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The Unknown Shore by Donald Malcolm

CHAPTER ONE

As he made a final cut with the laser scalpel, Surgeon-Commander Carlo Rangone noticed the aide to the Commandant of the Casualty Transfer Station beckoning to him from the door. Rangone's brow darkened. He brooked no interruptions during operations. However, he supposed that it must be important. Giving instructions to Donlevy, the surgeon aiding him, he strode toward the scrubbing room. The aide followed him into the room and closed the door. Rangone did not like Templeton, but being tolerant, he did his utmost not to show it. At best, he was polite to the man.

If Templeton sensed the dislike, he covered it up well. Army training colleges, such as New Sandhurst, were good at that sort of thing.

"I regret disturbing you at an operation sir, but Commandant Brandt wishes to see you at once. It's very serious, I'm afraid. He will tell you about it himself."

"Kindly inform the Commandant that I'll be along in two minutes, Captain Templeton." He finished scrubbing off and dried his hands. Hanging up the towel neatly, he shrugged out of his gown as Templeton left.

Before going to Brandt's office, he looked into the operating theater and received a thumbs-up signal from his assistant. The case had been a particularly nasty one. The injured man was a scout pilot, and he'd been badly shot up off the fourth planet of Canopus. It was a miracle that the Enemy had left his ship intact enough to let him limp away. Normally,

they showed no mercy.

Fortunately, the wounded scout had been picked up in time and brought to the Casualty Transfer Station, located on the satellite of a dead planet. The next move would be to send him to one of the hospitals nearer to Earth, where he would get regeneration treatment to restore his missing left limbs. Everything was arranged. The pilot would go out with some other casualties, all thankful that, for them, the war was over.

Rangone's long stride carried him along the green-tiled corridors. As he saluted—Brandt liked discipline—he noted the others in the room. Templeton was there, of course, hovering beside Brandt's desk in a manner that barely missed being obsequious. Laura McDonald, his strong right arm, was there too, stiff as her dazzling white starched apron. He sensed at once the worry in her clear gray eyes and in the set of her mouth.

Templeton was flanked by handsome Marine Major Essenden, the commander of the station's military force. Better than anyone, he knew just how token that force was, and the knowledge irked him. Rangone didn't know for certain, but there had been rumors about his cowardice in the face of the Enemy during an assault on Canopus One. Normally, Essenden would have been returned home for court-martial, but the desperate situation demanded the services of every man. He'd been sent to the Station, and the man he replaced went to the front. The exchange had been fatal for the replacement military commander. He'd been killed the day after his transfer, and that had not endeared Essenden to the rest of the personnel. Laura, especially, was very hard on him. Essenden's gaze met Rangone's and slid away.

"I add my apologies to Templeton's for disturbing you during an operation, Commander," Brandt said, drawing his attention. "However, the situation is serious in the extreme."

He indicated a message form, the only thing on his desk except for a communicator, a note-pad, and a pencil.

"We are going to have to evacuate this station."

Rangone knew better than to interrupt, so he let Brandt go on.

"Canopus Four has just fallen and our forces have sustained severe losses: We'll lose the entire Canopus system, and the Enemy will then be in

a position to execute a pincer movement on this system. As a non-combatant unit, we have been ordered to get out as soon as possible."

"When are the relief ships coming?"

Brandt's blue eyes regarded him unblinkingly; suddenly the only sound in the room was the tiny metallic chucklings of the air-conditioning unit. Rangone felt his heart constrict. As a surgeon, empathy was his business.

"There will be no ships, Commander. We will have to rely on the one we have. I can see by your expression that the implications of this have not escaped you. We are here to decide on a course of action. Templeton will outline the alternatives."

The aide cleared his throat and said, "We have, as Commandant Brandt told you, only one ship. Fortunately, it's a hospital ship with a full complement of equipment and refrigeration tanks."

Thank heaven for that, Rangone thought, listening attentively. He was already ahead of Templeton, but it was just, as well to let the man finish. Brandt preferred to have things done in an orderly manner. Rangone was reminded of a story he had read about a shipwreck. The ship's orchestra continued to play even as the vessel sank beneath the waves. Brandt would have understood and applauded.

"The capacity of the ship is 75 active personnel. At present we have 194 people at the station, including 65 patients."

All the patients, Rangone knew, were recovering from surgery that couldn't be delayed until they reached hospital well behind the lines. There were practically no walking wounded. To all intents and purposes, the patients were helpless. He knew what Templeton was going to say next and he didn't like it one bit.

"We have two alternatives. One: a selection can be made and the most seriously wounded left behind."

"No!"

Brandt glanced disapprovingly at Laura, but he refrained from saying anything. He knew how much she cared for her patients and made allowances for that. They were longtime friends as well, but that didn't

enter into matters of discipline.

She looked unwaveringly at Rangone as she spoke, seeking the comfort and support she would find in his eyes.

"These people have a right to live, no matter how slender the chance is. They have to be given it."

She, too, had inferred the nature of the second alternative.

Templeton maintained his unruffled calm.

"Two: by using laser surgery, Commander Rangone and his assistant, Major Donlevy, can remove the arms and legs of some of the patients, the number to be determined by the Commandant. This will allow the storage of the living trunks in the refrigeration tanks and enable everyone to be evacuated. At one of the home hospitals, regeneration can be undertaken using the serum."

"Commander?"

"I agree with Laura. Everyone has the right to have a chance to live. There are still hits and misses in the regenerative process. We still get such results as short arms or legs, hands with no fingers, or five thumbs. But medical science is progressing daily and I think the chance must be taken. An improved serum has been in use for some months now and it has cut down the failure rate. Provided basic clinical conditions are available, it can be used anywhere, including the battlefield. We can't abandon anyone to the Enemy—or painlessly dispose of them. May I suggest, Commandant, that the position be explained to those patients able to understand."

Brandt shook his head. "I regret, Commander, that immediate action is imperative. There is no time for discussion. I must make the decision. This is perhaps the greatest burden of being in command. I can only hope that I will do the right thing and that they will understand, if anything goes wrong."

Brandt was right, of course. Ten times a day, he, Rangone, made decisions affecting individual lives. To cut or not to cut. This was just another decision, only on a much larger scale.

"I'll begin at once," Rangone said, feeling twice as old as his thirty-eight years. "Where is the ship?"

"Bay Number One," Templeton replied. "I'll go and check that everything is in readiness. There was a fault on the conveyor belt from the departure room to the tanks but it's been repaired. I'll stay in the ship and supervise the stowing of the patients. You can reach me at Extension Nine, Commander."

He saluted Brandt, managing to include Rangone in the gesture, picked up a clipboard, and went out. Rangone found himself admiring the aide, if not actively liking him. Efficiency was something Rangone understood. The times immediately ahead were going to be difficult, and he was relieved to know that he had someone at the ship to rely on. He and Donlevy would have enough to do in the theater. Laura would also be extremely valuable in soothing any worried patient; there would certainly be many for her to handle. He'd have to detail someone to help Templeton at the ship. He could assign Barbara, the senior nurse.

He and Barbara had been flirting tentatively since his arrival eleven months previously. He felt himself warming all over as he thought of her beautiful, dark, slanting eyes, her flawless skin, and superb figure. She was of old Earth stock, Eurasian, the daughter of a British father and a Chinese mother. Her home, once called Hong Kong, had reverted to China over 150 years ago, in 1999. It had been destroyed in an earthquake just after she was born, 24 years ago. Her family had left Earth for the large Chinese colony on Vega Seven.

"There is one other thing, Commander, that you have no doubt considered."

Rangone gave his attention back to Brandt. "Sir?"

"There are 129 people on the station who aren't patients: medical, military, administration, catering, and welfare personnel. Some of those people will have to go into refrigeration. Templeton has compiled a list."

He handed a copy to Rangone who scrutinized it. He was about to comment when Major Essenden said: "The military personnel will have to be excluded, of course, sir."

Brandt stood to his full height of six feet, two inches, dwarfing the

burlier, but shorter, junior officer.

"You forget yourself, Major. I make the decisions here. You dispute them at your peril."

Essenden's face went gray, like faded parchment, and he wilted under Brandt's contempt. The cowardice story could be true. Essenden fell into silence.

Brandt turned back to the surgeon. "If there's anyone on the list you feel can help you, please let me know now."

The communicator buzzed and Brandt answered it, while Rangone checked the list again. When Brandt was finished talking, Rangone informed him that he needed no one on it.

"Templeton has everything ready at the ship. I'll be here if you want to discuss anything important. Anything you want done will get top priority."

Rangone saluted and, as he left, he heard Brandt giving the two officers their instructions. The whole installation would have to be destroyed. Nothing was to be left for the Enemy. He smiled grimly as he walked along the corridors. For all anyone knew, the place might be of no use to the Enemy. No one had ever seen them. They might be 20 feet—or 20 inches tall.

When he reached his office, he put out a call for Barbara, then went into the operating theater. Briefly he told Donlevy what was to be done, and the assistant soon had everything under way. Within minutes, the first patient was on the table. The anesthetic was given and it acted quickly. The chart indicated that the man's injuries weren't serious. In any case, laser surgery was so highly developed that it had no side effects. It healed as it cut.

He set to work. As he made his skillful incisions, another patient was wheeled in, and Donlevy took over the first patient when Rangone had finished his work. Laura had thoughtfully pulled a divider down the center of the large room, blocking off the operating area. Orderlies waited unobtrusively in the background, ready first to put the living limbless trunks into sterilized bags already in position on the conveyor and then to dispose of the severed limbs.

The first man was finished. Rangone was sweating. Unbidden, a nurse came forward to wipe his brow. Barbara entered as another patient was brought in and apologized for the delay in answering his call. He outlined the situation, and she left to join Templeton at the ship. He wished that he could have kept her at his side, but that wasn't possible.

He glanced at the wall clock. The satellite had a 13-hour day, but an arbitrary 24-hour time unit had been adopted. This didn't matter, as there was nothing on the surface to attract people, although he enjoyed the magnificent panorama of the planet and the stars. He often visited the small observation bubble to see it. It was almost 12 noon now. There was still a long day ahead.

He gave instructions to an orderly to bring sandwiches at 1.15 and carried on with the surgery. The work was monotonous and uncomplicated. He didn't allow himself to think about the people whose limbs he was removing without their permission. What would they feel when they revived at a hospital behind the lines? That problem would have to be taken care of when it arose. The patients would have to be kept under sedation until their limbs were regenerated.

And what of those whose limbs didn't regenerate or failed to regenerate correctly? Who was going to explain to them? He pushed the thought away. He had enough to worry about at present. It was times like this that he wished he had never become a surgeon. Even with the many modern aids to surgery, his constant gambling with people's lives had a corrosive effect upon him. After the war, perhaps... But he knew, deep within himself, that he could never give up medicine, even if it killed him, as it very well might.

At 1.15 sharp, the refreshments came. He was joined by Donlevy and Laura McDonald. The two surgeons lounged on a couch, exhausted, and wondered where they would find the reserves of strength they were going to need.

