is there such need for hurry? We found indications of only a very few Zugloorans in our system. Quite possibly the course of wisdom would be to wait and see—to find out whether they are in truth the demonic beings you claim they are."

The implication made Domrain's dark-red face purple with anger and dismay. "We cannot stand by and allow you to submit yourselves to Zugloo-ran subversion."

"You *cannot* stand by?" Secretary-General Koskela asked. "What will you do, then?"

"In the name of galactic security we request you to enter immediately into a defense pact with us. Earth is too important a planet to be allowed to be destroyed by the Zugloorans."

"We have told you," the President said. "We cannot enter into treaties ourselves."

"Then speak to your parliaments!" Domrain

said, raising his voice for the first time. "The treaty must be signed. Or else . . ."

Or else.

The alien left the sentence unfinished, but the meaning was easily understood by everyone in the room. The Morotans were showing their true stripe, now. They wanted Earth in their sphere of influence badly—for what reason, Brewster was still not certain. They came in peace, bearing bribes, wheedling and cajoling.

But now the hated Zugloorans were virtually on the threshold of Earth, and the entire situation was radically altered so far as the Morotans were concerned. Now they were panicky lest Earth accidentally veer to the wrong side. The treaty had to be signed. Right now. Immediately. Or else . . .

"You seem to imply a threat," the President said carefully. "It makes your position odd. You say you came here to win our friendship, to defend us—and now you tell us that if we refuse your help, we may lose your friendship as well."

Domrain looked confused. Evidently he was not expecting this kind of resistance from the Earthmen.

He said, "I meant no threat. Simply that for the good of Earth you should allow us to make provi-

sions for your defense. Obviously a Zuglooran attack threatens . . ."

"Or perhaps a Zuglooran diplomatic mission," Premier Nekrasov said.

"The Zugloorans' only diplomacy is that of the sword!" Domrain shouted.

"We shall see," the President said.

"Your meaning?" Tisonor asked.

"The Zugloorans are in the vicinity of Earth. Perhaps they will land here soon. We will talk to them, if they wish talk. Then we will consider our allies on a more rational basis. Either Morota or Zugloor—or perhaps neither, if so we decide."

The Morotans seemed panicky at the thought of losing Earth. "We offer technological aid and friendship," Khuriel said. "Zugloor can offer you only death—death, and destruction!"

"We are a people that likes to take risks," President Macintyre said in a cold voice. "If the Zugloorans come in blood, we'll meet them and defend ourselves. We're not exactly defenseless, on Earth. But we refuse to be stampeded into an alliance with Morota until we have first hand evidence of the threat posed by Zugloor."

Again there was a moment of silence. Brewster's watch gave the time as twenty minutes to

ten. Half an hour ago, a smoothly diplomatic session was in progress; now a bitter argument raged in the same room.

All because of Senator Morris' eagerness to buy the friendship of Morota with a little bootlegged information—and because of Jeffrey Brewster's willingness to let him pass along the information. He remembered a line from T. S. Eliot: "*. . . the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*" Morris' motives were wrong; Brewster hoped his own were right—but it had been the right deed nevertheless. It had brought out into the open what Brewster had only been able to infer, and could not prove without corroboration from the Morotans themselves.

They were indeed desperate in their desire for an alliance with Earth.

But if Morris was going to be punished for his act, then Brewster knew that he'd have to confess his own complicity. He had been sure that the senator would try to reveal the prohibited information, and had not only taken no steps to prevent it, but had encouraged the Californian. That glance they had exchanged had spoken many words.

Domrain said, "We are deeply disturbed by

the course of events this evening. We had hoped you Earthmen were rational beings."

"We are," the President said. "A little primitive, perhaps, but we'll outgrow that in time."

"You do not see that we wish only to aid you," Domrain continued mournfully. "You regard us with the suspicion of the barbarian, rather than with the open friendliness of the truly civilized being."

Brewster bristled. Once again the aliens were choosing oily words with high emotional referents, attacking the Earthmen on deep levels and trying to make it seem that any but a child could see the self-evident virtue of the Morotans.

But the President was not misled. He said, "Those are stinging words, Domrain—but they miss their mark. We *are* civilized, and therefore suspicious. Until it's proved, we choose to regard the Zugloorans as potential friends, rather than the enemies you claim they are. We will not leap prematurely into any kind of military alliance with Morota."

"Are we to take this as a flat rejection of our proposals?"

"If you wish. But you would be ill advised to do so. We ask you to give us time to decide be-

tween Morota and Zugloor, not to hurry us to our choice."

The three aliens rose. Standing, they were an impressive trio, massive, hulking, by far the biggest beings in the room. It was calculated for effect, too, Brewster realized.

Domrain said, "You will have all the time you wish. But if we choose not to defend Earth later, it will be on your shoulders."

Brewster nearly laughed out loud at the childishness of this new approach. *They're going off in a huff,* he thought. *Now they're telling us not to come running back to them for help if the Zugloorans turn out to be meanies after all.*

But they're bluffing. They have to be—because Earth obviously is tremendously important in their scheme of things.

Koskela, Nekrasov, and the President likewise rose, facing the aliens across the table. The Morotans seemed twice the size of the Terran trio, and yet there was a certain craggy strength about the three Earthmen that gave them a stature greater than their actual physical dimensions.

In a calm voice President Macintyre said, "It grieves me that this session should end this way. But let me state Earth's point of view once more: we are willing to enter into pacts of friendship

with all the races of the galaxy. Until we know otherwise, we will regard both Morota and Zugloor as our friends. And in the event of conflict —well, we can defend ourselves."

"No single planet has ever stood before Zugllooran might," Khuriel said.

"Perhaps we'll be the first," the President said.

Brewster felt a powerful surge of admiration for the President's boldness. He wasn't letting Earth be stampeded. On Tom Macintyre's shoulders rode the tough decision of whether Earth should continue a safe existence as a Morotan satellite—or go to possible destruction at the hands of Zugloor as a free world.

He was choosing freedom. The Morotans were angry, but they recognized the strength of their adversary and knew there was nothing they could do.

"If this i· ɔur final decision," Domrain began, "Then I mu . . ."

He was interrupted by a sudden knock at the door.

"Who is it?" President Macintyre asked.

"Colonel Chasin."

"Admitted," Macintyre said.

"Chasin entered. He was carrying a sealed envelope. Placing it in front of the President, he

said, "This came through just a moment before, from Unsecfor offices in Moscow. It's addressed to Mr. Nekrasov, Mr. Koskela, and yourself."

Frowning, Macintyre glanced at the others in the room and slit the envelope. He drew out a slip of paper, unfolded it, read it silently. After a moment his eyes widened; he handed the paper to Koskela, who read it, coughed in surprise, and passed it along the table to Premier Nekrasov.

The three heads of state exchanged glances and nodded at each other. Then the President looked up, and he was grinning in a curious way, not entirely from amusement.

He said, "The message we've just received is a very timely one, gentlemen. It's from Unsecfor offices in Russia. It seems a spaceship has just landed outside of Moscow. It's a Zuglooran spaceship—carrying three ambassadors who speak perfect Russian and would like immediate meetings to discuss a treaty of friendship between Earth and the Confederacy of Zugloor."

CHAPTER XI

Aliens in Moscow and aliens in Washington; by midnight, the startling news had been round the world and back again. The Zugloorans had landed. They, too, wanted peace with Earth. And they were sworn enemies of the Morotans.

Jeff Brewster was not the only troubled man on Earth that night. He had plenty of company. Hardly a person alive but did not realize that Earth was in hot water. Earth was a relatively insignificant planet, not quite out of the stage of national states yet. And it was facing two vastly older, vastly stronger super-powers, each one wanting Earth's exclusive friendship. In a tug-of-war like that, the planet in the middle could easily get torn apart. Too easily.

