New Worlds

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Dead leaves had accumulated against the fence at the northern boundary of the Myers Starport. Sheltered by the overhanging trees, they had lain undisturbed through the changing seasons.

Now, suddenly, they whirled up from the tarmac and were flung aside. A squirrel that had long since learned to ignore the sound and vibration of the great ships that landed a hundred meters away fled in terror from this strange new phenomenon, scampering back down its tree, safely outside the fence.

Across the field the Arthur H. Rostron continued loading, her crew and the port workers oblivious to the tiny disturbance.

Nobody saw the cat-sized, turtle-shaped machine, its metal shell a pebbled matte black, that appeared out of nowhere. A camera lens formed its single eye, a foam-covered microphone projected where a nose should have been, and its tail was a thin black cable that ended in a curiously undefined way. The cable’s length varied as the device moved, and an observer would find it impossible to focus on just where it stopped. Half a dozen stubby antennae protruded from various places, as if sniffing the air.

The thing had no legs, but instead crawled forward on a single black plastic caterpillar tread, whirring softly to itself.

The lens swiveled, scanning across the asphalt and concrete, along the kilometers of chain-link fence and the drifts of brown leaves, along the line of sycamores beyond the fence, past the distant, blocky buildings. It stopped when pointed at the Arthur H. Rostron and the surrounding service complex, and adjusted the focus.

Machinery buzzed quietly.

Then the turtle turned and retreated, vanishing back into the air, pulling its tail-cable after it.

For a moment, nothing more happened. The squirrel leapt back up onto a fencepole and looked about warily; seeing nothing out of the ordinary, it dropped to the pavement again.

A white-booted foot appeared from the air behind it, and the squirrel fled again, for good this time.

The foot was followed by a leg, and a body, both wrapped in baggy white material. Head and hands emerged, and the figure of a man stood on the tarmac, clad in a bulky protective suit and helmet, with a large pack slung on his back, tools and weapons held in place elsewhere with canvas loops and strips of Velcro. A small microphone was clipped to the base of his helmet, its cord trailing down behind his back and then stopping abruptly in mid- air.

He scanned the area, taking in the fence, the overhanging trees, the distant buildings, the Arthur H. Rostron and its attendants. He tapped at the microphone.

“Sugarman to Base,” he said, his eyes fixed on the starship. “I’m through, and everything looks okay, just like the probe showed. Definitely looks like an airport. Some people working, but they haven’t noticed me yet. The airplane, or airship, or whatever it is... Well, first, I only see one on the whole field, and it’s nothing like anything I’ve seen fly—I think we’ve got some new technology here. Could be big bucks.” He glanced around, assuring himself that he had missed nothing important, and then added, “Lee, McDowell, Seibert, come on through, any time you’re ready.”

He took two paces forward, then turned to watch as three more figures appeared from the air, all clad in the bulky protective suits and broad-visored helmets.

As they looked about themselves with cautious interest the first arrival spoke into the microphone again.

“Looks like we all made it. I’ll leave Seibert here with the mike while we scout around a little.”

He unclipped the microphone and handed it to the shortest of the group, who clipped it to her own helmet. Sugarman then turned to another and asked, “How’s the air?”

The other shrugged. “All the usual caveats, Mr. Sugarman. We’re working from a small sample, we can’t spot every virus that’s out there, even the familiar ones could be mutated into something that’ll kill us instantly—you know the drill. There could be anything out there, and we wouldn’t necessarily have found it yet. What we have found is plain old ordinary air, a bit high in ozone and carbon monoxide compared to what we might like, but no worse than you’d get any number of places back home.” He held up a small wire cage, displaying the white mouse inside; the little animal looked no more skittish than any mouse might look when thus exposed. “Herman’s breathing just fine, hasn’t keeled over, lost his lunch, or even coughed,” the man said. “It’s your call.”

Sugarman nodded. He scanned the area again.

One of the workmen seemed to be looking their way, Sugarman thought.

There were signs on the fence, probably warnings of some sort, but he couldn’t read them from this side; they faced out. Nobody was carrying guns, so far as he could see. The fence wasn’t electrified, and the single strand of barbed wire at the top didn’t look very serious. The trees hadn’t been cut back. This might be someplace people weren’t supposed to be, but it wasn’t any sort of high-security installation.

One had to be ready for absolutely anything, but one also had to know when to take risks, and which risks to take. This world appeared safe enough, and not too different from his own. Looking like invaders from Mars was probably not good policy, under the circumstances; it would draw attention.

