

NO ONE GOES THERE NOW

Hardcover First Edition published by Doubleday and Company, Inc.
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Updated, revised & rewritten 2006

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“No One Goes There Now” by William Walling. ISBN 1-58939-921-8.

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FOR JUDY

NO ONE GOES THERE NOW

BY
WILLIAM WALLING

PROLOGUE

All through the bright hours of morning, the glossy warmth of midday and the slow-paced afternoon, Polct the younger persevered with dutiful patience. Near sunset, however, boredom and a gnawing sense of uneasiness conspired to overcome hitherto unshakable faith in the elder's precognitive powers. His resolve not to be bothersome weakened into indecision. Inquisitiveness, coupled with a feeling of general uneasiness, waged a silent battle. Inevitably, curiosity won.

Polct squelched all lingering doubt and dipped surreptitiously into the surface ripple of his companion's thoughtstream, sorting the swirl of color, comparing the elder's fleeting mental images with its own sensory impressions.

Swollen and round on the far horizon, the system's blood-red primary etched frothy whorls of saffron and bronze in a bank of receding thunderheads. Clear rust-colored light plied deftly through a break of lofty trees on the rim of forest and cast lengthening shadows across lush meadowlands pocked here and there with hummocks of dark loam unearthed by timid burrowing creatures. Wax green and dewy, pendant foliage returned a sea of glistening highlights. One flashing cameo evoked a thrill of pure pleasure—a single grassblade bowed by a raindrop diamond.

Polct learned little from his anxious prying. He realized the elder's true consciousness ranged the arching sky above, rain-washed and empty. He disengaged with supposed finesse, reflecting for a time upon the unwisdom of having disturbed the elder. Determined yet uncomfortable, he eventually directed a tentative thought.

The afternoon wanes.

The conversational gambit was met with chill mental silence.

Darkness will soon overtake us, thought Polct.

Conscious of the intrusion, but reluctant to abandon the confluence of impending events he was laboring to integrate, the elder raised one pipestem appendage toward the flaring sunset. *Attune thy senses, O Polct! Even a babe might form predictions about fiercely living egos such as these. You sense naught?*

My ineptness mortifies, admitted the chastened Polct.

The elder's head turned; limpid elliptical eyes regarded his companion with circumspect intensity. *Guardianship is an assignment to be cherished. For any apprentice, the newness of the duty tends to inhibit effectiveness. Impending change is all but upon us. Do you not sense it?*

Change for good or ill, O Tanis?

A meaningless query withal. We shall act as poorly endowed pawns during the coming encounter. Assessing abstractions such as goodness and evil shall remain forever within the purview of Higher Ones.

My ignorance is insurmountable.

As may be. The tenor of the elder's thoughts grew more amiable. *Be not overwrought. Your anxiety is well predicated if sorely misconstrued. The source of perturbation stems from without, not from within. Savor the tension, follow to its root. One cannot help but sense wildness, a drive.*

I do sense it, O Tanis. What shall be done?

Done? Unpredictability is a universal attribute of all emergent species. We shall cope with the newcomers since cope we must. We shall guide their steps should they stoop to invite our humble guidance. Imbued with the wisdom of Higher Ones, we shall perhaps accomplish something of value. For the nonce, let us abide with folded hands and searching mind. We shall jointly pursue the incipient happening as one.

Polct mulled the elder's sagacity as, twin sentinels erect in the gathering dusk, they searched the fading sky. In deeper twilight their vigil was rewarded. A glistening pearl swept high across the heavens and vanished, silent as dust, behind a copse of towering trees. If either watcher noted the passage, no comment was forthcoming.

Time passed. Nocturnal voices began to speak in the gloaming—hushed chitterings, faint barks, the whirr of flying insects. The crisp air dimmed gradually and lost its opacity. Little by little, faint pinpricks in the deep azure dome gave evidence of a few brighter stars gleaming beyond the atmosphere.

The intruder reappeared at the zenith, a snick of violet brilliance that swelled rapidly into a roaring, apocalyptic jet of fire. White noise inundated the meadow. Multiple exhaust cones touched, splashed on moist turf, sputtered and winked out. Thunderous reverberations chased one another in diminishing volleys around the meadow's arboreal perimeter as forest and meadowland gradually trembled into hushed, unnatural stillness.