And a new factor began to enter the situation toward dawn of that fateful day. For now the

people of the Eastern Hemisphere had one set of aliens, the West another. A faint division was forming, threatening to split the world united so few years ago. The people of the East seemed to favor the Zugloorans. The people of the West leaned equally toward the Morotans. Tragedy lurked in the background, as old geographical rivalries threatened to spring from their dormant states.

The morning papers had the first photos of the Zugloorans. They were truly repellent-looking beings, though not so unearthly as the Morotans. They were simply giant lizards who walked upright on thick-thighed hind legs and balanced on long tapering tails. "The Dinosaur People," they were dubbed immediately by the popular press. They stood about the height of a man, perhaps a little taller, and they wore few articles of clothing—just a kind of ornamental shield round the middle, and a sort of collar of bright metal draping their throats. Other than that, they were naked.

Their skins were coarsely grained in the fashion of most reptiles, and they were a dark green in color. But it was their eyes that both fascinated and repelled Brewster as he studied the photos in the morning papers. They were cold eyes, big, beady, intelligent. The eyes of a lizard—but the

eyes of a *thinking* lizard. There was no mistaking the keen intelligence that glittered in those cold eyes.

Because of their appearance, they immediately had an advantage and a disadvantage over the Morotans. The Morotans looked like nothing that had ever been seen on Earth before; though their big bodies were roughly humanoid in outline, the details were unearthly. On the other hand, the Zugloorans were cut to a familiar mold, that of the Earthly reptile. But the reptile's reputation was not one of fair play and friendship. The snake, the crocodile, the lizard—these were not animals one normally felt affection for. And so few people could feel deep desire for friendship with either the reptilian Zugloorans or the indescribably alien Morotans.

The first press releases about the Zugloorans stated that they were being quartered outside of Moscow at the expense of the Russian government, and that negotiations with them would shortly begin. Premier Nekrasov had abruptly departed for his own country via a midnight rocket, as soon as news of the landing had come.

It was also announced that the Zugloorans had stopped off on Callisto shortly before their arrival on Earth. It seemed a member of their party

had died, and they paused in mid-journey to bury him.

Much similar material came out of Moscow that first day. The only thing that did *not* come out was information on who was going to do the negotiating with the Zugloorans, and when, and whether or not an international committee of negotiators would be used again. Reading between the lines in Premier Nekrasov's statement, Brewster found the definite implication that the Russians planned to talk to the newly arrived beings themselves, bringing the rest of the world in on the talks only at some later time. It was an ominous implication. The only way to deal with these new aliens was on a global basis, as before.

Early the next morning, President Macintyre sent for him.

Brewster reported to the White House at half-past nine. The President looked grave, and it occurred to Brewster that each time he had seen him, Macintyre had seemed to show deeper lines of strain.

"Sit down, Dr. Brewster. Jeff, if it's okay."

"Of course, sir."

Brewster faced the President and waited to hear what was coming. President Macintyre ran his powerful hands through his hair a few times

before he spoke. "Jeff, you've seen the morning papers, haven't you? Read up all about the Zugloorans."

Brewster nodded.

The President said, "We were in a nasty spot yesterday, but it's nastier today. Domrain and his friends now say they don't want to talk to us —that they're making preparations to leave Earth. Abandon it to the wolves, you might say."

"They're lying," Brewster said flatly. "They don't intend to leave. It's a psychological stunt intended to make us support them."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've analyzed their talk semantically, and I keep getting the same undertone: that they want Earth on their side something bad. Believe me, they won't let us go to the Zugloorans that easily."

"Maybe you're right." The President frowned. "Unfortunately, there's a new wrinkle on this. Nekrasov seems to be treating the Zugloorans as private property of Russia. Both Secretary-General Koskela and I tried to find out when he intended to let a United Nations team of negotiators come in there to talk to them, and the only answers he gave were evasive ones."

"You don't think Russia plans some maneuver with the Zugloorans, do you?"

Macintyre shrugged. "Jeff, at this stage I don't know what to think. Maybe Nekrasov thinks he's a Khrushchev, maybe not. But here's the problem: we have the Morotans and the Russians have the Zugloorans. Somehow we all have to get together. Until we know what the Zugloorans are like, we don't know how to answer the Morotans. And vice versa. And so—I want you to visit Domrain for us, Jeff."

"But I thought you said they didn't want to speak to us any more."

"So they said. But you go to them yourself, alone, unofficially, so to speak. Level with them, sound them out. Make it clear to them that we still want to be friendly with them. Meantime, Koskela and I will have to fly to Russia and try to persuade Nekrasov to loosen up a little. If Russia pulls anything like entering into a private treaty with the Zugloorans, we'll have no choice but to ally ourselves with Morota—and that means the end of peace on Earth forever. Maybe even the end of Earth, if Morota and Zugloor start scrapping."

He shook his head bitterly. "And last week I

thought the budget was my big headache! Who could have figured we'd find ourselves in No Man's Land between a couple of galactic big guns?"

Brewster stood up. "When do you want me to see the Morotans, sir?"

"Right away, if you can manage it."

Brewster nodded. "I can manage it."

He returned to the hotel in the official Unsecfor car and rode upstairs to see Mari. She was pale and tired-looking; like the others in the group, she had been up almost half the night listening to the news as it came pouring in.

"Well? Can you tell me the news?" she asked.

"I suppose so. The President wants me to go have a talk with the Morotans. Face to face, on the level. No phony diplomatic fencing this time."

"How about the Zugloorans?"

Brewster shrugged. "Premier Nekrasov is keeping them bottled up in Russia. It looks like the old Iron Curtain coming down again. The President and Koskela are flying to Russia to find out what the score is."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, thinking about the President's remark that last week his only problem had been the budget. *And before*

last Wednesday, Brewster thought, *I was just another college professor. Now here I am juggling with the destiny of worlds.*

Well, someone had to do the Job, and his country had picked Jeff Brewster. No use wishing that the whole thing had never happened to him. It *had* happened.

Besides—if he could have had the say, would he have picked someone else? Would he have missed it? He thought of the fellow who was writing that thesis to refute the one which had put him in his present position. *If I win,* he thought, *Lane Clinton loses—if I lose, everybody loses.*

But I don't think I'm going to lose . . .

"There's a car waiting downstairs to take me out to the aliens, Mari. I hope to be back by lunchtime."

This time the aliens were not waiting in the conference room in neatly arranged chairs, with a tape-recorder set up in front of them. This time the aliens were somewhere in the big farmhouse, closed off from mankind, and they weren't expecting company.

He opened the front door, looking back and nodding at the Unsecfor men who guarded the building. Then he went inside.

"Domrain? Khuriel? Tisonor?"

There was no immediate reply. Brewster advanced down the long hall and called out their names again. Finally, from upstairs, a rumbling alien voice replied, "We hear you. Who is there?"

"Jeff Brewster."

"We do not want to talk to you. Go away."

"Why won't you talk to me? Don't be foolish! You might be interested in what I have to say."

A few moments passed. Then an alien came down the stairs and stood facing Brewster. With a shock, the Earthman realized he had no way of knowing which of the Morotans this was. He had always identified them simply by the fact that Domrain sat in the center at the conference table, with Khuriel at his left and Tisonor at his right. But this was not the conference room now. And so far as Brewster knew this might be any one of the three. He had not seen enough of the alien beings to be able to tell one from another, yet.

Whichever one he was, the Morotan said, "Well? What do you want?"

"Just to sit and talk to you. Do you mind?"

"It seems to us that further contact with Earthmen is fruitless."

"You're wrong there. Who are you—Domrain?"

"Tisonor. But come upstairs, and we can talk there if you insist on talking."