“What the hell,” he said, unzipping the neck-seal of his helmet. “Let’s let ’em know we’re human, and not a bunch of bug-eyed monsters.”

By the time he got the helmet off completely the workman who had first spotted the strangers was pointing and shouting, and others were paying attention as well.

Sugarman took a deep breath; the air seemed just fine. He was almost sorry this particular version of Earth was inhabited.

Those people over there were buzzing about like angry hornets, he thought. Time, he judged, to make some provision for back-up.

He turned and said, “Seibert, when I give the word, step back through the gate and wait in the airlock for ten minutes—by your watch, no rough estimates. Then step back through here and stay by the gate until you hear from us.” That would split the party, since he was sure that he and the others would not still be here in ten minutes, but it would give them a contact; in an emergency they could radio Seibert, and she could phone through the gate.

Was there anything else?

“Oh, yeah,” he added, as an afterthought. “Take Herman back; we’re done with him.”

Seibert nodded, and accepted the caged mouse from McDowell. She hung it from a clip on her belt, then glanced back along the microphone cord to see where the opening was.

“Lee, McDowell, you’ll stay with me,” Sugarman ordered. “And all of you, keep radio silence until I tell you otherwise, even if we get separated. There’s no privacy on radio, remember that.”

The others all nodded in acknowledgment. Sugarman turned back to face the Arthur H. Rostron, and the others followed his gaze.

A small wheeled vehicle was approaching across the broad expanse of pavement. It was open, with a flat windshield—Sugarman might have called it a jeep in his own world, but he knew not to assume that similar appearances meant anything here.

Two men were riding in it, one driving, the other holding something that looked distinctly like a weapon.

“Seibert,” Sugarman said without looking back, “now. Tell ’em what’s happening.”

Seibert stepped back and vanished.

Sugarman and the others stood, waiting. Lee and McDowell had kept their helmets on, so their expressions didn’t matter, but Sugarman pasted a smile on his own face and held it as the vehicle came to a stop, about three meters away.

Always make a friendly first impression, Sugarman reminded himself—an important rule in these preliminary contacts. In most situations, a smile on his face could make up for any number of weapons on his belt.

The driver sat in the vehicle, leaning forward over the steering wheel, and Sugarman noticed a gun—or something very like one—held loosely in one hand.

The passenger stood on a structure that wasn’t quite a running board, holding a larger and more obvious gun, and called out angrily, “All right, this is private property. Who the hell are you people supposed to be, and what are you doing inside the fence?”

Sugarman smiled and held a hand up in a friendly wave, pleased that the natives spoke recognizable English. “Hi,” he said. “I’m Neil Sugarman, and I’m a representative of the New Worlds Corporation.”

“Never heard of it,” the passenger snapped. “And I’d suggest you three put up your hands while we talk, and keep them well away from those belts.”

Sugarman glanced back at McDowell and Lee and nodded, then put his own hands atop his head. Behind him, the others followed suit.

“Now then,” the standing native said, a bit less belligerently, “What are you people doing here?”

“Exploring, I guess you’d say,” Sugarman replied. “Just where are we, anyway?”

“You don’t know?” the man asked, glaring suspiciously.

Sugarman shook his head, still smiling.

“You’re on the outer north blast apron of the Myers Starport.”

Sugarman’s smile slipped somewhat. “Starport?” he asked.

That couldn’t mean what it seemed to. Maybe the language was slightly different here after all, or the name was figurative.

“Starport,” the man repeated. “That’s the Arthur H. Rostron over there, outbound for Epsilon Eridani IV. She’s taking off at 1600, whether you’re still here or not, and if you are here, and you get fried, United Starways isn’t responsible, because you’re all trespassing.”

“Well, now,” Sugarman said, trying to gather his wits. The threat of frying didn’t worry him, since the sycamores just beyond the fence didn’t look scorched, but he was still trying to consider all the ramifications of a ship bound for Epsilon Eridani.

Definitely new technology here, he thought.

“We aren’t trying to cause any trouble,” he said, “but I think we need to talk to someone in charge. I think we’ve got ourselves some important business possibilities to discuss.”

Any place where an installation like this was private property, and people spoke of corporations not being responsible for damages, was clearly set up along economic lines similar to Sugarman’s home reality, and that meant they could do business.