"How close do you think the Enemy are?" Donlevy's tone was desultory, betraying his fatigue.

"Brandt was very careful not to say. He probably doesn't know. They're almost certain to be closer than we think. They could make the trip from Canopus Four to here in a few hours, if their ships are as fast as ours. It depends on how long it takes them to mop up the Canopus system. If they

want to make sure of closing the pincers on this system, they'll secure their rear first. Still, we might not make it."

He glanced at Laura as he said that.

She smiled slightly to indicate that she appreciated his concern.

"We'll just have to wait and see, won't we? Do you think Essenden will cause trouble?"

"I hope not, for all our sakes. Dissension at this time will do no one any good. Brandt can handle him, if necessary. I think Essenden's sense of discipline will prevail."

"It didn't prevail on Canopus One."

Both men stared at Laura. Her statement had been without malice, but the undercurrent of hate she bore toward the Major was unmistakable.

"I nursed some of the men who got back from that action. The ones who were killed were lucky. The survivors suffered the greatest percentage of regeneration failure on record since the war started 15 years ago. You heard how he talked to the Commandant in the office. He thinks he can cover up cowardice by causing trouble. Don't talk to me about discipline."

"We haven't heard his side of the story." Donlevy was attempting to be fair, although he didn't like the Major, either.

"I've heard all the other sides and that's enough for me."

Rangone was shocked by the venom in her voice. However, it was none of his concern at the moment. There was work to be done and very little time in which to do it.

The next few days passed in a blur of work and exhaustion. Rangone and Donlevy felt more like butchers than surgeons. They kept going by taking stimulants. If there was an afterwards, then would come the reckoning. The Navy still had a precarious hold in the Canopus system, and every hour that they held on increased the margin of safety for the station personnel.

By the evening of the third day the job was done. There had been some

difficulty with the healthy people who were required to submit to surgery, but, after Brandt had made it brutally clear what would happen to them if they elected to stay behind, they had agreed to it. All of them had signed the official forms of release, although, strictly speaking, the formality wasn't necessary, as they were already under military jurisdiction. Brandt liked to let them think they had some share in the decision, however small. The Navy messages had stopped coming. Why, Brandt didn't know. He conjectured that it was a protective device on the part of the Navy—or that the fleet had been annihilated. But this was just speculation; Brandt simply didn't know. Minutes might count, now. Even as the final preparations to blow up the installation were carried out by Essenden, the Enemy might appear and blast them into spacedust.

* * *

THE surface detectors made one last sweep and found nothing. Space was clear. The huge doors of the bay slid open and the ship was lifted to the surface of the bleak satellite. Harsh light poured down from the B-type star. The planet was a faintly glowing disc against the blackness.

The ship rose on its anti-gravs. Its detectors swept space. Still nothing. When it reached a distance of 100,000 miles from the satellite, the installation was detonated by radio beam.

After they had travelled a quarter-of-a-million miles, the hooter warned them that it was one minute to O-space. Sixty seconds. The count had begun and nothing could slow it down or speed it up. Sixty seconds.

With eighteen seconds to go and the generators practically at full power, another warning signal, keyed to the detectors, keened throughout the ship. Something had appeared from behind the bulk of the planet, and was less than 200,000 miles away, approaching fast from the starboard side. The Enemy.

CHAPTER TWO

The people aboard the hospital ship waited helplessly. Time seemed almost to stop and each second seemed like an hour. If they could slip into O-space before the Enemy fired...

The seconds ticked by like the drumroll before an execution. Six, five,

four, three, two...

The generators operated at peak power, wrenching the ship into O-space. At the same instant the Enemy missile struck. The effect, fortunately, was minimized by the stresses of the O-space field, but the ship was damaged, and the generators were knocked out of phase with the world lines of the field.

Instead of the calculated jump, the ship bucked like a wild stallion. One minute it would drive at many times the speed of light, then it would drop into normal space, then kick back into O-space again. How long the crazy performance lasted, no one would ever know.

Surgeon-Commander. Rangone awakened with a splitting headache and a premonition of disaster. In the dim emergency lighting, he stared around him. No one else stirred. He released the cocoon lever, then braced himself to get out. His hands felt a hot stickiness. Experience told him what the substance was. Wiping the blood from his fingers, he freed himself and stood up a bit groggily. The poor light, flickering as it did, aggravated his headache. He sat down on the couch until he felt some strength flowing back into his limbs. There was a crumpled mess on the floor beside the wall-couch. The wall itself was badly splashed. He bent down to examine the body that was now obviously beyond help. A tab glinted. A marine, by the looks of things.

He found his way to Brandt's cocoon, opened it, and tried in vain to shake the Commandant awake. It would be better, he decided, to get rid of the body before anyone else woke up. He hoped there was only one. Even surgeon's stomachs have to give sometime. Perhaps the emergency lighting was a blessing. He located a locker where disposal bags were stored. Taking the opaque bag back to the cocoon, he put the body into it and sealed it up. The man could be identified later, when time allowed.

He checked the rest of the cocoons and found one with its lid torn free. *The bad luck of the draw*, he thought. *It could have been me—or Barbara—But she was safer.* He knew that the others would wake in their own time, so he went to examine the rest of the ship.

He went forward to the bridge and activated the external scanners; only two screens responded and each showed blackness with a few faint stars. The ship seemed to be drifting, without spin. He tried the radio and the Mayday signal. Nothing happened. These were problems for the engineers.

His concern was for the cargo in the refrigeration tanks.

He walked toward the stern of the ship and reached the tanks. Full lighting cut back in and he put it down to the vagaries of electricity. The tanks were divided into compartments and each compartment had its own temperature gauges and refrigeration machinery.

The ten slots in each tank unit held that number of people. If an entire unit failed, 10 people would be affected. Anxiously, he scanned the gauges. Numbers 4, 7, and 11 glowed red. All the rest were green.

It was now certain that the ship had been damaged by the Enemy. Everything pointed to it. He checked the red-glowing gauges again. The three needles were just flickering past the safety figure. Something might be done yet. He ran back along the corridor and burst into the O-space cocoon room. There was great confusion now that most of the people were up. Some were clustered around the opaque bag. He didn't stop to explain. They could work it out for themselves. He sought out Brandt and drew him aside.

"Three of the tanks are damaged. If we hurry, we might be able to do something."

Without warning, the ship gave a lurch and the lights dimmed, then came on full again. Rangone broke into a cold sweat and his eyes strayed to the bundle in the bag.

"We've more than the tanks to see about," Brandt said. "The ship almost went back into O-space there. That's the refrigeration engineer, sitting in the corner. I'll get the generator engineer." He shouted for him while Rangone got hold of the tank man and explained the situation.

Brandt hollered again. "Would everyone please strap in again. Under no circumstances must anyone leave here until I give the word. Major Essenden, please ensure my order is obeyed. It includes you."

The two engineers filed out of the room with Brandt and Rangone. The ship lurched again slightly and the lights dimmed and stayed that way.

Durbin, the generator engineer, said, "We could go anytime, without a prayer, Commandant." His voice was surprisingly steady.

"I know. Let's just hope it doesn't happen. If it does, we won't know anything about it."

The four men reached the refrigeration dials and a quick glance told Rangone that the needles had gone farther into the red since he had last seen them only minutes before.

Hertz, the tank man, said, "There's still time."

"Good. We'll leave you then," said Brandt and he and Durbin hurried on towards the great generators near the stern of the ship.

Hertz opened a hatch and the two men entered. Number four was at floor level, and they reached it quickly. It was the worst of the three damaged slots. The engineer released an inspection plate and uncovered a handle marked in red. He pushed it over to the right.

"Follow me and do the same with number seven. Push it hard to the right. I'll attend to eleven."

Hertz and Rangone climbed the metal ladder and ran along the catwalk.

"The handle brings in the alternate cooling system," Hertz called, rushing to the next ladder as Rangone stopped at number seven.

The engineer's feet clanged loudly above his head. He opened the plate and thrust the handle hard to the right. He waited for Hertz to reappear. The lights were still on emergency, but at least the ship had not lurched again. Hertz came back down the ladder, and as the two men emerged from the hatch, they met Brandt and Durbin coming from the stern.

"How is it, Commandant?" Rangone asked, half-fearing to hear the answer.

"Not nearly as bad as we had expected."

Durbin said, "The ship was hit by an Enemy missile, but the O-space field negated most of the impact. I've rectified as much of the damage in the generators as I can at the moment. We won't go unexpectedly into O-space. We can't."

The lights came back on full. "No more trouble with the lights, either. When we get back to base, the generators can be repaired."

Rangone looked up sharply to find Brandt staring hard at him, so he said nothing.

Brandt inquired, "What's the report on the tanks?"

"I've cut in the manual emergency systems," Hertz replied. "That means that both the primary and alternate systems are out. I have about three hours to find and repair the faults. I'll get on with it, sir, if you don't mind."

Brandt nodded. "I'll have food sent along to you, as well as someone to hold your tools, if you'd like."

"Thank you, sir." Hertz was impatient to get started.

The three men went back to the cocoon room. While Durbin said his piece about the generators and the lights, Brandt summoned Templeton and the astrogator, Lieutenant Dunmurry. Rangone was also invited to attend the meeting on the bridge. He and Barbara exchanged smiles as he followed the Commandant out.

Once on the bridge, Brandt said to Dunmurry, "Find out where we are please, Astrogator."

Rangone had left everything switched on. As before, only two screens were working; they showed as little as Rangone had seen previously. Brandt tried the radio and the Mayday signal. Both were still out of action.

Dunmurry said, "I'll have to take visual sights, sir. I'll give you a position as soon as possible."

He climbed from the bridge to the observation bubble.

Brandt said to Rangone: "You knew that communications had failed?"

Rangone nodded. "I was the first to awaken and I immediately headed for the bridge to get the distress call out. I tried the external scanners, too. The view's still the same."

"It doesn't look good." The words were grim.

There was a knock on the door. Brandt switched off the two screens with their vistas of yawning darkness, composed his features, and said, "Come in."

It was Laura McDonald, with a tray of food and drink. If she saw anything amiss, she made no comment. Laura knew when to keep quiet.

She was about to leave, when Brandt asked her to stay. She didn't ask why, but simply complied with the request. She looked shrewdly at Rangone. Laura knew. She busied herself with the cups. '

"Is everything all right out there, Laura?"

"Yes, sir. For the present. We provided a meal and my girls have the situation in hand. Questions are being asked about the delay in landing and so on," she added obliquely.

For once the Commandant felt and looked inadequate. He said nothing, and Rangone could see that her suspicions had been confirmed. What was keeping Dunmurry?

Brandt could stand it no longer. "Templeton," he snapped, "See if you can assist the Astrogator."

Raising his eyebrows a little, the aide climbed the ladder and tried to open the hatch. It wouldn't budge. Bracing himself, he pushed up with both hands. The hatch opened slightly at first, then gave all the way. Back on the bridge, they could hear something bumping on the ceiling. Then they became aware of a muffled sobbing. Rangone quickly followed Temple-ton up the ladder.