The ponderous alien turned and led Brewster up the creaking nineteenth-century stairs of the farmhouse to the room where the aliens were quartered. Domrain and Khuriel sat cross-legged on the floor; there were no beds in sight, and evidently the Morotans did not use them. Tisonor lowered himself to the floor in a quick smooth motion, and, somewhat hesitantly, Brewster squatted facing the circle of aliens.

"You wish to speak," Tisonor rumbled. "Speak, then."

"Let me say at first that I'm not here as an official negotiator or anything like that. I'm simply an Earthman who wants to have a few words with you." He moistened his dry lips. "I'm going to speak frankly to you, and I want you to speak just as frankly to me."

"We will meet truth with truth," said one of the aliens, and Brewster recognized the dry tone as belonging to Domrain.

Brewster said, "One thing I want to settle is the matter of how belligerent the Zugloorans are. You as much as told us they were cosmic villains who killed first and asked questions later. But now they've shown up on Earth, and from what

little we know about them, we can see they aren't as vicious as you made them out to be. You lied to us about them, in other words. Why?"

Domrain shifted uneasily and tugged at the fleshy protuberances on his face. "We can admit now that we exaggerated somewhat. But we had our reasons."

"That's what I want to find out."

"The Zugloorans are not perhaps as totally evil as we painted them for you. But they are the age-old rivals of our people. Their network of worlds stretches across the galaxy even as the Morotan Empire does—and they continually raid our territory, harass our ships, kidnap our citizens."

"Is there actual fighting between the Zugloorans and the Morotan Empire?"

"Only skirmishes at present," Domrain admitted. "It is a period of relative peace. But there has been fierce fighting in the past, and there will be again in the future."

Brewster stared closely at the aliens. He probed their words, searching for the tiny errors of phrasing that he could recognize as the outward manifestations of lies. But right now, Domrain seemed to be speaking candidly.

"So you tried to trick us into thinking the Zug-

loorans were monsters, when in reality they're simply a rival empire you don't like. Could it be that you just wanted to snare us and turn us into another world of the Morotan Empire, maybe?"

"We had no designs on the sovereignty of Earth," Domrain said with some dignity. "We exaggerated the menace of Zugloor, and now we see it was a mistake. But our intention always was merely to enter into friendly relations with Earth, not to absorb it into our empire."

I almost think he's telling the truth, Brewster thought in some surprise. "Suppose we signed a treaty with Zugloor now. How would we stand in relation to Morota?"

"You would become our enemies, just as every other world allied to Zugloor is an enemy of Morota."

Brewster nodded. He was beginning to see the picture a little more clearly, now. And it confirmed his earlier suspicions of why Morota had been in such a rush to sign Earth into its fold before the representatives of Zugloor arrived.

"What are your plans now?" he asked.

"We have none. Now we must wait to see how Earth and the Zugloorans decide. If you sign a treaty with Zugloor, we would leave Earth at once."

"And if we don't?"

"We are always hopeful of establishing a friendly bond between Morota and Earth."

"Can I tell my President that? That you're still willing to negotiate, provided Zugloor doesn't get a foothold on Earth?"

It was the opening Domrain had been waiting for. He said effusively, "It would be our greatest joy to enter into an agreement with Earth. We will not leave here just yet. If you think the possibility remains, we will stay."

"And," Tisonor added, "perhaps we will arrange some of the gifts we bring to Earth as a public demonstration."

"A good idea," Khuriel chimed in. "We will show Earth what we have to offer—freely, without secrecy. We apologize for our earlier tactics. And we will leave it up to Earth to decide whether they choose our way or the way of Zugloor."

Brewster decided it was time to end the interview on that note. He rose. "I'll inform President Macintyre of your words right away."

"We hope harmony will prevail," Domrain said.

"I hope so, too."

The aliens did not rise as he departed. They remained squatting there on the floor like grotesque Buddhas. Brewster made his way down-

stairs, revolving in his mind the things he had just learned.

The interview had gone far better than he had dared expect. The Morotans realized their earlier mistake, and were changing their tactics. Instead of the negative approach of the defense pact, and instead of the even worse blunder of threatening, the Morotans now hoped to buy Terran friendship with technological gifts. Weather control, longer life, freedom from mental disease—these would be offered if Earth swung toward the Morotan sphere.

It would be interesting to see what the Zugloorans had to say, how they would react. Would they, too, offer bribes?

It was like a giant auction now.

Downstairs, he phoned the White House on the special hookup established there, and after going through a battery of secretaries and underlings he was connected to the President himself. Concisely, Brewster summed up the results of his talk with the Morotans. The President listened attentively, asking a question now and then.

When Brewster had finished, the President said, "I'm glad to hear all this, Jeff. It takes a little of the tension off."

"But we still don't know how the Zugloorans stand on this business."

"We may know soon. We finally got word from Moscow that negotiations are beginning between the Russians and the Zugloorans. Premier Nekrasov has invited us to shift the sphere of activities to Moscow. Your friend Pirogov left on the morning rocket, and if Nekrasov told us the truth, he's talking to the Zugloorans right now."

"Pirogov?"

"Right. The Russians chose him to be the first negotiator. But there's another rocket leaving in two hours. Can you be ready by that time?"

"You mean I'll be going to Russia?"

"That's right," the President replied.

CHAPTER XII

Although intercontinental rockets had been in regular commercial passenger use for better than fifteen years, Brewster still subconsciously distrusted them. It was understandable that anyone would be uneasy about the prospect of traveling from Washington to Moscow in slightly less than forty minutes.

The Moscow-bound entourage arrived at Washington Rocket Field at half-past one that afternoon, half an hour before departure time of the second Moscow rocket of the day. It was just in time for them to witness the departure of the 1:30 London rocket. It was a 200-passenger ship, a graceful tapering metal cone standing on its tail in the middle of the bare field. The retractable elevator on which its passengers had entered was

being drawn away; the rocket stood alone on its launching pad.

At the stroke of one-thirty a mighty roar thundered over the field; the London rocket emitted a furious blast of flame and smoke, hovered for a few seconds not far above the ground, and then shot frenziedly skyward, becoming rapidly a tiny dark needle against the glowing blue backdrop of the sky. An instant after that, it was gone. Jeff Brewster realized with a start that ten minutes before they were to board their own rocket, the one that had just departed would have landed successfully in London—three thousand miles in twenty minutes.

With the London rocket gone, attention shifted to the Moscow one, which was being readied on Blasting Field Two, off to the left. Right now it was surrounded by an army of technicians and ground-men engaged in the final count-down that assured a perfect flight. Brewster watched interestedly. Statistics claimed that the intercontinental rockets were safer, in terms of accidents per volume carried, than the conventional short-range jetliners. But, of course, statistics were never too comforting.

At quarter to two the little trucks showed up at the passenger building to pick up the voyagers

and transport them across the field to the rocket. Brewster kissed Mari goodbye—the wives were not making this trip—and clambered into a truck next to Pradyot Raman.

The official Government entourage consisted of more than forty people. Morris was being left behind, and Vankovich and Pirogov were already in Moscow; but the other six members of the original negotiating team were in the party. Along with them came President Macintyre, Secretary-General Koskela, and the usual host of interpreters, Secret Service men, and administrative assistants.

In his breast pocket Brewster carried his passport—strictly for identification, now, since the United Nations Convention of 1975 allowed free travel between all countries of the world. He took the seat assigned to him, which was well-cushioned and swung in a kind of revolving gimbal that would keep him facing the same direction no matter what turns and twists the ship took, and waited for blastoff. His seat-partner was Chang Lee-hsiu.