“Business?” The passenger looked puzzled; the driver sat up slightly, evincing renewed interest.

“Yes, business,” Sugarman repeated. “I think United... United Starways, was it?” There it was again—these people had starships. But how could they? A flight would take decades; as a government project that might be feasible, but how could anyone make a profit?

It had to be something entirely new, and potentially valuable to New Worlds. Sugarman tried not to think about how big a bonus he might get for this one.

“Yes,” he said, “I think United Starways may be very interested in learning more about the New Worlds Corporation.” Not that they would learn all that much, of course—just enough to arrange a trade deal. New Worlds would trade any information they had or could get—except, of course, for their own company secrets, which were what everybody most wanted.

The passenger glared silently for a moment, then said, “You’re trying to sell something? A little corporate espionage, or something like that? Maybe the location of a promising planet?”

Now, even with starships going out, how could anyone know the location of a promising planet? That added to Sugarman’s confusion, but he mentally shelved the question for the moment. There was no point in thinking about it before he had any hard data. He replied, “I’m not about to talk business out here on a whaddayacallit, blast apron, with my hands on my head.”

He stared at the passenger, still smiling.

The standing native chewed his lip, then called, “All right, into the car.”

Sugarman led the way.

The starport’s spokesman carefully collected all the more obvious weapons— knives, guns, nunchaku—before herding the strangers into the back of the “jeep.”

The vehicle was designed to hold six people in all, but the bulky protective suits and backpacks more than made up for the fact that only five were aboard, and the three explorers were uncomfortably crowded during the short drive to the starport offices. Lee used the time to take off her helmet, since Sugarman had as yet shown no ill effects from his exposure to the local environment. McDowell was more conservative, and kept his own helmet on until ordered to remove it by a blue-clad security guard, at the building entrance where they disembarked.

As they clambered from the vehicle and were ushered inside, with their helmets in their hands, Sugarman peered back for as long as he could at the looming silver form of the Arthur H. Rostron.

A starship, was it? How had these people made such a thing economically practical, when the stars were years, or decades, apart? Was the thing designed for multi-generational voyages?

After some discussion among the security staff, the three explorers were required not only to leave behind their helmets and their gear, but to strip off their protective suits, in front of what appeared to be video cameras. This was to be done before they entered the port manager’s office.

They obliged—but even so, after further delays, Lee and McDowell were ordered to wait in an anteroom while Sugarman entered the innermost sanctum alone.

At the door, a security guard told Sugarman to wait for a moment while he was announced. Sugarman stood, waiting politely, and looked about.

The antechamber was utilitarian and uninteresting, except for something sitting in the corner that Sugarman couldn’t identify. At first, despite the absence of a pot and the bluish color, he thought it was a plant, but when he saw it move slightly he guessed it was a machine, and finally he decided it was some sort of modernist sculpture.

He certainly couldn’t think of anything else it could be, given its location. It had to be the local version of office art.

Interesting that that sort of highly-abstract art existed here, he thought, as the guard emerged and beckoned him through the inner door. There might be trade possibilities in that, as well as in new technologies.

Once the visitor was safely inside the inner office the guard departed, and Sugarman found himself facing a heavyset man seated behind a desk. The nameplate on the desk read Stephen Apperson.

“Hi, Mr. Apperson,” Sugarman said, holding out a hand and hoping that he wasn’t making a fool of himself by the standards of this particular society.

Apperson glared and did not take the hand; Sugarman immediately concluded that this culture was more restrained than his own about handshaking, probably about physical contact of any sort. He quickly tucked the hand into a pocket of his jumpsuit.

“Just what the hell are you people supposed to be?” Apperson demanded. “What’s with the suits? And who are you, anyway? Make it quick!”

Sugarman smiled. His host was speaking, anyway, and not using any fancy ritual greetings. Maybe the locals weren’t all that friendly, but that was no big problem. They hadn’t tried to kill him yet, which was something.

“Fair enough,” he said. “I’m Neil Sugarman, and I’m a scout working for the New Worlds Corporation—and Mr. Apperson, I’m not from your world at all.”

Apperson glared, then pulled open the lap drawer of his desk, took out a roll of candy, and threw a mint into his mouth.

He did not offer Sugarman one. Instead, he said, “Sit down,” and pointed to a chair against the far wall.

The mint crunched.

Sugarman pulled the chair over and sat down. For a moment the two men sat silently, studying each other. Sugarman maintained a facade of polite calm, while Apperson made no attempt to hide his annoyance.