Inside the bubble, he stumbled against Templeton and the two men fell over the huddled body of Dunmurry. Scrambling to his hands and knees, Rangone stared. Terror and awe suffused his whole being.

There, spread across his field of vision like the shield of a cosmic giant, was the Galaxy.

Templeton wasn't saying anything. His face, reflected in the pale fire from a hundred thousand million suns, was running with sweat. Rangone forgot his own fear and passed a hand in front of the aide's eyes. He had the satisfaction of seeing the man blink. He shook Templeton gently and

guided him towards the hatch.

"Go back down to the bridge. I'll get Dunmurry."

Whether Templeton understood or not, at least he was moving. The surgeon turned his attention to the astrogator. The man's head was pulled in between his knees; his hands were locked tightly over the back of his neck.

This was going to be difficult. He'd need Donlevy. He went to the hatch and asked Laura to get his assistant. He could see Templeton slumped in a chair, a bemused expression on his face.

Brandt was looking up at Rangone.

"What's out there?"

Rangone took a deep breath. "Our Galaxy. We've come right outside it. The shock of it sent Dunmurry into a catatonic trance, and if I hadn't followed Templeton, he'd have gone the same way."

Brandt turned away, his fists clenching and unclenching. With his back to Rangone, he said, "I don't have to tell you what it all adds up to, do I, Commander?"

"No. We're like people who have spent our lives navigating among millions of visible islands in a vast inland sea. Suddenly, inexplicably, a great storm blows up and sweeps us before it and makes us castaways on the biggest ocean there is. All our familiar landmarks are out of sight, over the horizon. And we're lost, more lost than anyone has ever been since time began. Dunmurry's trained mind couldn't comprehend the removal of the stars, the essential points of reference for his work, and the strain was too much."

CHAPTER THREE

Laura McDonald came back with a puzzled-looking Donlevy in tow. She shook her head slightly to indicate that she hadn't said anything. The news would have to come from Rangone. At least Tim would understand and not have hysterics. Donlevy started to climb the ladder. Rangone put up a hand.

"You'd better let me explain—as well as I can, Tim—before you come up."

The phrasing had to be right. He was going to have to repeat it many times within the next few hours.

"We're in very serious trouble. The ship is right outside the Galaxy. I hope it's *our Galaxy*. Dunmurry, the astrogator, couldn't take the shock. He's catatonic. Please come and help me."

Donlevy was noticeably pale, but composed. He climbed up beside Rangone, who said to Laura, "Please keep an eye on Templeton. He might need a hand to hold."

In the bubble, Donlevy was examining Dunmurry.

"It looks extreme. He might never recover his sanity."

He gazed past the man at the awesome spread of light. Out there, beyond the fragile window, was the stuff of reality and madness. If one stared too long... He shook himself mentally.

"We won't be able to use a stretcher."

Donlevy was glad Rangone interrupted his thoughts.

"He's not very heavy," Rangone went on. "If you can lower him through the hatch, I'll manage to carry him to the deck."

He went down the ladder and asked an anxious Brandt to support him on the rungs. He glanced over at Templeton and Laura. The aide seemed to be taking an intelligent interest in events and that was a good sign. He must have been made of stronger fiber than Dunmurry. Or perhaps he was less vulnerable to the potentially shattering effect of such sights. Whatever it was, Rangone was relieved that Templeton hadn't cracked.

The three men got Dunmurry down from the observation bubble. Templeton was now sufficiently recovered, and he and Donlevy went for a stretcher. They carried the astrogator to the medical room where Donlevy stayed with him.

"The others will have to be told at once," Brandt said decisively. "There

is nothing to be gained by delay. They've been asking questions. If they don't get answers, their suspicions might lead them to action." His brow furrowed. "It'll be bad enough for them. What about the ones in the tanks?"

Rangone spoke quietly. "Unless a miracle happens—no, two miracles—the people in the tanks are doomed. If we can't find our way back into the Galaxy, to an inhabitable planet, then nothing else matters. We'll all be doomed."

His colleagues were watching him intently as he continued. "Even if we do reach safety, that still won't help the ones back there. We expected to reach a hospital shortly after we evacuated the station. Unless there is serum aboard this ship, the people in the tanks will never have arms or legs again."

He hadn't meant to be so blunt. It had just come out that way. Shock registered on every face. His own muscles felt tight, now that he had spoken out what had been at the back of his mind ever since he had become aware of their seemingly hopeless plight.

"Poor, poor devils." Templeton's voice was surprisingly gentle. Brandt looked down at his boots. Laura was making a brave effort to keep her head up, to try to give Rangone some support. He and Donlevy had carried out the surgery. If they survived, they would have to carry the burden of their deeds for the rest of their lives.

Someone knocked. "Come in." Brandt's lips were tight as a jammed zipper. Hertz entered, his face beaming. He was wiping his brow with a soiled handkerchief. He said, "I've managed to get the primary systems working again on all three defective units, Commandant. They'll be all right, now."

He broke off as Brandt repeated. "All right now." The words were bitter and without hope.

The smile faded from the refrigeration unit engineer's face.

"Is—there—something wrong?" His eyes darted from one frozen countenance to the next, seeking an answer. Rangone knew that he would have to tell Hertz. Without frills, he explained the situation. Hertz slumped against the wall. His handkerchief fluttered to the deck, like a

token of surrender. He crossed himself.

"I'm sorry I was so efficient," he said, straightening up. "It would only be a small job to disconnect the systems."

"We can't do that... at present." Brandt sounded worn out. Then he realized the others were still looking to him as their leader. He tapped a hidden spring of strength and said briskly, "We'll go to the rest area, now. I'll explain the situation as well as I can. Then we must consider what we can do about it, if anything."

When they arrived at the rest area, the place was in an uproar. Essenden was standing on a table, trying to make himself heard above the din. In a corner, two marines were struggling with a man. One of the marines had an ugly bruise on his forehead. Barbara stood nearby, waiting to tend to the injury.

No one noticed the arrival of the party from the bridge. Then someone shouted, "The Commandant!" and immediately the newcomers were almost swamped by pressing bodies and shouted questions.

Brandt had a strong voice. His second "Quiet!" had some effect and the noise abated. "Settle down. I have something very important to tell you. Anyone creating further disturbance will be put in the brig. Do I make myself clear?"

His eyes snapped around the assembly like lobster claws, and he was answered by a mumbled chorus of assent. The marines had managed to subdue the man and Barbara attended to the wounded one, who obviously relished the attention.

"Most of you have probably guessed by now that the ship was damaged just before it entered O-space. The generators are not working correctly and this has caused the ship to make a number of erratic jumps. We are now right outside our Galaxy." He let the surge of disbelief wash over him and went on. Engineer Durbin has rectified the fault in the generators, so there will be no more unexpected jumps."

"Can we get *back*?" a senior medical orderly interrupted, his voice on the edge of panic. Essenden had distributed his marines strategically among the crowd of about fifty people; he was prepared for trouble.

Brandt looked at Durbin and the engineer said: "The O-space generators are working, but not predictably. They need a major overhaul and this ship isn't equipped to provide it. If they were used, I could give no guarantee where the ship would end up."

There was a brief struggle over by one wall and Rangone saw a marine hitting a man with technician's insignia on his uniform, something glinted and hit the floor. The marine scooped up the knife, while the man slid slowly down the wall and collapsed into a huddle. The incident passed virtually unnoticed. Barbara had finished with the injured marine and she managed to worm her way to Rangone's side. He put a protective arm around her as they faced the others. The atmosphere was getting more tense by the minute.

Everyone started talking and gesticulating at the same time so that suggestions were swallowed up in the racket. One word finally came through—food— and they quieted down.

"What about food and drink, Commandant?" Pryde, the assistant astrogator, asked.

"There will be an equitable distribution," Brandt said quickly, adding, "while we find a solution to our problem. Meantime," he pressed on, "I want everyone to stay here. Don't go wandering about the ship. You will be kept fully informed of any decisions made."

This seemed to satisfy them, although there were still small groups engaged in heated discussions. Brandt drew Essenden aside.

"Place guards on the food supplies, at the refrigeration units, and at the generators. Tell them to apprehend anyone who does not have my express written authority to be in those areas. I'm relying on you to keep control. It would take very little to cause the situation to blow up in our faces."

Essenden's salute and "Yes, sir," carried an implied sneer, but Brandt let it pass. He needed the officer, and he would not hesitate to use him to help preserve law and order. Essenden had acted well thus far and Brandt hoped that things would continue that way.

Brandt called Rangone, Durbin, Hertz, and Pryde to the bridge. He stationed a marine outside the door. When Pryde asked where Dunmurry was, Brandt told him that he was indisposed. He gave no further

information and the tone of his voice warned the assistant astrogator not to pry for more.

"I'll summarize our position," Brandt began, after they'd settled themselves. "One: the ship is a considerable distance outside our Galaxy. Two: the generators can work, but they can't be fully controlled. Three: there seems to be little, or no hope of regeneration for the people in the tanks. Four: I haven't checked the food supply. However, we left the station in a hurry and the supply is probably very low. We didn't expect to need a lot."

He invited comment; when none was forthcoming, he continued, "Sooner or later, sooner I fear, some of the people back there are going to think out items three and four for themselves, especially the one or two who have relatives in the tanks. That's when the real trouble will start. Once panic gets hold, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to control."

He cleared his throat before concluding, "In our isolated position, there is no chance of our being found by another ship. (You'll bear with me for stating the obvious, but it helps to underline just how desperate our straits are.) Nothing has ever been this far out in space. We have no means of attracting attention."

"What about our radio, the Mayday signal...?" Pryde's question tailed off as he met with blank stares. In any case, had any of them stopped to think about it, sending signals would have been about as effective as waving paper flags.

Brandt went on as if there had been no interruption. "There is only one thing we can do: we must try the generators."

The suggestion came as no surprise to the men.

Durbin warned them, "You realize that anything might happen during jumps, Commandant? I think I can make certain that the ship heads back toward our own Galaxy, rather than Andromeda, or some other island universe, but that's the limit I can guarantee. We might end up inside a star. The automatic kick-in that operates if the ship comes too near to a body in space is damaged beyond repair. We might shoot right through to the other side of the Galaxy. Or we might not emerge from O-space at all."

"All very cheering," Brandt commented with dry humor. "Is there

anything else you can do that will increase our chances, even by a fraction?"

Durbin was hesitant. "There are one or two adjustments I can make, but they're dangerous, not in the book—"

"We'll forget about the book. Do what you can, then report to me. Commander, I want you to check and see if there is any serum aboard the ship. Hertz and I will find out our food situation. Meet me back here in fifteen minutes."

Brandt, Hertz and Rangone were back on the bridge at the appointed time. Durbin was still working on the generators.

"I found some serum," Rangone reported, "but not enough to bring about full regeneration for everyone in the tanks."