They strapped down. Stewardesses circulated through the big ship, checking seat belts and offering last-minute cheer. At 2:00 P.M. sharp, a gong sounded loudly, the blastoff signal. Cushioned

as he was, Brewster felt the slight impact. The monster rocket lifted from the ground. Destination, Moscow. Arrival time, Blastoff plus Forty, which was 9:40 P.M. Moscow time.

The rocket had no windows for passengers, since there was nothing to see but the blankness of the upper atmosphere, and windows would only weaken the structural design. The ship roared upward through the stratosphere, hundreds of miles above the Earth, and curved in a giant arc down toward Moscow. Within, there was no sensation of movement, even though the rocket was exceeding a thousand miles an hour shortly after blastoff.

The intercontinental rockets had been developed for use in war—a war that, luckily, had never taken place. The big 200-passenger rockets were the slowest of all. It was possible for one of the smaller ships to make the same journey in less than half the time. The mail rockets did the Moscow-Washington trip in only fourteen minutes; but there were no passengers aboard the mail rockets.

Half an hour after blastoff came the instructions that wristwatches should be set ahead seven hours to conform to local time. The final leg of the journey was beginning. The rocket was

dipping down over the Russian Federated Republic. And, at precisely 9:40 P.M. Moscow time, it made its smooth landing on a windswept field outside the giant city.

Half an hour later Jeffrey Brewster had been installed in one of the new government-owned Moscow hotels built after the disastrous burning of the city during the 1965 revolution, and he was sipping at a shot of vodka poured for him by Alexei Pirogov.

"No, no, *no!*" Pirogov exclaimed. "You don't *sip* vodka! What's the use of sipping it? Here. Watch."

Pouring a drink for himself, Pirogov tipped back his head, tossed the fiery clear liquid down his throat, exhaled in satisfaction, and immediately gobbled a slice of the black bread on the tray nearby. "There," the young Russian physicist said. "Drain the glass and follow with food. There is no other way."

He poured himself a second drink and sent it after the first. Brewster, who much preferred to sip a Martini, had no choice but to imitate his friend and gulp the vodka down. Between mouthfuls of black bread, he said, "All right, now. While I'm still sober enough to think straight: tell me about the Zugloorans."

Pirogov looked grave. "There is little to tell. I spoke with them for an hour this morning. They are rather unsociable, as you might expect intelligent cold-blooded creatures to be."

"Did they tell you why they're here?"

Pirogov smiled wanly. "They did. If it will comfort you to know, they have come in order to protect us from the foul Morotans. They are very angry with themselves for having let Morota get its ambassadors to Earth ahead of theirs."

After a thoughtful moment Brewster poured himself a second drink. "And they want to sign a treaty, I take it."

"Of course. They offer technological aid and military defense in case of Morotan attack. Naturally, part of the deal is that we have nothing further to do with Morota, and send Domrain, Khuriel, and Tisonor off packing immediately—if not sooner."

Brewster grinned. "So it's the same deal from both of them. Each bunch hates the other's guts, and each wants exclusive friendship with Earth."

Pirogov nodded. "This seems to be the position."

"And how do we choose between them?"

"This I do not know," the Russian said in mel-

ancholy tones. "Neither race seems entirely virtuous to me—but neither is as despicable as the other claims."

"It's lucky for us that they both arrived at practically the same time. At least we can have a look at both of them before picking."

"It was not luck," Pirogov said. "Morota and Zugloor spy on each other constantly. One world found out the other was sending ambassadors to Earth, and immediately sent out their own."

"Which got the idea first?"

"The Morotans, I suspect. After all, they got here first. But I could be wrong. If . . ."

There was a knock at the door. Pirogov uncoiled himself lithely from the overstuffed chair he had been sitting in and went to see who was there. Brewster heard a brief and to him unintelligible exchange of words in Russian; then Pirogov returned and said, "The Zugloorans have agreed to a meeting now with all eight of us. There's a car waiting downstairs."

The Russians had quartered their alien visitors in a scientific building in the suburbs of Moscow, about fifteen minutes by car from Brewster's hotel. One by one, the eight negotiators filed into the room where the trio of Zugloorans

waited. Vankovich and Pirogov had seen the aliens before; for the other six, it was something of a shock.

The Zugloorans did not sit. They stood, leaning back, using their heavy tails as props. Their scaled bodies looked almost greasy in the bright light, and their beady eyes flickered rapidly down the length of the group, taking everyone in. Brewster sensed a tension in the air; these were less friendly creatures than the Morotans, stiffer, more formal. But that did not make them any less or more desirable as allies, he thought.

"We have agreed to submit to any questions you wish to ask us," said the left-hand alien when the group was seated. His voice was deep and cavernous, with a hint of reptilian sibilance.

There was a moment of silence, while each delegate paused to see if any other would speak. Finally Chang Lee-hsiu said, "How far is your world from Earth?"

"Ninety-eight thousand light-years," came the precise reply.

"Is the star visible from our observatories?"

"No."

"How long ago did you leave for Earth?" Pradyot Raman asked.

"Nine weeks."

"You stopped on Callisto," Brewster said. "How long ago was this?"

"Two weeks ago your time."

"And why did you stop there?"

"It was discovered that we had allowed the Morotans to reach Earth ahead of us. The Morotan ship had anchored itself in orbit round Earth while learning the chief languages of your world. We paused on Callisto to bury a member of our expedition who had destroyed himself when he realized we had permitted Morota to reach Earth before us."

"Hara-kiri," Sir Adrian muttered.

"Does this mean," Lefebvre wanted to know, "that if you fail in your mission to Earth you three will destroy yourselves as well?"

"Of course. Among the peoples of our empire, failure is a weakness that cannot be tolerated."

"Just what is your purpose in coming to Earth?" Linhares asked.

"To persuade Earth of its own free will to enter the Zuglooran Commonwealth of Worlds. This will entail no loss of sovereignty on the part of Earth. It will simply mean a pledge of friendship—and, in event of Morotan attack, the Zuglooran Commonwealth will undertake to defend

your world. We will also require certain territory for our use as a warning-base here."

It all sounded familiar, Brewster thought. The Zugloorans were crisp, brisk, businesslike, perhaps a trifle on the cold-blooded side; but that was natural enough, considering that physiologically they *were* cold-blooded. Essentially, they wanted the same things the Morotans had asked for. And they offered a great deal in exchange for mere friendship.

"Is your Commonwealth at war with Morota now?" Sir Adrian asked.

"Hostilities have been in force more than seven thousand years," the reptilian creature said. "At present there is little actual combat, but it is only a lull in the action."

That checked with what the Morotans had said, Brewster thought. The picture was emerging of two gigantic stellar empires, each contending for the right to claim Earth as an ally. It seemed a tremendous amount of fuss over one very small world.

"If," Brewster said, "we were to ally ourselves with the Morotans, would we automatically become enemies of Zugloor?"

"Yesss."

"There's no way we can maintain friendship with both empires?"

"Allies of Morota are enemies of Zugloor," the alien replied simply.

Although the interview continued some twenty minutes more, nothing further was learned. The situation was clear enough: both empires sought the friendship of Earth. Both offered a bounty of scientific advances and the added incentive of military defense.

Brewster, in his hotel room again, looked quizzically at Pirogov and said, "There's absolutely no way of choosing between them. We might just as well flip a coin: heads Morota, tails Zugloor."

Sir Adrian knocked and was admitted. The British diplomat nodded to Pirogov and said, "I've just come from a meeting of the high staff —Macintyre, Koskela, and Premier Nekrasov."

"So they're operating as a unit again?" Brewster asked.

"Oh, yes. I understand that Nekrasov has apologized for his so-called Iron Curtain tactics in refusing to let the West see the Zugloorans until Russia had interviewed them. He didn't realize his actions would kick up the fuss they did."

"Our leaders are not always aware of their errors," Pirogov said. "The Premier did not seem

to realize that the aliens were ambassadors to Earth and not to the Russian Federated Republic."