Sugarman wondered if the candy was just that, or if it were an antacid, or a drug of some sort. If it was supposed to cheer the port manager up, it didn’t appear to be working.

It was Apperson who finally spoke.

“All right,” he said, “What’s going on? You claiming to be an alien? We don’t usually get nuts in groups unless they’re protesting something, and they don’t usually have all the fancy equipment my people said you had, so I figure it’s a scam, and I might as well hear your pitch. What’s the story? You supposed to be from Lambda Aurigae or something?”

Sugarman hesitated; some of the slang was unfamiliar, and Apperson’s accent—one not quite like anything Sugarman had heard before—didn’t help.

He got the gist of it, though.

“No,” he said, “I’m from Earth. But not your Earth. I don’t know if your civilization has the concepts I need to explain this, but let me try: Have you ever heard of parallel worlds?”

Apperson chewed on his mint some more before answering.

“You supposed to be from a world where the Nazis won World War II or something?” he asked at last.

Sugarman smiled a bit more genuinely than usual at this proof that the concept was known here.

“Nope,” he said. “In fact, the Nazis never came to power at all, where I come from. Adolf Hitler—was that the name?” He looked questioningly at the port official.

Apperson nodded.

“Well,” Sugarman continued, “He was killed by a thrown beer bottle in 1923, where I came from. But we’ve found worlds where he and the Nazis did win—and we stayed out of them. Nasty places. Not worth the risk, not when there are a million others to explore.”

Apperson grimaced sourly.

“Parallel worlds aren’t real,” he said. “They’re just something sci-fi writers made up.”

“What writers?” Sugarman asked, startled.

“Sci-fi writers—you know, science fiction.”

“Oh,” Sugarman said, “Science fiction. We don’t call them... whatever you said.”

“Yeah, well, whatever you call them, parallel worlds are just something they made up.”

“Sure—like starships,” Sugarman said, grinning.

Apperson didn’t reply.

After a moment, recognizing that the next move was his, Sugarman said, “Listen, I can’t prove anything to you sitting here in your office, but in my equipment pack I’ve got a pocket video on Schenck’s discovery of the crosstime gate, and some of what New Worlds has done with it. I think you’d be interested, and short of taking you back through the gate with me and showing you everything first-hand, I can’t think of any better way to convince you.”

Apperson thought that over, then nodded. He touched a button on his desk and said, “Carl, bring in Mr. Sugarman’s backpack, will you?”

Sugarman gave him a friendly smile; Apperson considered it, then pressed the button again and added, “And have your gun ready when you bring it in. I don’t trust this guy.”

Sugarman’s smile turned wry.

A moment later, a security guard dumped Sugarman’s pack on the desk. At Apperson’s orders, he kept Sugarman closely covered.

“Get your gadget,” Apperson said.

Sugarman gave the gun a good look, and then pulled a black object, roughly the size and shape of a cigar box, from one of the side-pockets on the pack. By the time the guard had hauled the rest of the pack back out of the office, Sugarman had shown Apperson how to work the tape—play, fast forward, rewind, and freeze-frame—and the port manager was studying the display with interest.

Half an hour later he clicked off the power; the screen went dark, and Apperson shoved the little black box away.

“All right,” he said, “I’m convinced, for now—I’m no scientist, I just handle administration here, but it looks good to me. Now what?”

“Well,” Sugarman said, leaning back, “Now we need to talk about whether it would be profitable for our two worlds to trade with one another. You saw on the video about some of the deals we’ve made—and some we didn’t make, for that matter. You know more about our worlds than we know about yours, so I think it’s time for you to tell me a little.”

“What’s to tell?” Apperson asked, with a shrug. “I can’t describe the whole damn universe in fifty words or less. It looks to me like our world is a lot like yours—but different, too. I can’t tell what the differences are from a twenty-minute tape.”

His words were calm, but Sugarman thought Apperson was worried about something. There was no overt sign, but Sugarman had had plenty of practice in reading people.

The tape was designed to reassure people. It emphasized the limits of the crosstime gates—how they couldn’t be aimed, how no two had ever come out in the same reality, how one couldn’t be re-opened once it was closed. It was supposed to convince potential customers that they didn’t need to worry about Sugarman’s people invading them, or spying on them, or opening gates into places they had no business going.

So why was Apperson worried?