Brandt grimaced. "We have very little food; perhaps enough for a few days if we ration it very strictly."

"Need we be explicit about the amounts of food and serum?" Rangone asked. "At this stage, we don't even know if Durbin's adjustments are going to be successful. Why create a panic?"

As a doctor, Rangone was adept at shading his meaning when he thought it necessary to the well-being of a patient.

Rangone took advantage of Brandt's momentary pause to try to persuade the Commandant to his point of view.

"If the ship is going to make jumps, people will be in their cocoons. All but essential personnel can be put under hypno-sleep. That could be explained, quite honestly, by saying that anything might happen during uncontrolled O-space maneuvers. That would solve the food problem. It would also solve the ultimate problem, should the ship fail to reach a planet, or end up in the limbo between O-space and normal space."

There was a silence. Still Brandt considered the alternatives.

"My suggestions might not be ethical, but they *are* right, in the present situation," Rangone added.

Brandt snapped his head up and he looked at the surgeon's face for a long minute. Rangone returned his scrutiny without a blink.

"You're right," Brandt admitted. "Let's go and tell them."

They caught the tail-end of a woman's scream as they entered the rest area. "... brother's back *there!* Oh, Bob..."

Amidst the general melee, a woman was struggling between Barbara and Laura, who were trying, unsuccessfully, to calm her. She tore herself away when she saw Rangone and flung herself at him, her nails raking red lines down his face.

"Beast! Murderer!" Her breath came in great gulps as she railed at him. "You maimed my brother and now he'll never get his arms and legs back!"

Screams racked her body and she sagged against him. He caught her before she fell. Laura appeared with a needle, found a vein, and injected a clear fluid, all without fuss. The effect was almost immediate. The woman was helped out to the medical room.

The ugliness was back in the air. One of the nurses was crying steadily.

Brandt called out: "The woman is wrong. There is serum. The people in the tanks have every chance of regeneration."

It was a shading of meaning of which Rangone could have been proud.

"And we have food," Brandt continued. "We are going to try to get back to our own Galaxy. Engineer Durbin thinks that we can at least reach it; then we can start a search for a planet. Please help by keeping calm. Miss McDonald, give a sedative to anyone who wants it."

To Essenden, he said in a low voice, "What happened, Major?"

The officer must have been feeling guilty, for he bristled.

"I couldn't prevent it—"

Brandt cut off his protest fiercely. "I'm not blaming you, Essenden. Just tell me what happened."

"They were all whispering together and suddenly the woman shouted

out that the people in the tanks would never be regenerated. You came in just about at that point."

Brandt kept any curtness out of his tone. "In the circumstances there was nothing you could do to prevent the outburst, Major. It is unfortunate that Commander Rangone came in at that juncture. I think you've done a good job so far in helping to control a potentially explosive situation. I want you to carry on with your duties." He turned to leave, then stopped and added. "There's something I want to clear up, Major Essenden. You react every time I, or anyone else for that matter, comes near. My personal opinion of you as a soldier is not going to interfere with my efforts to extricate this ship and its personnel from our present trouble. I'd take it as a great favor if you would submerge your feelings, for all our sakes. If we can't live on terms of brotherly love, then we must at least declare a truce."

Brandt was unsure of Essenden's reaction. He was relieved to see the Major's face take on an expression vaguely like that of respect. He nodded his head decisively, saluted, and said, "Yes, sir," without sneering.

The Commandant was satisfied. Personal friction was the last thing he wanted, especially at a time like this. He returned Essenden's salute and went to join Rangone, whose cuts were being attended to by Barbara.

"Sorry about the attack, Commander. Is it serious?"

Barbara shook her head, not really paying attention to Brandt's query.

Rangone said, "It wasn't your fault, sir. In a way, it wasn't the woman's either. She didn't know we have some serum aboard. But she was partially right. I am to blame for what was done to those people in the tanks."

"No guilt attaches to you, Commander," Brandt interjected swiftly. "You carried out my orders. The responsibility for everything that happens aboard this ship rests with me. Please join me on the bridge when you are ready."

As Rangone entered the bridge, Pryde was descending the ladder from the observation bubble. Brandt had just asked if he felt better, when Durbin knocked and came in.

"Now we can get started."

They gathered around the astrogation table. Pryde laid down his autocalc and glanced at a sheet of paper.

"I estimate that we're approximately twenty thousand light-years out into space and about thirty-five degrees above the galactic plane."

With the electron pencil, he drew a rough sketch on the star projection plate.

"It doesn't matter how far out we are," Durbin said. "I've been thinking about this. Nothing has ever been this distance away from the Galaxy. Assuming we are still on a world line, it must be an inter-galactic one. We have no experience of that. The ship will follow the world line, but I have no control over the generator output."

The other three contemplated Durbin accusingly, as men who knew they were going to die, but hadn't actually heard the sentence pronounced.

Durbin was defensive. "I *did* mention it before."

"Did you make the adjustments you hinted at earlier?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the results?"

"The ship must follow a world line but I don't know which one. It will head generally towards our Galaxy. But I can't be specific about an exact place within it, such as the Sun's backyard. I can make sure that the ship will emerge from O-space and the mass-detector I've rigged up should keep us from bumping into anything. This detector is an additional power drain, so we can't jump indefinitely. And I have no control over the magnitude of the jump. One light year, a thousand, or..."

They all knew what that "or" meant.

Without hesitation Brandt decided, "The chances are much better than I thought they would be. Provided the ship can be kept heading toward our Galaxy, we might yet survive."

"We can only make a limited number of jumps," Durbin reminded the Commandant.

"Can you indicate when the limit is being reached?"

When Durbin said he could, Brandt said, "We might as well get started."

"Are you going to tell them of your decision?" Rangone inclined his head in the direction of the rest area.

"We've agreed that there is only one course of action. I have made the decision to implement it. There isn't the time nor the necessity for a general discussion. It would serve no purpose."

"And the hypno-sleep?"

"Carry it out. Tell no one. Return here when it's done."

As Rangone went out, he heard Brandt telling Pryde to sound the hooter ten minutes prior to jump-time into O-space.

Most of the cocoons were sealed by the time Rangone arrived at the jump-room. Essenden and Barbara were supervising the operation. Rangone answered their unspoken question with a brief nod. He saw them sealed into their own cocoons. Then he turned on the hypno-sleep mechanism and went back to the bridge. Brandt and Pryde were already in their cocoons; Durbin was in one of the two cocoons in the generator room. Rangone got into his own cocoon. The cocoons were inclined so that the occupants could watch the instrument panel and the viewing screens. Brandt checked with Durbin that everything was ready.

The one-minute warning wailed through the ship like a lost wind.

Sixty seconds to—what?

One light year, a thousand, or... Durbin's words rattled around in Rangone's mind like loose marbles as he tried to relax in his cocoon. Maybe Durbin's modifications would fail and they'd end up inside a blue giant. Such thoughts were hardly relaxing, but they came unbidden, like spectators at a public execution. The ship might never emerge from O-space and they would be doomed to endure a living madness. He clenched his teeth until they hurt as he waited for the jump.

CHAPTER FOUR

Achieving or surpassing the speed of light had seemed an insurmountable obstacle to flight among the stars. Methods of circumventing it, such as the use of suspended animation or the idea of using a ship as a travelling rabbit hutch in which generations of people lived and died enroute to their destination, had been studied and discarded. The stars looked as unattainable as they were to Neolithic man.

But scientific work and the discoveries stemming from it continually enable man to advance. Work done in the '60s and '70s of the twentieth century on pulsars, quasars, and black holes hinted very strongly that space had, for want of a better word, a fabric. Space existed as a thing in itself, as did the galaxies, stars, and interstellar gas. Money was allocated and research intensified. The key to interstellar flight lay in the rare terminal condition of a star's existence, known as a black hole. The vast majority of stars died in cold obscurity. But some stars finished with a flare of glory, when, for a brief time, measured sometimes only in hours, the immensely dense core of the star exploded, and shone with a light that equalled the luminosity of an entire galaxy of 100 thousand million suns.

The remnants of the stellar core then disappeared from visual and instrumental detection, just as print is lost to view when a page is turned, though it still remains physically present. The black holes remained as highly concentrated magnetic signposts to the fabric of space. It was discovered that by following this fabric, the speed of light could be exceeded. The holes themselves could not be used: unmanned probe ships simply vanished. Then came the discovery that black holes throughout the Galaxy were connected by force vectors that came to be called world lines (a phrase coined by a popular science writer). Their use enabled ships to travel among the stars. These world lines criss-crossed space. To travel from one star to another, a ship phased into a world line, moved along it until it reached the vicinity of its destination, then completed the journey at sub-light velocities.

The duration of jumps, as they came to be called, and the distance covered by them, was calibrated according to the laws which existed in Other, or O-space. The shorter the proposed journey was to last, the briefer the intervals between jumps could be. It was discovered that a ship could not travel in one uninterrupted jump. Rather, it had to move along with an undulating motion like a wave form, pulsing briefly into normal

space at each peak of the wave, before another surge of power from its generators plunged it back into O-space. Occasionally, ships were lost when they failed to dip back into the trough of O-space. They were simply marooned among the stars.

* * *

FOR the three men on the bridge, it was a time of almost interminable waiting. Unless they were very fortunate, an eternity of drifting would be the fate of the people aboard the hospital ship. The ship's response to the generators was unpredictable and erratic. Durbin had specified one-hour intervals between jumps to allow him to coddle them. Only when the ship had jumped and peaked for the eighth time was any progress evident. They were now much nearer to the galactic mass and their orientation to it had altered. The central concentration of stars marking the Hub of the Galaxy had shifted off to port and before them spread its loosely-wound spiral arms.

Now comes the hard part, Brandt thought. The target had looked much bigger when the ship was farther out. With the thinning of the stars ahead of the ship, the chances of arriving in the vicinity of a star, let alone one with habitable planets, were much reduced. His confidence began to ebb.

Without warning, the ship jumped again, then plummeted back into O-space.

Durbin's voice came hollowly into the cocoons.

"That wild jump has upset the generators, Commandant. We're riding an uncharted galactic world line instead of the usual inter-stellar path. The power drain has left us practically no reserve. I estimate that we can make three more jumps."

"Thanks, Engineer." Brandt made a great effort to prevent his voice from shaking. "We'll have to make those jumps. We have no option. Do the one hour intervals still apply?"

"I'm trying to calculate that, sir. So many unknowns make it a wee bit difficult. Just a minute."

Three steps to salvation, or oblivion, Brandt thought into the silence.

They could not, they must not, fail now! For the ones in the tanks, failure might be for the best, another part of him reasoned. No! It was a long scream in his mind.

* * *

By holding on to the thin strand of life, man had spun himself a strong web to the stars. Every human life snuffed out weakened the structure by its passing.

The people in the tanks had their right to life and he would give his own to see that they lived. Rangone had said that there was enough serum to permit the regeneration of one arm and hand for each person in the tanks. How they would react to the situation was a problem he could legitimately put off for the future.