"He realizes that now, though," Sir Adrian said. "All he had to do was read the papers, with their talk of a new cold war over the aliens, and he knew he was wrong."

Brewster said, "What decision did they reach? Did they tell you?"

Sir Adrian turned his attention to the vodka bottle for a moment. When he had downed his drink, he made a wry face and said, "They seem pretty bewildered, if you ask me. Some of the tension's off right now—but all three of them know Earth's in a tight spot."

"If we pick one side, we're enemies of the other," Brewster said.

"What's more," Sir Adrian said, "the Morotans seem to have issued a kind of ultimatum this afternoon while we were leaving. They asked the United Nations to make an immediate decision between Morota and Zugloor, so they would know whether we were to be treated as friends or as enemies."

"Nice," Brewster said. "The pressure starts to mount again, then."

"When the Zugloorans find out, they'll coun-

ter with their own ultimatum," Pirogov said gloomily. He polished off the last of the contents of the vodka bottle with a quick gulp. "Some decision will have to be made."

Sir Adrian said, "I suggested an all-power conference in London immediately: the eight of us, the three big boys, the Morotans, and the Zugloorans. We'll all sit round one big table and try to reach a solution."

"How did they react?"

"Macintyre seems to be in favor of it. They're putting through a call to the Morotans in Washington to find out if they'll consent to talks with the Zugloorans."

"Has anyone approached the Zugloorans about it yet?"

Sir Adrian smiled curiously. "It's being done right now."

Pirogov shook his head. "It will never work. Those beings have hated each other for thousands of years. Do you think they will enter into a conference with each other now?"

"Yes," Sir Adrian said.

"You seem confident," Brewster remarked.

"I am. You see, I suggested a little trick which may help the aliens make up their minds."

"What do you mean?"

Sir Adrian's leathery cheeks widened in a warm grin. "I hinted that it might be a good idea to tell the Morotans that the Zugloorans had already accepted, and vice versa. Neither one is going to want to look stubborn in the eyes of all Earth—so they'll both give in."

Brewster chuckled appreciatively. "A triumph of diplomacy, Sir Adrian!"

"It makes no difference," said Pirogov gloomily. He was staring at the richly brocaded rug on the floor. His expression was black, morbid; right now he looked like a character out of Dostoievski, Brewster thought. "It makes no difference at all," Pirogov repeated. "Conference or no conference, on what grounds can we choose between these aliens?"

Brewster smiled suddenly. The time had come when they were ready for the solution. "Who says we have to choose between them?" he asked.

CHAPTER XIII

The next morning, word came from the three Morotans in Washington that they consented —reluctantly, for they thought the meeting was purposeless—but consented none the less to a round-table meeting of representatives from Earth and both galactic powers. The Zugloorans, having previously been informed of the Morotan acceptance, had also agreed to the meeting.

And so the Moscow visit was cut short. At noon that day, a London-bound rocket blasted off carrying all those who had come to Russia the day before to meet the Zugloorans, plus the Zugloorans themselves. Twenty minutes later, they had landed outside London; the time was 10:20 A.M., London time. At the landing port they were informed that the Morotans had arrived on the eastbound rocket thirty minutes earlier, and had

already been taken to the conference rooms at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster.

Just what the plan of the United Nations would be in the forthcoming conference, Jeff Brewster had no idea. But he had an idea of his own, and had been waiting for the right moment to propose it. He'd discussed it with Pirogov, and the Russian had agreed that it was worth trying.

He knew the risks. If he were wrong, his plan might bring about the immediate destruction of Earth. But no one doubted that the alternatives were any better in the long run.

The delegates rode through the outskirts of London to the Westminster Hotel where they would be staying. Brewster saw that London had changed very little in the last six years. He and Mari had come here on their honeymoon trip, back in 1983. They had had a grand time as tourists, taking in Big Ben and the Tower and the British Museum and all the other notable sights; they had seen the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace and had watched small boys sailing little boats in the Serpentine. As he looked back across those six years he encountered again a figure he had almost forgotten: the twenty-six-year-old Jeff Brewster of 1983, newly married, an instructor at Columbia, with no par-

ticular responsibilities in the world and nothing to do all summer long except travel and enjoy life.

Six years of hard work had followed that. He had gained his doctorate; he had written a book. The book had cost him uncountable hours of agonizing midnight work. But the book had been a success. It had won him his coveted professorship.

And it had led him into this strange jaunt from Washington to Moscow and now to London, with Earth's destiny locked in his grasp.

Riding down the old, narrow streets, with the car traveling on the wrong side of the road because the British obstinately clung to their traffic system in an otherwise right-hand-side-of-the-road world, he allowed himself a moment of relaxation. Ease up, he thought. Let some of the tension drain away. With luck, he'd be home soon, teaching his classes, being near Mari again. No more interstellar diplomacy, he thought. It was something to look forward to after this week of strain and doubt.

They reached the hotel and the delegates were assigned rooms. As usual, the eight negotiators were given rooms near each other. The President and his entourage were quartered elsewhere;

Secretary-General Koskela and the Russian Premier likewise had special arrangements. Where the aliens were, Brewster did not know.

But he unpacked as soon as he could and left his room. Pirogov's room was just across the hall. He opened the Russian's door without knocking and said, "I'm going down to see Macintyre now."

"So soon?"

"I want to get it done before the conference starts. For all I know, they're planning to do just what I'm going to suggest—but I want to make sure."

Pirogov rose. "I'd better go down to see Nekrasov, then."

"Good idea. Meet you back here later."

"Right."

Separating, they headed for different floors. The directory said that the President had been settled on the ninth floor; Brewster rode down in the elevator—the *lift,* he corrected himself, telling himself he had to speak English English now and not American—and got off at nine.

Two assistant press secretaries were guarding the entrance to President Macintyre's suite. They scowled at Brewster as if telling him he had better go away, but he glared at them and said, "I'd like to see the President, please."

"He's busy."

"Tell him Dr. Jeffrey Brewster wants to see him. Tell him I have something important to discuss."

"Everybody who comes through this way has something important to discuss. Otherwise they wouldn't want to see the President."

"Look," Brewster said. "Are you going to stand back out of my way, or . . . ?"

"The President gave orders that . . ."

"The President will see me," Brewster snapped loudly, a little surprised at his own boldness.

The press secretaries seemed to give ground a little. One of them mumbled something that sounded like, "Just a moment and I'll check inside." He ducked within the double doors of the suite, and a moment or two later returned, glowering sullenly, with the information that Brewster could proceed within.

"Thanks for the favors," Brewster said. He didn't lose his temper often, but a sure way to anger him was to block his way with officious underlings.

Secret Service men met him within the doorway, guided him to the President's rooms, and surreptitiously frisked him for dangerous weapons before he was allowed to go in. Brewster

sighed; no doubt a President deserved all these precautions. He wondered how a down-to-Earth man like Tom Macintyre felt about being treated like a very rare and easily damageable antique.

Tired though he was, President Macintyre managed a cheerful grin and a firm handshake as Brewster entered the Presidential suite. He showed Brewster to a chair, sat down facing him, smiled. "What's on your mind, Jeff?"

"The conference that's being held. I have a couple of ideas I want to talk over."

Macintyre grinned. "You're being retained as my consultant in psychosociology, you know. If you have any ideas, don't keep 'em to yourself."

"I was just wondering how the United Nations plans to deal with the aliens at the conference."

The grin left the President's face. In a solemn voice he said, "I wish we knew. Confidentially, Jeff, about all we can hope is that they'll both go away and leave us alone."

"Not so easy, though, is it?"

"No. Nekrasov thinks we ought to take up the offer of the Zugloorans. Koskela wants to sign up in an alliance with Morota. But neither of them are really sure that's what we ought to do."