The afterglow dwindled along the horizon. Unfamiliar constellations looked down upon the ogive prow of a vessel dimly silhouetted against trees swaying in the night wind as if to withdraw from the uninvited presence.

Polct's parting thought bristled with excitement. *They are come.*

Aye, they are come, echoed the elder.

The watchers vanished simultaneously. Deep night engulfed meadow and forest.

I

Ecce Homo Invictus

The maxim of Imperium Terrestriana

Holt Morrow's matte black pressure-suit bore the imperial crest. Toting a megajoule laser rifle at high port, he halted at the foot of the pinnacle's access ramp and scanned the meadow for movement—any sort of movement. Birdsong impinging upon the suit's external transducers rang faintly within the bubble headpiece. On the fringe of forest, wisps of downy, fern-like growth stirred here and there under a vagrant breath of air. That was all he was able to discern.

A veteran explorer, Morrow's wealth of otherworldly experience coupled with his well-developed instinct for self-preservation made him ultra-suspicious of the verdant stretch of forest-bordered grassland. If anything, the meadow looked *too* promising; it gave every indication of containing nothing the least bit inimical. Having set foot on a spectrum of raw worlds during his lengthy career as an explorer, Morrow felt preternaturally wary of what might or might not lurk beneath the recently discovered planet's inviting veneer. Within the pastoral paradigm he had claimed the privilege of being the first to enter might lie anything.

His leathery cheeks patinaed by a pattern of broken venules, deep crow's-feet gathered at the corners of Morrow's narrowed

eyes as he squinted into the bright sparkle of morning. After a second bout of intense scrutiny, he began distancing himself from the starcruiser's landing craft. Moving forward boldly, he bore himself erectly, athletically in spite the encumbering vacuum gear. Vigilant, his reflexes at hair-trigger, he turned round and round as he walked, churning metaled boots through the early dew.

Temporarily satisfied, pending further examination of the evidence, he leaned the laser weapon butt-downward against the p-suit's bulbous, articulated knee. Rough-chiseled features split in a homely grin, he waved a benediction to the alien surroundings. "Out, come out wherever you are," he sang into the voice-actuated microphone. "Looks to me like a patch of A-number-one-prime real estate."

The pinnacle's main hatch rumbled open. A dozen armored shock troops spilled down the ramp and double-timed into the meadow, forming a loose, outward-facing circle to interdict the immediate landing site. Morrow watched them deploy with a vaguely cynical expression. Succumbing to a spur-of-the-moment impulse, he unclipped the dogs of the pressure-suit's globular headpiece, cracked the seal with obvious unconcern and drew a shallow, tentative breath. Savoring the fresh tang of oxygen-rich, unregenerated air, he lifted off the fishbowl and set it on the turf, then began to shuck off the vacuum gear with wriggling ease suggesting much practice. He sat on the turf, stripped off heavy sweat socks and moved his bare feet through the dewy grass with sybaritic pleasure. Looking up, he regarded the procession of approaching explorers with apparent unconcern,

Maran Roberts, the exploratory mission's nominal commander, led the way, his matte black vacuum gear identical to that worn by Morrow—an unspoken announcement of verifiable descent through six or seven generations of unmutated

or lightly mutated neohuman stock. Ennis Ladeen, the starcruiser's first officer, trailed Roberts towing via remote control a pair of null-grav aerial search drones. A jittery flight surgeon clad in gray-green vacuum gear brought up the rear.

The medic spotted Morrow lolling unprotected on the turf and confronted him, his lips working indignantly. Holt could hear only the indistinct voice buzz emanating from the fishbowl resting beside him on the grass.

Commander Roberts dropped a gauntlet to his p-suit's utility belt, energizing the external speaker. "A bit hasty, weren't you, Holt?"

"Aw, nothing scary's in this pretty lump of mud."

"Hereafter," suggested Roberts, no hint of levity in his diction, "you will either do as the surgeon suggests or chance a personal encounter with the 'Hereafter.' You claimed seniority, and were accordingly awarded the signal honor of being first off. Despite your incredible age and limitless experience, next time you'll forfeit the honor. Old hands do not behave like green youngsters. It sets an unhealthy precedent."