* * *

Durbin intruded on his thoughts.

"It won't matter, sir, how small or how large the intervals are between jumps. The rules don't apply, since we have only three jumps left. After that the generators will be useless for O-space jumps."

Brandt felt hopeless. "One light year, a thousand, or infinity—does it still apply, Engineer?"

He heard Durbin breathing heavily and the sound, oddly, was reassuring.

"There's absolutely no control now, Commandant. The generators are not phasing in accurately with this galactic world-line. In addition to the drain on our power, the immense distance between the black hole in our Galaxy and the one to which it is connected, probably in Andromeda, must add to the problem. The deviation is surprisingly small, but it's enough to cause trouble. There's now a more than even chance of the ship disappearing into limbo."

Brandt said quietly, "We'll jump. I'll decide the intervals."

For perhaps the first time in his life, Brandt experienced the need for something greater than a reliance on his ability to survive. He had never

come to terms with religion, despising, for the most part, the trappings and distortions it had suffered at the hands of society. He hated the shattering effect it had on hitherto-isolated beings. If others wished to rely on what he considered to be a prop created by man to prevent himself from falling over, that was their concern. He found that he managed to get along very well without the aid of a prop, no matter what name it bore.

Man, individually and collectively, might be the joker in the universal pack, but he was there, and exerting an influence. Time and space, matter and energy: all had been brought under his control. Man had conquered life and he would surely conquer death as well.

Here I am, Brandt reflected, *face to face with eternity. I am not going to flinch.*

"Jumping now."

When the ship peaked, the stars were thicker, but still too far away.

"Make the second jump."

The console light dimmed and brightened.

"There!" Pryde cried, hysteria in his voice. "Down at the bottom right of the screen—a star showing a disc. And others within range. We must have hit a stream."

Brandt felt a sense of relief so all-pervading that it hurt. Tears were splashing down his cheeks and he didn't care. They were safe.

Then, transfixed, he saw the tell-tale light fade and fail to regain its former brightness. The ship emerged from the unscheduled jump. He forced himself to look at the screen. His tears turned bitter, now.

The stars were gone. The blackness of space seemed to seep into the cocoon, into his very being. The gamble had been lost. Over the radio linking his cocoon with that of Pryde, he could hear the astrogator cursing steadily. Durbin was also cursing, but for a different reason. "The kick of a dying mule," he kept saying over and over. "It had to get us before it gave out."

Brandt could have given himself over to despair quite easily, but he

resisted.

"Durbin, stay where you are until I order you to leave. You are still on duty. Pryde, get into the observation bubble and let me know our position."

He released himself from his cocoon as he spoke. Pryde was struggling up to the bridge like a corpse rising from his grave. His normally tanned face was several shades paler. Brandt, stretching himself, made no comment.

The astrogator climbed into the bubble. Brandt paced about below waiting.

Pryde came back down, almost falling as he moved.

"Dead astern, Commandant! A small group of stars! They must be on the Galactic rim. One of them is showing a reddish-yellow disc. I can't tell what size it is."

"So we might still have a leg of the race to run. Ask Mr. Durbin to come to the bridge, please. He'll know if we can reach that star."

Neither man spoke what was in his mind: *the star might not have planets.*

Pryde had given Durbin the news over the intercom and the engineer was a bit jauntier when he came onto the bridge.

"What's the power situation?" Brandt demanded, his anxiety lending undue harshness to these words.

"The generators are finished as far as O-space jumping goes, sir, but they can still be used for other purposes. The planetary drive is functioning. I would say that we'll make that star."

Brandt exhaled heavily and directed his glance at the two men.

"Point the ship in the right direction and let's get underway. Start the scanners on a sweep for planets. I'm going to leave the others in hypno-sleep until we know the result of the search. I take it that we won't know for a few hours, yet?"

"I'll try and calculate the size of the star, sir," Pryde answered, clearing a space on the star-projection table, "and knowing our own velocity, I should be able to give a rough indication of our estimated time of arrival at a likely orbit. The stellar spectrum indicates that the star is somewhere in the K- or M-type range, so it should have a lower temperature than Sol. I'll provide accurate data as soon as possible."

"Good." To Durbin he said, "Five minutes to firing time. I'm going for a quick check of the sleepers."

He left the bridge through the door leading to the cocoon room. He went in. The cocoons were ranked like row upon row of sarcophagi; he felt like an archaeologist opening a tomb in the Valley of the Kings. He gazed in at one or two of the drugged faces, whose owners knew nothing of the group of stars or of the chances of survival. He shivered a little. The thought of tombs had made him sensitive to the silence of the room and he went out feeling depressed.

Going round the corner to his left, he entered the first of the inter-connecting medical units. The whiteness of the place again reminded him, somehow, of death. He made his inspection of the cocooned people as brief as possible and returned to the corridor.

He leaned against the wall. He discovered that his uniform was sticking to him. As much as anything that had gone before, this observation made him realize the strain that he was under. It was perhaps as well that he hadn't had time to think about himself. As he stood there, he made a resolve: if he failed to find a habitable planet among the group of suns ahead, then he would let the sleepers rest on for all eternity. There would be no point in reviving them to relay word of their impending extinction.

He went back to the bridge, determined to keep his decision to himself. Pryde was still working at the table, Durbin was sitting on one of the console couches staring at the two screens that still worked. One of them showed the group of stars.

"I've redirected the ship, sir. Thirty seconds to firing."

They watched the hand of the clock sweep away the seconds until the light above the space drive gauge turned green and a faint tremor announced the return of life to the ship. Once again it had purpose.

With audible sighs, they relaxed a little. Subconsciously, they were listening for the signal from the probing beam that sought a planet, even though they knew that any body this far from one of the stars would be useless. Still, the discovery of a planet at this distance out would increase the possibility of the existence of other, more suitable, worlds nearer to the warm rays of a star.

Durbin heaved himself out of the couch. "I'll go and make a hot drink."

Brandt nodded. Pryde went on with his work and Brandt didn't disturb him. Taking a couch, he pressed a stud and lowered himself to a half-lying position. Sleep tried to engulf him, but he fought against it. Tired and exhausted as he was, this was no time for sleep. The others had to stay awake; so must he. Glancing at Rangone who was in hypno-sleep, he almost envied the Surgeon-Commander. If the search failed, he would never know. The doctor had protested at having to take the sleep, but Brandt had overruled him. If he was needed, he could be awakened.

The engineer returned with the drinks, just as Pryde said, "I've got figures for us to work on, Commandant." He came over to the couch, a notepad in his hand. Durbin handed out their drinks.

"The star we're interested in is a K-2, so it's in the right temperature range. As it's in the main sequence, we're likely to find planets in orbit around it."

Brandt refrained from rousing what might prove to be false hopes and asked, "What about the other two stars?"

Pryde frowned. "They are both too far away. They form only a visual group with the K-2. It's our sole prospect."

"How long before we reach the vicinity of the stars?" Durbin wanted to know.

"I estimated that we're at least two hundred million miles away from it—allow for a ten percent margin of error either way, probably on the wrong side. With our ion drive velocity of ten million miles a day, we should be somewhere in the zone where suitable planets are likely to be found within eight or nine days."

They thought that one over and sat gazing at the glowing star. Brandt

started to say something, when a loud *ping* interrupted him.

Cups clattered, liquid burned, as they scrambled to reach the sonarscope. Fascinated, they stared at the blip on the display screen. Pryde shook himself, checked the time lag between two successive radar signals, and read off: "Seventy seconds! That would make it... let's see... about thirteen million miles away. We should reach the body in thirty hours!" ' "

Durbin picked up the fallen cups and cleared up the mess. "If, as you say, we're about two hundred million miles away from the star, Mr. Pryde, it means that the planet out there will probably be too cold to sustain life—"

"I know that, Chief," the astrogator said, wanting nothing to dampen his joy. "Where there's one planet, more are almost certain to exist."

Durbin was going to reply, but Pryde pushed on: "Planet-building plays an integral part in the life of a star, especially one on the main sequence. It has also been shown that, given the right conditions, at least two bodies in any normal solar system will be capable of sustaining life, should it arise.

"That doesn't mean to imply that the suitable planets must have blue skies and balmy days. A very interesting study of minimal conditions—"

Brandt interrupted firmly, "I think we take your point, Mr. Pryde. The important thing now is to get some rest. We'll take turns sleeping, two men on duty, one off. You two can decide who is to have the first rest period, four hours."

"Let us take the first watch, sir," Pryde offered.

"I'll stay on just now. Hurry up and decide."

They tossed for it. Pryde won and went to sleep.

Brandt and Durbin settled down to what they hoped would be an uneventful watch.

In the loneliness of space at the rim of the Galaxy, the ship sped on toward the source of the blip on the display screen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Brandt had second thoughts about leaving Rangone in hypno-sleep. The Surgeon-Commander, after all, ranked second only to himself. If anything unforeseen happened to Brandt, the doctor would be in command.

When Rangone awakened, Brandt told him what was happening.

"I'm glad you didn't leave me in stasis, Commandant. If something happened, the idea of being left to drift on into oblivion doesn't appeal to me."

"I have a much more practical reason than that for arousing you, Surgeon-Commander. You probably haven't realized it but, because of your rank, you are second-in-command aboard this ship."

No comment was necessary.

* * *

DURING the next twelve hours the sensitive instruments of the ship detected five more bodies in orbit around the star they were approaching. They had six chances for survival.

When they were about eight million miles away from the first object the radar had picked up, Pryde, in the observation bubble, sighted it visually with the six-inch reflector. He saw that what he had thought to be one body was, in fact, two, travelling very close together in parallel orbits. They were irregularly shaped, obviously hopeless for their needs. It was only as he sensed his mounting disappointment that he admitted that he'd built up his hopes in defiance of the scientific probabilities. The two cosmic chunks looked small and so they proved to be. One was about 1500 miles in diameter, the other about 200 or 300 miles smaller.

As the ship swept in toward the star, three more objects were sighted visually. All were barren.

As the ship approached the second-last planet, tension was evident in the eyes and the tight mouths of the four men. This planet was in orbit a hundred and thirty million miles from the dimly-lambent star. The planet looked promising, banded as it was by heavy cloud or dust. The albedo was very low. A tiny, lone satellite hovered just outside the Roche Limit.

The planet was about six thousand miles across.

Taking no chances, Brandt ordered the ship into orbit, 1000 miles above it.

"We're not going to find out very much from up here," Brandt announced, "so I'm going down in a lifeboat to explore."

He waved aside a flurry of protest. "You'll be in command of the ship during my absence, Doctor. If I fail to return, you'll be permanently in charge. I've recorded all this on the vocalog. I'll leave as soon as I've checked over the craft. If this world is uninhabitable, then we'll go on to the last one. I don't know how long I'll be gone. However, if I haven't come back within six hours, you are to assume that I am lost. Do not attempt to search for me. That will not achieve anything, and will just cause delay. Would you accompany me to the lifeboat please, Commander?"