Well, the man was confronting a whole new reality—a little nervousness was understandable. Particularly if he didn’t believe everything on the tape.

“True enough,” Sugarman agreed. “So let me start with something simple. That ship out there, this whole field—this isn’t anything I’ve seen before.”

“The ship? You mean the Arthur H. Rostron?”

Sugarman nodded. “It’s a starship? Bound for Epsilon Eridani, someone said? That’s what, eleven light-years?”

“Something like that, yeah. It’s a three-week run. She leaves in...” He glanced at a digital clock on his desk. “Eight minutes.”

Sugarman blinked. “Three weeks?”

Apperson nodded, obviously thinking about something else.

“Twenty-one days to another star?” Sugarman asked, struggling against disbelief. He had encountered some amazing things in his crosstime travels, but this was a whole new order of unlikelihood.

Had he reached a universe where the very laws of physics were different?

“Yeah,” Apperson said, becoming more interested. “You people don’t have a stardrive?” His expression shifted, became calculating.

“Nope. No more than you have crosstime gates.”

The two men stared at each other for a moment.

“Listen,” Sugarman said, “how is that possible? I mean, faster-than-light travel? Didn’t Einstein prove it was impossible here?”

“Sort of,” Apperson said. “In normal space. But there are loopholes, ways around that. How’d this Schenck person ever come up with that crosstime stuff?”

“She’s a genius,” Sugarman answered, shrugging. “How do I know how she did it? But listen, are there other habitable planets out there? I mean, it’s not all just rock and ice like the rest of our solar system?”

“Oh, there are plenty of good worlds, and most of them aren’t even inhabited. Besides, so far all the extraterrestrials we’ve found have been harmless enough, anyway. About these parallel worlds, though—that tape said that a gate costs millions of dollars, but once it’s operating, you just step through? I mean, instantaneously?”

“Sure,” Sugarman said, “There’s no distance involved, after all. But... extraterrestrials? You’re serious?”

“Of course I am. You didn’t see Tcheeb on the way in, in the corner there? I didn’t think it had had time to move anywhere. Look, about these gates—do you sell that technology?”

“No, that’s a trade secret, I’m afraid, but we have plenty of other things we can sell.” He glanced toward the door to the antechamber. “That thing in the corner’s an alien? I saw it, but...”

The conversation was interrupted by a weird high-pitched shriek, like nothing Sugarman had ever heard before. It rose quickly to a crescendo, then died away again.

“The ship,” Apperson explained, “The Arthur H. She’s off.”

“And the stardrive...”

“Company secret.”

The two men stared thoughtfully at each other.

“I think,” Sugarman said slowly, “That I need to consult with my superiors on this. I mean, we’ve found new technology before, but a stardrive...”

“Yeah,” Apperson agreed. “I’m just a bureaucrat, I don’t make policy. And you could still be faking, somehow—maybe that videotape was all computer-synthesized or something. I need to call corporate in New York.”

“Sure.” Sugarman wondered whether Seibert, out on the blast apron, had actually been in any danger. He hoped not.

But then, they were all in danger, he realized, remembering the guards’ guns.

“Listen,” he said, “can you send me and my two people back to the gate for a few minutes? Radio doesn’t transmit through it, and we’ve got to go back and report in person.”

Apperson mulled that over while he ate another mint. He watched Sugarman’s face, while Sugarman tried hard not to give anything away. He tried to ready explanations in case Apperson asked to know why all three had to go; he gave serious thought to what he should do if Apperson demanded to keep Lee or McDowell as a hostage.

Of course, neither Lee nor McDowell knew anything about transtemporal theory. They couldn’t tell Apperson’s people anything, no matter what happened.

“Okay,” Apperson said at last, and Sugarman breathed more easily.

Fifteen minutes later, in the back of the starport jeep, Lee leaned over and whispered in Sugarman’s ear, “What’s going on? We’re not going back, are we? We left all the gear...”

Sugarman held up a hand to hush her.

Reluctantly, Lee obeyed. McDowell scanned the horizon, apparently disinterested.

The Arthur H. Rostron was gone; the patch of concrete where it had stood seemed to shimmer oddly.

Sugarman wondered if Seibert was all right, and what she had seen.

She was waiting for them at the gate, watching uncertainly, but apparently unhurt; Sugarman supposed she was trying to decide whether or not she should vanish back through again.

Well, he intended to make that quite clear.