The accused grumbled something about having been resurrected so many times once more would do no harm. A sharp look from Roberts silenced him.

The flight surgeon's head wagged knowingly, complementing the frown evident despite the reflective fishbowl that partially obscured his features. Turning away in disgust, the medic retreated toward the relative safety of the grounded pinnacle.

"Certainly does look a'promise," endorsed Ennis Ladeen, letting his eyes sweep across the expansive meadow ringed by breaks of towering trees. "Except for lacking a natural satellite," he added, "it's like a second Old Earth."

"Exemplary," agreed Maran Roberts. "You might even say idyllic. The survey report raved about the planet's praiseworthiness;

in fact, the report favorably summarized the entire stellar system. Five also looks promising, but will require extensive atmosphere and ecosystems enhancement to reach Stage One viability. The other relatively close-in pair will need six or seven standard cycles of Class III terraforming, plus ancillary improvements, to become viable. But Three, here, seems the authentic gem. How shall we begin, Ennis?"

"Best, I think," replied Ladeen, "to send POLLY up for a quick look-see of the landing site. Once the meadow and surrounding forest is secure, we can have GEG to do an expanding search spiral out to, say, fifty or sixty clicks."

"So ordered," Roberts told him. "We might also want to move the picket ring outward twenty meters or so to give ourselves elbow room."

"Aye, ser Roberts." Ladeen turned away and began issuing orders.

Morrow chewed a grassblade, outwardly at peace with himself as well as with the new world.

"What brought on a wild urge to desuit?" asked Roberts, his manner purposefully casual. "I'd hate to lose you over some senseless misstep, Holt. We've voyaged together too long."

Morrow spat out the grassblade and clambered to his feet. He scuffed a big toe through the meadow grass, a show of penitence that fell short of deceiving Roberts. "Nothing scary," he said confidently, "in this grassy green garden."

"You chose a curious method to prove that thesis."

"Aw, don't get crotchety, Maran. Guess I felt a sudden urge to —"

"Holt," declared the commander, "we've seen a good portion of the visited galaxy together. Now and then we stumble across what you call a 'pretty lump' like this, but seldom anywhere near as inviting. No two planets are alike, yet in their pristine state all share a universal presumption of danger."

“Guess I needed a breath of fresh air after being penned up aboard ship so many —”

“Most virgin planets,” pursued Roberts, unwilling to let the other make his point, “turn out to be innocuous, wanting only the touch of a friendly hand to achieve Stage One viability. Then, after all our hard work, the political wonks urge us to step aside and let a newfound planetary matrix be scraped, weaned, watered and made fruitful so the multitudes can swarm in, breeding and fighting. Then shortly—very shortly—the Planners insist that we dig deeper into the galaxy and turn up yet more planetary matrices.”

“Recollect,” asked Holt pensively, “the first real estate deal we ever turned? I think the computer tabbed the planet Arcania. Unless my century and three-quarters has bilged what few memory links are left in my noggin, I think it was the first time we ever fought the good fight as a team.”

“How many ‘real-estate deals’ we have turned since then,” said Roberts. He reflected wistfully on the wildernesses and dreary vacuum where much of his long life had been spent. Cutting a sharp glance at Morrow, he said, “No, you impulsive old pelican, you’ll *not* change the subject.”

Holt wilted under the other’s penetrant gaze. “This lump’s special.”

“Special..? Perhaps especially dangerous.”

“Nope,” denied Morrow. “This one’s a green ‘n gold garden floating way to hell and gone out here, parsecs from the noise and crush. A spooky feeling came over me when the pinnacle’s hatch opened and I stepped out on the ramp. It was like I’d been here before, and just come back again. In a way, I’m almost sorry the survey team found it.”

“*Déjà vu.*”

“Come again?”

“I felt it myself—still feel it,” Roberts told him. “It’s a psychological trick the subconscious never tires of playing, as if an exotic ambience permeates your ‘pretty lump.’ For me, it was like entering some magic land of dreams, real or imaginary, not a world altogether real and ripe for settlement. A matrix like this comes along once in a lifetime.”

“You’ve got that right,” said Morrow emphatically. “Good, bad or indifferent, deja-whatever sure socked me hard in the gut.”