He saluted Pryde and Durbin.

As they walked along the corridor, Brandt said, "My concern is for everyone aboard ship, but especially for those in the tanks. We might not find a suitable planet, Commander. That will mean that we're doomed. In that event, the sleepers must not be awakened. We can at least do that much for them."

They reached the lifeboat bay.

"I'm sure that you'll be back, sir."

Brandt said nothing. He checked over the craft.

"You're in command now." They shook hands briefly. Brandt sealed himself into the lifeboat while Rangone closed the bay. Seconds later, a light indicated that Brandt had taken the lifeboat out and Rangone returned to the bridge.

"Did he get away all right?" Durbin asked.

"Yes." Rangone stood staring at the two functioning screens. I feel like a man who is playing in a game in which the dice are loaded. Space is catching up with us. It frightens me to be pitted against such long odds."

Durbin said, "Even if we find a haven, Commander, our troubles will not be over."

"What do you mean, Chief?" Pryde's question was sharp.

"I might have difficulty landing the ship safely. She's taken more rough handling than she was designed for. I'm surprised—and thankful—that she's still spaceworthy. Some of the modifications I've carried out worked only because of an engineering miracle."

"We won't fail," Pryde said, his words firm with conviction. "We can't fail."

Neither man answered. How often they had seen human resolve crushed by the onslaught of implacable Nature.

Brandt's voice crackled into the silence. "I'm entering the cloud layer now... to hear from... until I get..."

"It sounds bad down there," Durbin commented worriedly.

Rangone deftly guided the conversation into another channel. He said to the Chief Engineer: "Have you ever known any human activity that requires the exercise of skill that isn't attended by some degree of lucky chance, or miracle if you like? I think that it's just such a rogue factor that makes us the best computers of all and preserves the dichotomy between us and machines."

"The simple word for it is 'hunch'," Pryde said. "It's come to my aid, often. Astrogation isn't quite the exact science laymen like to think it is!"

"That's right," Rangone replied, happy to keep their minds off their present troubles, "Medicine has made a lot of progress out of hunches that were acted on with skill and judgment. It must be the same with you, Chief. I think sometimes it is uncanny the way you persuade your machinery to do what you want."

Durbin consulted the chronometer. "We should be passing into the night side of the planet about now."

The thought seemed to depress him, for he asked Rangone, "How are those poor devils in the tanks going to take the news that the best they can

hope for is to have one arm and hand regenerated? Who is going to tell them? I don't envy whoever gets that job to do."

Rangone's expression made it evident that he wished the subject hadn't arisen. But it had and he tackled it forthrightly.

"It will have to be done gradually, no matter who tells them. They'll have to be sedated so that the knowledge can be given to them in small doses. Our immediate problem is to find a habitable piece of land, either on this planet or on the last one. Otherwise we're all dead. Brandt wants to let the hypno-sleepers and those in the tanks remain the way they are, just in case we fail. A year from now, or a million, the ship will hit something and they will never know what happened."

"That leaves four of us, assuming that the Commandant gets back," Pryde said. "You must have something tucked away that you can give us. I, for one, wouldn't relish being entombed alive in a ship, with no place to go, waiting for the end. In that circumstance it would take more courage to live than to die. One of the things that makes life bearable is the fact that we don't know when or how we will die. But sitting here, waiting for the end—"

"It hasn't happened yet, so there's no point in worrying about it. You're supposed to be the optimist in the crew, remember?"

Pryde nodded at Rangone, but didn't reply.

* * *

ONCE Brandt descended into the cloud layer, conditions became turbulent and he found the lifeboat difficult to handle. It was continually buffeted by high winds and he had to keep correcting his course. Occasionally lightning struck the hull, causing it to ring dully. Brandt hoped that the clouds didn't stretch too far down or his search would be hampered. The cloud layer was extensive, at least fifty miles deep, Brandt didn't care for his prospects.

His screens showed nothing but grayness all round. His radar told him that he was within ten miles of the surface, which seemed to be curiously flat. Deeper and deeper the craft penetrated the murk and still the clouds persisted. If anything, the storms at that level were even more intense than they had been higher up in the atmosphere.

Finally, about a mile above the surface of the planet, the clouds began to thin out, but visibility was still poor. The rain was torrential. The lifeboat hit a series of air pockets and Brandt momentarily lost control as it tumbled towards the surface. Finally he managed to regain control. The radar screen told him that the surface was flat. He couldn't see it yet.

Puzzled, he slowed his rate of descent, straining his eyes in an attempt to pierce the sheets of rain. Suddenly he broke into a small, clear patch. He was looking down at a rain-swept ocean that stretched in all directions as far as he could see. The sight scared him and for a moment, his mind froze. He had always hated the sea. He overcame his fear, set up a search pattern on the computer, and proceeded cautiously. Probing with his radar, he circled the planet, his bewilderment growing by the hour.

Just over four hours after he had left, he edged the craft alongside the ship and maneuvered it into the bay. When the pressure gauge light on his panel told him that air had been cycled into the lock, he left the lifeboat.

Rangone and Durbin were waiting for him.

"All water," Brandt said, releasing them from their tension.

"Water!" Durbin was incredulous.

"That, or liquid of some description." Brandt began to walk towards the bridge and the others trailed along behind him.

"We're relieved to have you back, Commandant. Was it bad?"

Brandt answered Rangone, "Yes, very bad." He closed his eyes, then opened them again, shutting out the terror of those few hours. "I followed a search pattern that took me over the whole surface. There wasn't a piece of land showing anywhere above the waves. The place is a cauldron of rain and storms."

He shivered a little as they entered the bridge. Pryde said he was glad to see the Commandant back safely and handed him a warm drink. Brandt sat on one of the couches and recounted his story for Pryde's benefit.

"I shot a roll of film. You can see it for yourselves. But I don't want to be there when it's shown. As I went on and on without sighting land, I kept wondering to myself what I would do if something happened to the

lifeboat and I was doomed to float forever on the sea like a cosmic Flying Dutchman. It wasn't pleasant, I can tell you."

They were silent for a moment, each thinking about his own private fears.

Then Durbin asked, "What's the next move?"

"There is only one move. We go on to the last planet and hope for the best."

Pryde said thoughtfully, "I think our chances of survival have risen, Commandant."

Brandt frowned. "How do you arrive at that conclusion?"

"That world below is covered in water. When there's water at this distance from the star and especially when there's so much of it, then there is almost certainly some water on the last planet. And there will be plenty of land above the water. The odds against the existence of two pelagic worlds in one solar system are astronomical."

If anyone recognized the unintentional pun, it caused no amusement.

"Given land and water, there should be vegetation, which, in turn, means oxygen."

"Hold on a minute," Brandt said, "At the rate you're going, you'll have a welcoming committee waiting for us."

Pryde flushed, but persisted, "I still think that our prospects are better than they've been at any time since the ship was hit, sir."

Brandt's reply was mild.

"There's only one way to find out, Mr. Pryde. Let's get going. How long is it going to take us to reach the planet?"

"It's about 85 million miles from the star, which makes it approximately 50 million miles from our present position. I'd say we'll be there in just under five days, sir."

"Right. Plot the course, please."

Pryde went to his table and Durbin said, "As we're going nearer the star, I suggest that meteor screens be activated. I've been checking the impact readings and we're taking a lot of minor hits and the incidence is on the increase, both in size and in frequency. There will be a power drain and the screens won't function perfectly, but they'll repel all the little things, anything less than the size of a pea."

Brandt put his cup aside. "We'll still have enough power to get us to our destination and to maneuver, Chief?"

Durbin nodded.

"Go ahead, then. I'm going to rest. Wake me if anything unusual happens."

He went over to a couch by the bulkhead and was asleep almost immediately.

The lights dimmed as Durbin activated the meteor screens. They failed to attain their former brightness.

"I'm going to check the sleepers," Rangone said. He stepped into the corridor and a mantle of isolation fell about his shoulders. He was one of four people awake on a space-borne Land of Nod. As he moved on his soft shoes along the metal floor, the thought that the ship, with its cargo of humanity, might already be dead, weighed heavily upon him. Pryde could be right. There might be all the ingredients essential to life on the planet ahead. But he could also be wrong.

He wished that he knew a bit more about astronomy. Pryde had said that a K-2 star wasn't as hot as Sol. But the planet they hoped to reach was nearer to K-2 than the Earth was to its parent star. Would the average temperature be lower than that of Earth, the same, or higher? And what about tilt of the axis? He found it all very confusing. Medicine was much simpler.

He went into the cocoon room. He walked up and down the aisles inspecting gauges and looking at faces. Did people dream while they were in hypno-sleep? One could tell when a normally sleeping person was dreaming by the changing expressions that reflected their dream actions. But under hypno-sleep, people looked as if their minds had, temporarily, left their bodies.

Stopping before Barbara's cocoon, he scrutinized her features and realized the extent of his responsibility to the others on the ship. Durbin had asked who would tell the people in the tanks. He knew that he would be asked to advise Brandt in the matter. But if the last planet was hostile, only one man could act as executioner: him.

For him, it wouldn't end there. He would be alone aboard a shipload of corpses, on a journey that might never end. Life was precious, even when there seemed only a slender chance of its continuance. Would he be able to remain clinical while he ended it? He dismissed the thought and left the cocoon room. He'd wait and see.

He checked the medical room and then set off toward the tanks. As he padded along the corridor, he turned over in his mind the problem of cushioning the limbless people against the impact of the news that they would never again be able to do many of the thousand-and-one things that human beings considered natural. He knew that the battle for their sanity—and perhaps his own—would be long and arduous. But it was one that he would have to win with as few casualties as possible. He had much experience in helping those whose injuries had not responded to regenerative treatment to readjust to their new life. He would need it all. Often, the delicate manipulation of one such person's precarious mental balance was exhausting. What would it be like with a hundred?

As soon as he reached the door leading to the tanks, which were in an air-tight compartment of their own, he saw that the gauge read zero. There was no air in the tank area. Assuming that this was serious, he thumbed the button next to the gauge and spoke into the grill.

"Rangone speaking from the tanks. There's been a total air loss. Wake Brandt. I'll wait here."

Pryde replied. "We were just about to leave orbit."

"This is more important! Hurry up."

He didn't wait for an answer. He opened the locker to the right of the door and put on a suit. As he checked it, two men came running along the corridor, Brandt and Hertz. The refrigeration engineer didn't bother to look at the gauge, but pulled on a suit and checked it. Brandt did the same.

It was a tight squeeze in the airlock. They bundled out on the other side and found themselves ankle-deep in fluid. Hertz let out a sob as he sloshed towards the gauge board. Numbers four, five, nine, ten, and twelve glowed red.

"Pipe fractures," Brandt said. "The ship was never built to withstand the structural wracking it's had. After we deal with this emergency, the whole pipe system will have to be checked for hairline cracks."

He lifted an inspection lamp from the board and went up the right hand ladder. Hertz and Rangone followed, carrying repair kits. Each tank was entirely separated from the others by two feet and supported by lattice-work. Cat-walks provided access from one tank to the next. Number four was the second on the right, in the third row.