"And you?"

"Me?" The President's voice was tired. "I just

want the peace of Earth, Jeff. Right now I don't care how we get it. But I don't want us to be pulled apart in an interstellar conflict that we don't understand or have any interest in."

"You know what the obvious thing to do is, then," Brewster said.

"Nothing looks obvious right now."

Brewster leaned forward eagerly. "Send them *both* packing, sir! Tell them we don't want any part of their alliances! Tell Morota to go back where it came from, and tell Zugloor the same thing."

"But how can we do that?"

"Because the aliens will make sure our will is respected! Sir, do you know why they're both so anxious to bundle us up in their confederacies? Why two giant empires are scrapping like small boys for the friendship of one little planet with three billion people on it? Is isn't just because they want to extend their empires. No, sir. It's because they're both afraid of us!"

"Afraid?"

"Scared stiff." Brewster locked his hands together. He felt confident of what he was saying, now. "Let me give you some interesting statistics. Civilization on Morota is about eighty-five thousand years old. It took them nearly a third of that

span to reach the stage we're at now—the stage of interplanetary flight. The figures are about the same for Zugloor."

"So?"

"Look at Earth's record. Civilization is hardly seven thousand years old, figuring from the first societies in the Nile Valley. Within seven thousand years, we've not only developed a complete technology, we're advanced enough to have spaceflight, nuclear power, the beginnings of a world government. Compare the ratios. Morota and Zugloor spent *thirty-five thousand* years each getting to the same place we reached in only *seven thousand* years. Project those figures into the future a little. If we continue to advance at five times the alien rate of progress, in another ten thousand years or less we're going to be where they are now! Only we'll have gotten there in a fifth the time it took them!"

The President looked bewildered. He smiled graciously and said, "All right, Jeff, talk about ten thousand years from now. But I can't worry about what happens in—uh—A.D. 11,989. I have to think about tomorrow."

"That's the mistake we've all been making, sir. The aliens have been taking the long view—projecting our past into the future. Maybe our rate

of progress is an accelerating function. Maybe we're going to catch up with Morota and Zugloor long before the year 11,989. Maybe in the next five hundred or a thousand years we'll be out there traveling between the stars, colonizing, setting up an empire that will outshine anything the Morotans and the Zugloorans have ever built! They see that. They've extended the probability-lines and they realize we're moving faster than they ever moved. And they're afraid of us. Deadly afraid. They're scared green."

"But if they fear us as a potential rival—why not destroy us now, while we're still relatively harmless? If what you say is true, the smartest thing to do is to wipe us out."

Brewster nodded. "You have to realize that Morota and Zugloor are at war. Have been, for eighty centuries. They despise each other. If there were only one empire in the galaxy, it would be a safe bet we'd be obliterated so fast we couldn't duck. But there are *two*."

"And they hold each other at arm's length, you mean?"

"Exactly! They cancel each other out! Morota doesn't dare attack us because it knows Zugloor will defend us, and similarly the other way round. Each one knows how strong we're going

to be some day. Both of them want to get in on the ground floor, form strong Earth-alien ties right now, so when the showdown comes between Morota and Zugloor we'll be on their side!"

Brewster moistened his dry lips and went on. "You see, I've worked it out psychosociologically. They're each *afraid* to try to destroy us. They don't know what may happen. They've never run up against a planet like Earth before—a planet where the inhabitants can go from horse-and-buggy transportation to spaceships in less than a hundred years. It takes the other races centuries to accomplish what we do in weeks and months. So the best thing is to give a flat no to both of them. Tell them, 'Sorry, but we'd rather go along at our own nice-enough rate of progress, without your help.' We don't have to worry about the defense we'll be losing. We won't be losing it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"All you have to do is imply to each of the races privately that some day we're going to end our galactic neutrality, and when that day comes we'll swing our influence to favor the race that's treated us best. You can bet neither one of them's going to risk an attack on us."

The President stared levelly at Brewster for a

moment. "What you say seems to make sense, Jeff. But what happens if you've guessed wrong? Suppose we turn them both down, and they decide that the safest thing for the peace of their empires is to join forces and wipe us out? We can't defend ourselves against *one* galactic empire, let alone both of them!"

"I don't think we need to worry about that. Psychosociologically speaking, what you're suggesting is about as likely as having the Earth slow up and begin moving backward in its orbit." He shook his head. "Those two empires have hated each other's guts for eight thousand years. I don't think they'll join forces to wipe us out. They wouldn't join forces for anything—not even for something like this, which would be to their great advantage."

"So you're betting on a standoff," the President said. "You claim that these aliens have projected Earth's future and see us as the next major power in the universe—a power so mighty that they're coming to seek alliance now, before we've hardly begun developing. And that if we send them both away empty-handed, they'll leave us in peace, canceling out each other's strength."

"That's my view, yes."

The President was silent for a moment. Then he

said, "I read your book, Jeff, and I was impressed with the way you could dig hidden meanings out of things. There were one or two examples you gave where I thought you had dug too deep, found things that weren't really there. For the good of Earth, I hope this isn't one of those times. I hope your guesses were right."

"You'll try what I've suggested?"

Macintyre shrugged. "I'll talk it over with Koskela and the Russian. But I think they'll agree. Neutrality is the only sane policy we dare follow, in this mixup. And your reasons are good ones." He chuckled in quiet amusement. "Imagine, worrying about what's going to happen in ten thousand years!"

"It worries the aliens, all right. We're too new to really know what ten thousand years is like. But to them it's not much more time than a few hundred is for us. In proportion to the length of our history, ten thousand years ago for them is around the time of the fall of Rome, I'd say."

"And if the Carthaginians had been quicker on the trigger, there never would have been any rise of Rome, let alone a fall," the President said. "If they had destroyed the infant Republic, instead of waiting until Rome was too strong for them . . ."

"They didn't have any choice. Neither do the Morotans and the Zugloorans. *They're* the ones who have to worry about the future. Tomorrow belongs to Earth, Mr. President. That's why these aliens are here. They know they can't stop us, so they want to make friends now."

"If you can't lick 'em, join 'em," Macintyre quoted. "Well, I hope you're right. Thanks for your advice, Jeff—Dr. Brewster, I mean. The talks begin tomorrow morning. I think the Morotans and our other, lizardy, friends are going to be in for a surprise."

Brewster returned to his room in a state of considerable elation.

"Well?" Pirogov asked.

"I told him all about it. He's willing to try it. What about Nekrasov?"

"Same. Those men are at their wits' end, Jeff." Pirogov grinned. "At this stage they're delighted to have some suggestions for a way out coming from their bright young advisers. They're all out of ideas themselves."

Brewster sat down on the edge of the bed and massaged his throat. He had done a lot of talking, and he had spoken fast and with urgency. Never in his classroom days had he ever needed to get a point across with such necessity.

But the President had understood. He had grasped the nature of the Morotan-Zuglooran fears: fears not for today, but for the Earth of tomorrow that would burst brilliantly out into the universe.

Eighty-five thousand years was a long time for a culture to survive. Galactically speaking, the Morotans and the Zugloorans were elderly races, entering the decline of their days. They were smart races, too. They could both see the bright new star glimmering on the horizon of the universe: Earth. That was why they were here. To win the friendship of Earth now, before Earth became really dangerous.

"You keep rubbing your throat," Pirogov pointed out.

"It's sore. I guess I talked too much."

"You, a teacher, getting a sore throat from talking? Pah! A product of the decadent bourgeois West, that's all you are! A spineless effete capitalist!"

"I guess you're right," Brewster admitted.