Roberts appraised the stir of activity going on around them. He reached out a gauntlet and gently clap[ed Holt’s shoulder. “Come, you must do penance for your indiscretion.”

A chuckle. “For instance?” Holt bent and retrieved the fishbowl. Clumsily lugging the vacuum gear, he trailed Roberts to a slim gray console hovering millimeters above the turf, its null-grav field flattening the meadow grass in a neat rectangle.

“You’re barred from the pinnacle for the prescribed quarantine period,” said Roberts, “so you might as well make yourself useful.” The commander touched an amber switch plaque marked LOG and it glowed green; the word RECORD appeared. “Ser Morrow,” Roberts declared formally, “you will direct and supervise the preliminary survey. All natural phenomena within a fifty-kilometer radius of the landing site are to be observed and recorded. Constant audiovisual contact with the pinnacle is to be maintained at all times...”

The commander’s orders continued as the anonymous system’s primary climbed higher above the trees and the dewy turf began to dry. A morning breeze rustled unfamiliar leaves in the nearby copse of soaring trees.

Ten revolutions of the as yet unnamed planet—ten “periods” in the parlance of Imperium Terrestriana—effected a slight yet significant change in the broad, kidney-shaped meadow. Gleaming like anodized mushrooms against the darker backdrop of forest, a cluster of pre-fabricated metal domes housing the temporary command center ranged in a semicircle. In the near distance, all three of the starcruiser’s ground-to-orbit shuttles squatted in a section of meadowland blackened by exhaust jets, their ogive prows pointing accusatively at the lone patrol verticraft orbiting monotonously a kilometer overhead.

All overt activity was taking place elsewhere. Roving specialty teams systematically took the virgin planet’s pulse. Robotic airborne cartographic survey vehicles mapped the five major land masses, the oceans and islands. The interstellar cruiser shifted to a polar orbit and began to cut one orange slice of terrain after another, its sophisticated remote sensing equipment recording photographic, infrared and electromagnetic surface detail, as well as shallow subsurface features via ground-penetrating radar. Botanists and biologists invaded the forests, the deserts, the high plains and low plains. A plateau not far west of the landing site attracted the immediate interest of planetographers when radar backscatter detected unnaturally regular geometries upon and beneath the surface. All of the varied data, edited and compiled in the command center, was uploaded to the starship’s master computer for eventual incorporation in the expedition’s Stage One Report.

The explorers took full advantage of their leisure hours. They played as hard as they worked, rock-climbing in the high country, shooting rapids in the white water of a thundering river. Others captured the planet’s shimmering landscapes on holovision disc, much to the disgust of several amateur painters.

Bouts at swords began to draw spectators to a shallow natural amphitheater within walking distance of the command center, with the expedition's untied women offering their favors as prizes. However, swordplay along the far-flung galactic frontier periphery was fencing, not dueling. Conducted in the spirit of friendly competition, the contests lacked the rigid formality of Code Duello, the Imperial Convention-set method of settling grievances declared mandatory within the ever-expanding sphere of neohuman civilization.

Explorers considered themselves beyond the jurisdiction or influence of the trillions in whose name they combed the nearer reaches of the Gould Belt. Explorers rarely gave thought to the exacting, inescapable tenets of Imperial Convention prevalent within interstellar colonial society, not that they believed there was anything wrong with upholding one's honor and dignity. Even so, formal duels were practically unknown within the close-knit brotherhood of men and women who willingly spent their lives searching for viable worlds hundreds of parsecs from Old Earth. Accustomed to living and working in the presence of elemental outworld dangers, explorers did not feel a need for artificial stimulation, even if the attitude was largely unstated. Explorers decried the synthetic intrigues and posturings imposed by Code Duello, and refrained from mentioning even in confidence that Convention smacked of sham, a reflexive deceit conveniently palmed off on the masses as their own idea as a method of instilling some sense of honor and a will-o-the-wisp called "chivalry" in the great cross-section of neohuman society. Figurative and literal outsiders as they were, explorers tended to believe the Planners proactively fostered Convention in its most sanguine guise, Code Duello, as a minor aid in controlling runaway overpopulation, as well as a code of honor that might lend at least a touch of aristocratic noblesse to otherwise drab pedestrian lives.