The trouble was easily spotted. The stainless steel fluid pipe that supplied the tanks had split. Nutrient was dripping from the gash, which was about ten feet toward the rear, near the fourth slot.

"This one isn't serious," Hertz said, opening his kit. He took out a clamp and fitted it over the pipe. Nutrient ran over him as he worked.

The others had gone up to examine the other damaged units. Hertz checked the individual feed pipes that led off the main pipe he had just repaired.

Rangone's voice came over his suit radio. "Along here, slot six." Hertz hurried to him. This one was more serious. The pipe had cracked right through, so that slots one to five were not getting any fresh nutrient. Hertz swore. Fortunately, the gap wasn't wide and a large clamp served to repair it temporarily.

"That should hold for a while. But I don't know if I'm in time to save the occupants."

The circulation of nutrient was continuous. The damaged slots were certainly empty. The question was: how long had this been the case?

The flow of fluid from number ten, which was above seven and one place to the left, was heavy and both men feared the worst. Brandt was waiting for them. They worked on in silence to repair all the obvious pipe splits. Then Brandt said, "We'll have to attend to the people in the

damaged tanks now."

There were small gauges on each slot that registered the heart-beat of the occupants and also gave other essential information. The technicians had had to do a tricky bit of wiring before the ship had left the casualty station so that each gauge would record two sets of data.

Slot seven of both tanks nine and ten were all right, but the gauges of slots one to five of number five registered nothing.

"Can you carry out a physical check, Commander? We have to be sure."

"At once, sir."

Hertz, who had gone to check four, could be heard murmuring a mixture of expletives and imprecations. Brandt returned to the bridge and soon Rangone and Hertz felt the vibration as the engines started and the ship left orbit.

"In another three days, we'll know what's in store for us," Rangone said. Hertz, morose, didn't comment and the surgeon continued his work in silence. Each slot was equipped with a scanner and a set of electronic probes, so that examinations could be carried out without removing people. His fears were confirmed. He went back along the cat-walk. Hertz, his hands clasped, was leaning on his elbows on the guard-rail, staring at the floors.

Rangone took his arm gently. "Come on. It's all over for them. We've just suffered our first casualties."

CHAPTER SIX

As the days passed, the planet appeared larger and changed its configuration against the starless abyss beyond the edge of the Galaxy. Pryde made an initial calculation of its diameter as 6,700 miles, with an axial tilt between 15 and 18 degrees. Its day was certainly shorter than that of Earth, perhaps as short as 16 hours. He made revisions to his figures at regular intervals.

When they were a day's journey from it, they could see that the planet was gibbous and that it had polar caps much more extensive than those of

their mother world. The southern cap reached almost to the equator at one point. A thin land mass snaked its way around the planet, stretching from north to south at about a ten degree angle.

The ship was put into orbit and they gathered to gaze at the planet a thousand miles below. The telescope brought out details of mountains, seas, rivers, and forests. But large areas were cloud-covered and a grayness pervaded the globe. They could see storms rolling across the face of the world and lightning streaking the gloom. Despite this, relief was on every countenance. They had a chance for survival!

The planet rotated beneath them for a few hours while Pryde refined his earlier figures. The diameter was 6,300 miles and its rotational time was nineteen hours; the axial tilt was 16 degrees. The strip of land varied in breadth from 700 to about 3,000 miles and was shaped vaguely like South America lying on its side. As someone commented, it resembled a gigantic tadpole swimming round the world. The planet's motions of rotation and revolution were direct. There seemed to be no satellite.

Brandt ordered the ship into a lower orbit, 250 miles above the surface of the planet.

"There's no sense in wasting time now that we've arrived. We must find a suitable site as soon as possible. I've noted some likely ones on this rough sketch map. Pryde and I will each take a lifeboat and start the search."

While Durbin supervised the orbital maneuvers, the little craft were checked over. At the lock Brandt said, "We'll keep in touch by radio for as long as we can. Within a few hours we should have our new home selected. Then our real problems begin."

Rangone recalled the chief engineer's remark that he might have difficulty in landing the ship, but he said nothing. They were too close to comparative safety to fail now.

The lifeboats had scarcely left the ship when both pilots began reporting many micro-meteorite hits. "The planet seems to have an envelope of debris around it or else it's ploughing through a meteor stream," Brandt's words crackled over the speaker.

"Meteors are the voices of space," Pryde said, managing to make it sound sepulchral. "For all we know, they may have travelled all the way

from Andromeda."

Lost souls. Rangone thought, *perhaps of wanderers like ourselves who couldn't find a world.* He wondered at his mystical turn of mind. Tension could play tricks on a man, he knew, but he had considered himself immune to such effects.

They were sitting in front of the screens. Unaccountably, a third one had started to function again, affording them a partial, but direct, view of the planet. The other two were pointed toward space, toward the unfathomable distance that separated them from Andromeda.

"The Commandant was right," Durbin said, "about real problems. They should find a site fairly easily, but I still have to get the ship down in one piece."

"We're expecting that engineering miracle we discussed," Rangone answered absent-mindedly. His thoughts were elsewhere, and Durbin's words merely grazed his consciousness.

The engineer's next remark scored a direct hit on Rangone's drifting reflections.

"What about the people in the tanks, though? Who's going to tell them that they'll be lucky to get an arm back, if even that? They'll just be animated trunks, relying on us for every necessity—"

The surgeon rounded on him savagely. "Who are you really worried about, Durbin, them—or yourself? Whoever tells them, it won't be you. Commandant Brandt will allocate duties and you'll help to carry them out. Your immediate job, when they find a site, is to land the ship safely. Stop concerning yourself with other troubles."

Already, his fury was cooling. Hertz was staring at him. In all the time he'd known Rangone, he'd never heard the surgeon talk like that to anyone, even when they deserved it as Durbin undoubtedly did. But the attack had the right effect.

"You're correct, of course, Commander. I'm sorry. I'm coiled up with the responsibility." He pressed a knotted fist to his stomach.

"We all have responsibilities, Durbin," Rangone said quietly. "Do you

need something for your stomach?"

Durbin declined the offer.

* * *

THE lifeboats were now near the surface of the planet. They were travelling from east to west, following the dull red sun. Brandt had gone north of the equator, Pryde south of it. They hoped to find a site as near to the line as possible. The ice caps looked uninvitingly close to the land.

Pryde reported. "I'm coming to the edge of the sea. There's a wide rain squall sweeping in toward the land. A range of mountains to port, about 12 or 14 hundred feet high. The lightning's spectacular. I'm flying at 1,000 feet. The wind's strong. I'm over the sea now and turning to follow the shore. There's a forest running parallel to the mountains, between them and the sea. Weird colours: blackish-purple and greens, some rusty-brown. Keep tuned."

Rangone scanned the rough sketch map of the planet. "Pryde is nearing the end of the tadpole's tail."

Hertz said over his shoulder, "From orbit, that area seemed the most promising, but I suppose it looks much different from a low altitude."

Brandt came in on the circuit. "It's raining here, too. I'm about a hundred miles north of the equator, heading due west. As far as I can see, the country is mostly low hills and forest. The colors of the trees—if they are trees—and the vegetation, are peculiar, as Pryde said. No sign yet of a river. Wait! Up ahead. A lake. There might be a river, or rivers, flowing into it. I'm going down for a closer look.

"The lower I descend, the murkier it gets, due to the rain probably. And the sun doesn't give nearly as much light as Sol does. Plenty of lightning about. The forest doesn't quite extend to the water's edge, and I can see a river coming from the northeast. I'm passing over the area now taking photographs. Looks good. The land around the river-mouth is wide and flat, blackish-brown in color, with a thin strip of sand, maybe, next to the water. The lake's about five miles long and two or three wide. Yes, it does look like a good spot. Continuing with the search. Out."

Pryde came in: "I'm still following the shoreline. It's very mountainous

around here." He was silent for a minute, then he resumed excitedly, "Volcano ahead! About four miles inland. A big one! Plenty of smoke and fire. I can see lava burning down the slopes. I've left the rain squall behind." Suddenly he sounded awed. "The volcano has split the mountain in two! This is incredible!"

"Don't go in too close," Rangone warned. "That thing will be spewing rocks for miles around. The air around the volcano will be turbulent and treacherous."

"I'm circling about two miles away and I've gained altitude to get a better view. The mountain is slowly falling apart, just like a sandcastle at the tideline."

"I hate to report this," Brandt came in on the circuit, "but I've spotted two volcanoes. Both are active."

"This part of the continent appears to be dotted with them," Pryde said.

"At least the site I've seen is far enough away from the volcanoes to be safe, or so it would seem," Brandt remarked.

"It sounds as if our new home is going to demand all the pioneering spirit we have, Commandant."

Rangone said. "A cold, dim sun, a shorter day than we're used to, volcanoes, a sulphur-clogged atmosphere—"

"Things could be worse. We haven't found any evidence of earthquakes—or should I call them 'planetquakes'?—yet!"

Within the next few hours they had a general picture of the ice-free part of the continent; the likely sites had been photographed. Brandt told Pryde to rejoin the ship in orbit. The latter said that he would and gave his position. The Commandant was back first, and, over a hot drink, they ran through his film, paying particular attention to three possible landing sites and to the shot of the volcanoes.

Hertz checked with Pryde again. The astrogator was on his way back to the ship.

"Your first site seems to be the best of the three," Rangone commented.

"Re-run it, please, Chief," Brandt said. "We'll soon see. The first one has the virtue of being well clear of the volcanic area."

There was a piece of quiet level ground, about three square miles in area, immediately to the west of the river. The forest curved in an extensive crescent to the north and east, reaching to within a few hundred yards of the lake. The lake itself might contain fish or something that passed for fish.

Brandt said, "You'll notice that the site is only twenty or thirty miles from the sea. That could be useful if we want to do any exploring."

"True," Rangone answered, "but the forest looks impenetrable all the way to the northern shore. With all due respect, I think it's going to be a long time before we have the opportunity to explore anywhere except the immediate area, Commandant."

"Anyway, we'll have to wait and see what Pryde brings back before a final decision is taken. My other two sites seem too close to the volcanic region for comfort."

As if on cue, the astrogator spoke through the hiss and crackle of the atmosphere. "I'll be aboard in about twenty minutes, Commandant. I have some good film. I'm flying through quite a storm by the way. I'm just taking a look at a range of low, silvery-white hills. This really is a most peculiar—"

Brandt said urgently, "Pryde, report!"

Silence. Even the atmospheric noise had ceased abruptly.

"Pryde! What's wrong? Answer!"

There was no sound; not even the voices of space could be heard.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brandt wasted no time. Whatever had happened to the astrogator might be serious or it might not. He had given no indication of danger or damage to the lifeboat. But this was an unknown world and anything

could have occurred.

Sensing his thoughts, Durbin gave Brandt Pryde's last-known position.