"But," Pirogov said, "we of the mysterious East have cures for such ailments!" The Russian rummaged in the closet, dragged out one of his suitcases, reached in, plucked something out. It was a bottle of vodka—the fame fiery Russian-

brewed brand Brewster had become acquainted with in Moscow.

"Behold, lackey of Wall Street!" Pirogov shouted exultantly. "The remedy for all ills! From the heartland of Mother Russia comes this precious fluid, a mere drop of which is guaranteed to soothe your raw throat and settle your digestion, aid your circulation and improve your virility. Give me those glasses, Jeff."

Grinning, Brewster handed two water-glasses to the Russian. Pirogov poured two generous helpings of vodka into them, corked the bottle, handed Brewster his drink. He contemplated the clear liquid for a moment.

"To George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Paul Bunyan, and Thomas Macintyre," Pirogov said, glass on high.

"To Alexander Nevsky, Boris Godunov, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and Vladimir Nekrasov," Brewster replied.

They laughed for an instant. Then glasses clinked, and were quickly drained.

CHAPTER XIV

According to Sir Adrian Cross, the room where the final conference would be held was six hundred years old. As an American, Jeff Brewster felt the normal tingle of antiquity. The giant world's fair—celebrating the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing in the New World—was still three years in the future; a room that was 600 years old was awesomely ancient.

And then he realized something, and chuckled at his own foolishness. What would six hundred years be to the aliens? Why, Domrain himself was older than this supposedly ancient room! And probably the Zugloorans, too, dated back to medieval times, though they had been sparing of such personal details. To a race that has endured almost ninety thousand years, a mere six

hundred is an instant, a flicker of passing days and nothing more.

The conference had been called for nine in the morning. Brewster slept badly; he was overtense, for one thing, and for another his metabolism was befuddled by the series of rapid shifts from one time-zone to another. Here in London, they were five hours ahead of Washington and New York, but two hours behind Moscow. And two nights ago he had slept in Washington, the night before in the Russian capital. Modern rocket transit could really snarl up a man's pattern of eating and sleeping.

He ate a light breakfast—he wasn't very hungry, for a number of good reasons—and adjourned to the conference room with Pirogov and Pradyot Raman. All of the United Nations negotiating team would be at the conference —except Morris, of course.

The conference room was heavily guarded; not surprising. When he entered, Brewster discovered that the really important figures in the drama scheduled to be played out here this morning were already on hand. At the back of the room sat the three men who guided the destinies of the greatest powers on Earth: President Macintyre of the United States, Premier

Nekrasov of Russia, and, between them and presiding, Veikko Koskela of Finland, Secretary-General of the United Nations and in a small way the chief administrator of all of Earth.

To the right as Brewster entered he saw the three Zugloorans standing behind the table, leaning back propped on their tails in their customary posture. And, far to the left, with the three Earthmen serving as buffers between, sat the Morotans, Domrain, Khuriel, and Tisonor, glowering sullenly across the room at their ancient galactic enemies.

The atmosphere of the room was so tense it seemed to crackle. As he took his seat, Brewster wondered whether Morotan and Zuglooran had ever sat at the same council table before. Certainly they did not enjoy being so close to each other. Hatred fairly jumped back and forth from one alien trio to the other. They made little attempt to conceal the loathing they felt.

Secretary-General Koskela opened the meeting with a few mild prefatory remarks to the effect that both Morota and Zugloor seemed to be interested in forming an alliance with Earth, and the purpose of this meeting was to reach some sort of settlement of the matter.

President Macintyre took the floor to summarize the various offers.

"Both Morota and Zugloor offer lavish technical aid for Earth. We of this committee have studied the documents presented to us, and we agree that both Zugloor and Morota offer us virtually an equal quantity and quality of assistance. Both Morota and Zugloor wish us to enter an alliance —each excluding the other. Both Zugloor and Morota would, in the case such an alliance were consummated, establish a detector base somewhere on Earth, and would defend us against attack by the other power if such attack should be forthcoming." The President glanced at both groups of aliens. "Correct me if I've made any errors in putting forth the basic propositions."

No one spoke. Continuing, Macintyre said, "We assume that alliance with one power will mean war with the other. Each power has assured us it could not tolerate a condition whereby we were allied to the other. Very well. We have reached our decision."

He turned to face the Morotans. "Ambassadors from Morota, be officially informed that the planet Earth, acting as one body, formally *accepts* your offer of a treaty of friendship and de-

fense, and will welcome all the benefits that accrue therefrom."

Brewster started—then smiled as he realized what was being done. The Zugloorans had begun to frame agitated protests; the three Morotans were grinning in smug satisfaction. Then the level, calm voice of President Macintyre was heard again, this time addressing the Zugloorans.

"Ambassadors from Zugloor, be officially informed that the planet Earth, acting as one body, formally accepts your offer of a treaty of friendship and defense, and will welcome all the benefits that accrue therefrom."

Instantly a hubbub arose. The Morotans were on their feet, shouting loudly in several languages; a ripple of comment passed through the eight negotiators, and the Zugloorans looked amazed.

"Impossible! Impossible!" Domrain roared. "Morota cannot enter into treaties with a world allied to Zugloor!"

"Nor can we of Zugloor tender friendship to a world loyal to—to the beings of Morota," hissed one of the Zugloorans bitterly.

Confusion prevailed. Both sets of aliens were pouring forth denunciations of each other, ac-

cusations of subterfuge, loud refusals to enter into treaties.

But President Macintyre dominated the situation. Rising, he said loudly, "You have heard our terms. Earth is not yet a galactic power—but even now, on the mere threshold of our expansion into the universe, we set forth the note which shall govern our policy: neutrality. We will meet Zugloor and Morota with equal friendship. We have no cause for enmity with either race. Will you join hands with us across this table and pledge eternal friendship?"

He extended his right hand to the nearest Morotan, his left to one of the Zugloorans. He waited, holding the pose, arms outstretched as if embracing the universe. But there was no immediate response from the aliens. If anything, they shrank back.

"You will not join hands with mine?"

"Never," Domrain said coldly.

"Nor I," a Zuglooran snapped.

President Macintyre did not appear disturbed by this blunt refusal. Without raising his voice, he said gently, "So be it. The offer of Earth has been refused."

"We still long for Earth's friendship," Dom-

rain said sullenly. "But not at the price of finding ourselves allied with Zugloor as well."

"There can be no such union," the Zuglooran returned. "The thought is almost obscene."

"As you wish," the President replied. "Earth, having offered you friendship on her own terms, now withdraws that offer. We shall yield neither to Morota nor Zugloor. We ask you to remove your ships from our soil instantly, and never to violate our neutrality again. As of this moment I proclaim Earth a sovereign world of the galaxy, free and independent, affiliated neither with Zugloor nor Morota. We are prepared to defend our independence to the death, if necessary."

There was a long moment of silence. Brewster watched the expressions on the faces of the aliens. They were quite human expressions, all things considered.

The Morotans and the Zugloorans both looked stunned, as if they had been expecting this sort of defiance all along but had never really believed it would come about. They were eyeing each other uneasily, with none of the fierce and dramatic hatred of a moment before, but with an uneasy wariness.

Morotan and Zuglooran were feeling each

other out, silently, here at the conference table. And they were discovering that they were beaten. A puny, inconsequential world called Earth had fought them to a standstill.

President Macintyre said, "If at any time in the future either Morota or Zugloor chooses to join us in friendship, we will consider their words. But we do not intend to link ourselves in a war-like alliance against people with whom we have no quarrel. If these things are understood, we ask you to depart from Earth at once."

"We have no intentions of violating the rights of a neutral world," Domrain muttered. "We will leave as soon as the ambassadors from the Commonwealth of Zugloor have declared their intention."

"Our intent is peaceful," the Zuglooran retorted. "We are prepared to leave at once."

"Then do so," Domrain replied. "And we will do likewise."