Even before the jeep came to a complete halt, Sugarman leapt from his seat and took her by the arm. “Come on,” he called to McDowell and Lee.

“Where are you going?” called their driver/escort. “Mr. Apperson didn’t...”

“It’s all right,” Sugarman said, with a reassuring wave, “We’ll be right back.” He shoved Seibert back along the microphone cord and through the gate before she could protest.

McDowell was next, and then Lee, and then Sugarman himself. He took a last look at the Myers Starport, and saw the driver climbing from his vehicle, a worried expression on his face.

Probably thought he’d catch hell for this, Sugarman thought. He didn’t need to worry, though; Sugarman was quite sure that Apperson wouldn’t mind.

Then Sugarman was through the gate and back in the reassuringly familiar airlock on the homeworld side. He herded his team toward the exit and slapped at the red emergency button.

“Blow the gate!” he called. “Blow it!”

He was barely through the #2 hatch when the transtemporal field collapsed with a roar of displaced air, and the opening to the Myers Starport closed forever.

Amanda Brewer, the project director, called down to him from the observation balcony, “That’s eight million bucks we just threw away on your say-so, Sugarman!”

His teammates were standing before him; Lee and Seibert were staring at him.

“Neil,” Lee said, “I don’t get it. It looked fine to me!”

“Yeah,” Seibert said, “What was wrong with it? And did you see that ship take off? What was that?”

“That’s all proprietary information, as of right now,” Sugarman said. “I can’t tell you.”

“Was it something that Apperson told you?” Lee asked.

“Sorry, I can’t...” Sugarman began.

“So come and tell me, Sugarman!” Brewer called down. “I want you in my office five minutes ago.”

Five minutes later Brewer and Sugarman were seated on opposite sides of Brewer’s desk.

“We’ve blown gates before,” Brewer said. “Because of crazies like the Nazis, or environments like that one where they’d nuked everything with cobalt bombs. You know that. But I think you forget sometimes, Sugarman, that we don’t like blowing them. So why’d we shut this one down? What was the threat to human civilization in this world?”

“It wasn’t a threat to human civilization,” Sugarman admitted, “Only to us—to New Worlds.”

“Go on,” Brewer said, “What kind of a threat?”

“Economic,” Sugarman said. “These people had interstellar travel.”

Brewer tapped a felt-tip pen against her desk. “Sugarman,” she said, “you better explain that.”

“They have faster-than-light travel, Ms. Brewer. Three weeks to Epsilon Eridani.”

“So?”

“So which would you rather have, Ms. Brewer—a way to reach other Earths, the way we do, or a way to reach really new worlds? Which do you think is more valuable, a way to find all the mirror images of ourselves we could ever want, or a way to find entirely new intelligences? They’ve got aliens, Ms. Brewer—extraterrestrials. We’ve found new societies, but they have whole new species. Who needs the competition?”

Brewer frowned. “Would we have to compete?”

“You know the regulations we work under—we couldn’t have kept a stardrive under wraps. We’d have to let this United Starways expand into our reality, or license the technology—and you can bet we wouldn’t get the license! Sure, we’d still have the gates for ourselves—but who’s going to want to pay us to use the gates if they can build starships and find whole new planets?”

Brewer considered that.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “It might have been worth the risk.”

“It was a judgment call,” Sugarman admitted.

“You may have just thrown away the biggest new technology we’ve found yet,” Brewer pointed out.

Sugarman shrugged. “Maybe I did,” he agreed. “But hey, now that we know it can be done, maybe we can find it for ourselves, and not have to share it.”

Brewer nodded thoughtfully.

In his office in the Myers Starport, Stephen Apperson listened carefully as his men swore they could find no trace of the strangers or the aperture that they had vanished through.

Finally he nodded. “Good,” he said. “I was afraid we might have to...dispose of them, somehow, but apparently they got scared and ran. Cowards, I’d say—they’ve done it before. According to this,” he said, with a wave at the black video box that Sugarman had left on the desk, “they can’t re-open the path once it’s gone. Which world they hit each time they open a gate is supposedly random, can’t be controlled. So if the gate’s gone, they’re gone, for good.

“Which means we don’t need to worry about competition from a system with zero travel time, instead of weeks aboard ship, and where most of the worlds found are habitable, not dead rocks.”

He threw another mint into his mouth and considered the video box.

“Of course, now that we know crosstime travel is possible...” he said.

He didn’t finish the sentence.