At hour fifteen, Commander Roberts massaged his neck, sore after hours spent staring into communications tanks. He was preparing to turn things over to his second in command in favor of a shower and a stroll in the forest, when Holt Morrow hailed him. "Got a minute, Maran? Gente here says it's urgent."

Roberts craned to look over Holt's shoulder. The image of a stocky, broad-shouldered explorer filled the holovision tank. He rose and stepped over. "Roberts here. What can we do for you?"

The caller drew himself to attention. "Gailen van Maar, ser Roberts, Xeno Team Four."

"Proceed, Gailen. We are recording."

"Period before last, ser Roberts, a pair of team members swept the area bounded by..." Van Maar paused to read coordinates from his notes. "Orbital ground-penetrating radar picked up a set of unusually regular subsurface features in a low, flat-topped tell isolated by rolling hills. The master computer evaluated it as a simple anticline, but here on the ground we thought it looked like... Well, not altogether natural. I requested two more orbital passes, viewed the data and decided the mesa was incompatible with local topography."

"Enough." Roberts hit the recording switch plaque.

"When," groused Holt, "did they quit teaching kids one-syllable words?"

"Dictate your report later," suggested Roberts. "What have you found?"

"A *city*, ser Roberts. Extremely ancient, barely recognizable." The xenologist's bubbling enthusiasm caused muttered comments to travel about the command center.

"Evidence of prior habitation," said Roberts, "does excite the imagination."

"Nothing definite's been established yet," declared van Maar. "The preliminary gammarad survey indicated what may

have once been walls, foundations, the shells of large buildings. Implements too, or what might once have been implements. Everything discovered to date is recorded on holodisc. Our primary task will be to segregate and classify locations before petitioning to commence a dig, then we should —”

“Excellent,” interrupted Roberts, unaware that the virgin planet designated Dan by random computer selection, was only the second entry in van Maar’s Expeditions Register. He asked with dry inflection if they too might have a look at the site.

A xenoarchaeology specialist, van Maar looked startled. “Of course. Forgive me, ser Roberts.” The stocky young man’s image snuffed, and was instantly replaced by a panorama of low hills covered with scrub brush. A semi-flat tableland humped above the hillcrests. Roberts found it difficult to share the other’s excitement. Then he blinked and the holovision image’s stereoperspective quality leaped at him. What had first looked like low scrub was actually a grove of medium-sized trees. He scaled the find roughly by comparing it to a pair of grounded verticraft parked atop the huge mesa.

“Interesting,” he said at last. “Call down any additional equipment you’ll need from the cruiser, van Maar. If the preliminary data can be factored into the report within five or six periods, fine. If not, your find will have to be a Stage Two discovery.”

“I just sent a shopping list up to the cruiser, ser Roberts. This is, uh... What I mean is,” added the scientist hesitantly, “I’m still something of a neophyte. This is only my second voyage, and I wondered if I, uh...”

“Naturally you’ll be credited with the find,” assured the commander. “Congratulations are in order, ser van Maar. I’ll leave the channel open so you can input the full report.”

“Thank you, ser Roberts.” Van Maar’s holovision image dissolved.

“So it looks like we’ve got company?” observed Holt.

“Or did in some remote era of the past. No point raising false hopes.”

“My only hope,” said Morrow, “is that the natives’re friendly.”

Tanis the elder came back into rapport with his youthful apprentice. *One senses a growing suspicion of our presence, O Polct. The pristine nexus is at hand. Are you prepared?*

Prepared, yet apprehensive.

Such apprehension is baseless. This first encounter will be a simple, uncomplicated meeting. A newcomer moves in this direction, possibly a specialist who deals with varieties of fauna. Make your presence known to it, but nothing more. Understood?

Verily, O Tanis.

Do not attempt to communicate with the newcomer.

Shall I try to align with the seat of its being?

By all means attune with its psyche. Learn its frequency and range should the task prove easy of accomplishment. Should the other attempt to communicate, however, only audibles are to be employed.

Comprehension sits with me, O Tanis.

Then it is well. Position yourself here... Within Polct’s mind spread a crystalline image—a forest glade bounded by lofty trees trailing moss in the breeze. It will approach from the direction of the watercourse.

Is it wise to transit now, O Tanis?

Go, was the elder’s parting thought.

Polct vanished.