With icy dignity, Domrain, Khuriel, and Tisonor rose from their seats, marched past the delegates, and out the door of the conference room. Several seconds later, the Zugloorans, glowering angrily and flicking their beady eyes from side to side in great agitation, followed the Morotans from the room. Brewster wondered if

the unfortunate Zugloorans would follow the demands of their cultural code and commit suicide now. After all, they had failed—even though not completely.

The third Zuglooran left and the door shut. Instantly the atmosphere of chill tension dissolved. President Macintyre sank into his seat, grinned, pulled a big red-and-black checked handkerchief from his pocket and began to mop sweat from his forehead. Premier Nekrasov reached across the intervening form of Koskela and slapped the President lustily on the back in rough congratulations.

"It worked!" Macintyre exulted. "We did it!"

"A brilliant performance, Mr. President," Sir Adrian said. "A masterwork of diplomacy!"

Macintyre pointed across the table to Jeffrey Brewster. "There's the architect of our galactic policy! There's the man who told me how to handle those aliens!"

Brewster flushed slightly, and shook his head. "I—I was just guessing. It was as much luck as anything else . . ."

"Luck or not, it's probably saved Earth." The President turned to the United Nations chief. "Koskela, when we really get this world government going, do you think there's any place for

an adviser who's a psychosociologist? He might be useful."

Jeff Brewster had no plans for entering the world government, and he tried to make that clear to President Macintyre right away. He'd accomplished the task assigned to him; now Brewster wanted to return to private life, to his home and his classes, and to work on his next book—which was to be a further refinement of the theory of communication. He wanted to get in touch with Lane Clinton—that young fellow might have some ideas worth looking into.

There was one more thing to settle; he had to do what he could for Morris. When they were alone, Brewster told the President everything—how he had suspected, from the senator's reactions at the meeting where the policy of keeping information about the Zugloorans from the Morotans was discussed, that Morris would let the secret out.

"I was at least as sure of that as I was that the approach we took to both sides would work. If I hadn't been sure of the senator, I can't swear but that I might have told them myself—or found some way to let it get to them."

Macintyre was quiet for a moment or two. "You don't like Morris, do you, Jeff?"

"I can't think of many people I dislike more. He's just the sort of politician that makes scientific-minded people like me shy away from politics—until we realize that there's a big difference between the kind he practices and the kind we're serving. . . . The trouble is that someone like him will sometimes do just the right thing, for the wrong reason—but it'll be something that needs doing, and something that another man will hesitate to do."

The President nodded. "I know. I—I rather wish that it had been you who spilled that particular mess of beans. You might have done it —shall we say inadvertently?"

Brewster jumped to his feet. "Idiot!—that's what I am! Of course I could have done it that way!"

"But—I'm glad you didn't. . . . You want me to go easy on the senator, eh? Well . . . I'm a politician, too, Jeff. The President has to be. I've already softened things for Morris—he'll get a mild reprimand and a covert pat on the back, as much as I'd like to see a sharper instrument used.

"You see—I thought it a good idea to be generous while he was still worried, and before he realizes that we can't afford to stomp him for something that came out so well. . . . Wasn't it Napoleon who once said he needed generals who knew when to disobey orders? Morris will be told in effect, 'Good work—and don't try it again.' He's smart enough not to push his luck too far."

The entire fateful final conference had lasted less than an hour. Arrangements were made for a return to the United States for those who had come from there, to other countries for Chang, Pradyot Raman, Linhares, Lefebvre, and the Russians.

It was slightly more than a week since the phone call from Chasin. Only a week, Brewster thought, as he packed his suitcases for the last time and prepared for the trip home. He was departing along with about half the entourage on the 1:30 rocket for New York, which would bring them down at International Rocket Field on Long Island at five minutes to nine New York Time. With luck on the Thruway he could be in his apartment before half-past nine. It was going to be good to get back.

He wandered round the hotel saying his last goodbyes to the men who had been his associates this past week. He promised Pirogov he would pay him a visit in Moscow next summer, and they shared a final gulp of vodka in memory of the week that they had endured together.

As he rode to the rocket field, Brewster thought back over the week. By this time, the Morotans were probably on their way back to whatever far star they claimed as home—and the Zugloorans, too, unless they had destroyed themselves.

It had been quite a neat plan, Brewster thought in a moment of self-congratulation. It was founded on the simple observation that Morota and Zugloor hated each other with a hate that surpassed all else. Earth's declaration of neutrality had left them high and dry. Neither side would dare attack Earth now, for each was still hopeful of winning Earth's friendship. And they would never do the sensible thing—join forces to obliterate Earth now, while it could still be done —because the concept of joining forces was one that simply did not exist between Morota and Zugloor.

At the rocket-field he stopped to buy a newspaper in the facsimile-machine. Fumbling in his

pocket, he came up with nothing but American money. He turned, looked around in appeal at Sir Adrian, who had accompanied the departing Americans to the field.

"Here," Sir Adrian said, handling him a threepence coin. "You'd better use this. My compliments."

Grinning, Brewster accepted the coin and dropped it in the slot. "Perhaps it won't be long before Earth has only one coinage. Not British coins and American coins, or British citizenship and American citizenship—just *Earth*. Nothing else."

"Some day," Sir Adrian said. "Sooner than you think, now that we've had a taste of what's out *there*."

He unfolded the newspaper as it rippled out of the electronic reproducer. In huge headlines the happy news was screamed:

STARMEN GIVE UP! EARTH PROCLAIMED NEUTRAL! NO PEACE TREATIES AFTER ALL! SPACE BEINGS LEAVE!

Quickly Brewster read the story. It had been officially released around lunchtime. It quoted

the text of the conference substantially as it had happened, giving lavish credit to President Macintyre. No mention was made of the part Dr. Jeffrey Brewster had played in formulating the Earth's reply to the alien ambassadors.

He sighed in relief. He had insisted on claiming no credit, but he had not been sure they would honor his request. He was glad they had. Let the credit go to President Macintyre; he deserved it. Brewster had the gratification of knowing his theories were sound. He had successfully extracted meanings from the aliens that had not been intended to come out.

"You'd better board that rocket," Sir Adrian said. "You wouldn't want to miss it."

"You bet I wouldn't," Brewster agreed.

"Be seeing you," Sir Adrian called, after they'd said their farewells.

Five minutes later he was strapping himself down for the twenty-minute voyage across the Atlantic. He was tired, and he was going to need a couple of days of relaxing before he could face a Psychosociology class again.

Earth has plenty to do now, he thought. *We have to wipe out the last traces of disagreement among ourselves, and buckle down to the job of conquering space. Now that we know a faster-*

than-light spacedrive is possible, we'll have to invent one. A better one than the aliens have, maybe.

Morota and Zugloor have looked into our future and they see a great galactic empire there. Now it's our job to build it. And it's better that we'll be doing all the hard work ourselves, instead of having it handed to us on the proverbial platter.

The ready-for-blastoff signal sounded, and Jeff Brewster settled back in his gimbaled cushion-seat, waiting for the impact of departure. His thoughts were mixed—half of tomorrow and the home-cooked meal he was going to enjoy, and half of the days after tomorrow, when his children's grandchildren went beyond Pluto to forge Man's dominion in the stars. It was pleasant to look forward to both.

But meanwhile—he thought of the parting with Macintyre, Pirogov, and Sir Adrian, and realized that he was no longer a private citizen. They'd let him alone with his family, his teaching, and his studies until they needed him. Then Jeffrey Brewster would be summoned to Washington again. Perhaps next year, perhaps the year after—perhaps sooner . . . He knew that

he'd be half-waiting for the call, and he wouldn't be entirely unhappy when it came.

But now he was going home, home to Mari. And the stars were waiting.