"I'll go down and look for him. You'll be in temporary command, Surgeon-Commander. Should I fail to return, you'll be in permanent command. The fate of the ship and her occupants will be your decision."

He left the bridge, and shortly after, they felt the slight lurch as the lifeboat pulled away from the ship.

Brandt's voice came through, surprisingly clear. The vocalog, as usual, would record everything. "I'm going down fast. This is no time for caution. Every minute saved could help Pryde, if he's in trouble. I'll keep in contact for as long as possible."

Already, Brandt's voice had begun to fade. Static suddenly flooded the cabin and communications were cut. The lifeboat was on its own now. The continued static was eerie. There was nothing to do but wait.

Brandt soon found himself in what seemed to be a mixture of cloud and dust. The micro-meteorite indicator was pinging almost continuously. There were also strong, upper-atmosphere winds and the little craft was buffeted about. He dropped toward the surface at the maximum safe speed and was soon in a calm sky, with good visibility all round. Now to find Pryde. He had the astrogator's last-known position and what should be an easily-identifiable landmark, white hills, to aid his search.

Quickly he took his bearings. Pryde had said he'd be alongside the ship in about twenty minutes. Brandt calculated on that basis, taking account of the top speed of the lifeboat. Pryde's speed, while he was searching for sites, would have been much less than Mach 2.

He had no way of knowing how far Pryde might have flown after he stopped communicating nor, for that matter, if he had been able to hold his course. If he had gone into the sea, then it was all over. Brandt kept a strict watch, flying as low as possible, but not so low as to reduce his area of visibility. Occasionally he had to alter course to avoid volcanoes. This was going to be a dangerous world, but the thought exhilarated him. Life was a battle; he longed to be at the center of the action. The prospect of challenge was a spur to him.

The miles of land passed beneath the lifeboat. Once or twice he tried to communicate with the ship in orbit and with Pryde, without success in either case. Pryde's silence worried him. He feared that it was something more serious than mere radio failure or an easily remedied mechanical failure. There was no Mayday signal. He scanned the metal- and infra-red detectors: nothing.

His mind switched back to the problems that lay ahead, once the landing site had been established. It was bad enough that they were stranded, with little or no hope of ever making contact with any of their own race again, but add to that the presence of nearly a hundred people deprived of their limbs! It was by no means certain that regeneration would be effective, especially if Rangone had to administer minimal doses of the necessary drug.

Brandt was a fearless man, but he knew that it would demand immense courage and understanding to tell the limbless people of their predicament. He felt cold all over and he forced his mind to concentrate on the immediate task of finding Pryde.

He tried the radio again, but there was no response. If Pryde had held course after the communications failure, then Brandt knew that he must be nearing the position of the other craft. The scanners still told him nothing, which was hardly surprising to him as he looked at the terrain below. He had passed over a desert area and was now flying over a tumble of rocks and deep gullies that stretched onward for many miles. Suddenly, ahead and slightly to starboard, he saw something glinting in the fitful sunlight; hills, white hills, tinged with red.

To port, only a few miles from the hills, was the biggest volcano he'd yet seen. At present it was quiet. He estimated both the hills and the volcano to be about five miles away and began to cut his speed. He kept the radio channel open as the needle dropped and he was idling over the harsh landscape. Pryde could be anywhere—or nowhere—near this spot. The thought dismayed him.

He drifted the craft over and took a look at the white hills. They were actually a mixture of dirty white, silver, and assorted dull colors, about two miles long by a few hundred yards wide. The distance between the hills and the volcano was filled by a rocky blackness. The volcano was obviously still active. He cruised slowly along the full length of the hills, then turned to port, toward the inverted cone of the volcano. As he neared

the great peak, he could see the sheerness of some of the lower slopes. Swirling winds plucked at the lifeboat, trying to throw it higher into the sky or dash it to the waiting rocks.

Could Pryde have ventured too near and been struck by a vicious fist of wind that hurled him to his death? Brandt jockeyed the craft nearer to the blackness of the volcano, his eyes searching for signs of wreckage. It seemed hopeless. The lifeboat, or what was left of it, was so small in comparison with the area he had to cover. The winds were buffeting the craft insistently, trying to pull it toward a sheer cliff-face. The volcano lost some of its blackness and he began to see other colors, mainly grays and browns, striating the rock. He was now about quarter-of-a-mile away from the beckoning cliff and he knew that he could not fly much closer and still be safe.

Carefully, he let the lifeboat drift in over the scree at the base of the volcano, correcting all the time for the effects of the wind, which might plunge him to his death at any instant. The pockmarked blackness seemed to fill his vision and he found it hard to concentrate. Had that happened to Pryde?

Suddenly, the bottom fell out of the sky. The lifeboat plummeted like a shot bird, in the grip of a downdraft of intense power. The controls were useless. He held on as the craft spun and continued to drop. Then, as quickly as the wind had caught him, it threw him off contemptuously. He veered the lifeboat away from the cliff, only two hundred feet distant, took it lower and started to circle back.

Incredibly, during the flip his eye had sensed, rather than seen directly, a flash of something that wasn't rock. He dropped his speed almost to zero and flew carefully along the base of the cliff. His eyes were strained with prolonged staring at the bleakness below, but he had to go on; he had to satisfy himself. Minutes passed and still he saw nothing. The metal-indicator remained silent. He began to think that the flash must, after all, have been a rock, or even a trick of his imagination. He must not fall prey to wishful thinking. That would only dull his faculties.

He had almost reached the end of his crawl along the 'cliff base when the detector sounded briefly, then was silent again. He backtracked until the detector gave its signal once more. There below was the wreck of Pryde's lifeboat, its back broken and nose crumpled, lying at the foot of a shallow chasm. Of Pryde there was no sight. Had he left the craft or was he

still inside? Brandt jettisoned a marker bomb and waited until the charge had spread the red dye around the chasm, then went to look for a suitable landing place.

He wasn't going to risk going down too near to the base of the "volcano" the terrain was too rough and the volcano might erupt at any time. He flew the craft low and soon found a large tract of ground which was comparatively smooth, about a half-mile from the crashed lifeboat. Cautiously he set his own craft down, secured it and went out onto the black surface of the planet. The first thing he was conscious of was a faint, steady tremor coming through the soles of his boots. He stood for a minute, and noted that the intensity of the tremor fluctuated. That could mean only one thing.

He glanced up at the jagged cone of the volcano. Wisps of pale smoke were drifting lazily into the partially overcast sky. He wouldn't have much time. After he left the lifeboat, he found the going hard. The ground was very uneven and littered with eons of debris from volcanic eruptions. This gave way to an area criss-crossed with chasms and he saw that he wasn't going to be able to take a direct route to the crashed ship. There was a deep rumble from the volcano and the smoke increased in volume and thickness. The ground was shaking alarmingly. Twice, he had to detour to avoid deep gashes in the rock and he was annoyed at having to go so far out of his way. Every minute was precious.

To add to his troubles, down drafts were bringing sulphurous fumes from the cone, making it hard for him to breathe. The gravity on his new home was evidently greater than he was used to, which was an additional hindrance. His feet and legs were aching from scrambling over the rocks. The marker dye was at least three hundred yards away. As if to reinforce his anxiety, the volcano gave off a series of ferocious roars and threw up smoke, flame, and rocks. Luckily, the rocks did not erupt very high into the air and they tumbled harmlessly down the cliff walls. But it could only get worse. He feared now that Pryde must be either dead or very seriously injured. Otherwise, he would surely have made an attempt to leave the lifeboat. Brandt forced himself to hurry as much as the terrain would allow, trying to shield his nose and mouth from the fumes with a cloth.

He skirted a chasm, aware now of the steadily increasing agitation of the ground, and stumbled on. The crashed ship was about a hundred yards away. Suddenly the ground to his left started to slide and he felt

himself going with it. Desperately he dug his heels in and grabbed at anything that would give him a handhold. The slide was moving faster and he could not stop himself. He rolled down the slope towards the newly-opened break in the ground; his body was pummelled by the rocks, and the wind was knocked out of him. What a way to finish up. Then as suddenly as the slide had begun, it stopped, and he was jammed against a tangle of rocks.

He was sore all over but still in one piece. The slide had been shallow. He started to make his way to the top. The ground continued to shake and the noise from the volcano seemed to be building up to a climax. He was sure that there was a quake on the way. And he had joked about it! The going was slow, for the surface he was trying to pull himself up was broken and loose. After sliding back down twice, he eventually reached the lip and clawed himself onto level ground. Briefly he lay there, drawing in gulps of air, gagging at the smell.

Rocks, some of them large, were falling near him. He must get up and reach the lifeboat. From a low outcrop, he noted the position of the marker dye already beginning to fade under the patina of dust. He was one large ache but he forced himself to go on. He treated the many chasms with respect. If he fell down one of the deep ones he was finished and so was Pryde.

Something else that he hadn't taken into account was working against him. The star was westering to the horizon and he didn't know how much daylight he had left. He moved on through a veil of smoke, fumes, and dust, caught by down drafts and swirling along the base of the cliff. He tied the cloth across his nose and mouth like a surgical mask, leaving his hands free. He jumped over two narrow gashes and stood at the edge of the marker dye. He scrambled towards the wrecked lifeboat in the chasm. Rocks were falling all around, bouncing off the upper crags and ricocheting clear of the cliff-base, although the occasional boulder came rolling down near the lifeboat. He hoped that his luck would hold.

In his eagerness, he almost fell over the edge of the chasm, for the ground was deceptively loose, and he sent a flurry of scree chattering stonily into the depths. The downed craft had wedged itself across the chasm and appeared to have been securely stuck. But that had been before the latest volcanic activity. One more shake and the broken lifeboat could plunge to the bottom of the chasm, ending any hope of rescue before the

quake came.

He studied the ground and saw two possible routes down to the craft, which was about twenty feet below him, its nose pointing away from the volcano. Uncoiling the rope from his waist, he fixed one end to a rock and tied the other end round his waist. He gave the rope a few hard pulls, then, feeling his way at every step, he began to lower himself over the edge. He was down halfway, when the ground fell away, leaving him dangling in the air. He fought his panic and considered his position. The lifeboat was about ten feet beneath him and a few feet to the right. He was coughing constantly as the enveloping dust filtered into the chasm and began to obscure his view. Above him the falling rocks kept up a deadly tattoo. Could he swing over, land on the ship, and risk sending everything to the bottom? He doubted if he had time to haul himself up and begin again. His indecision was halted by weak cries. Pryde was alive!

"Pryde! This is Brandt. I'm trying to get down to rescue you. Are you badly hurt?"

As he spoke, he was lowering himself cautiously. He was almost level with the lifeboat, when he discovered he was on a ledge, no more than a foot wide.

There was no reply from Pryde. Brandt called again, edging towards the wreck, trying simultaneously to keep the rope taut, and to work it along the lip of the chasm. Not once did he look down. The scree fell on him like confetti.

Pryde's voice came weakly. "It's my leg... trapped... and broken, I think..." A silence. Then: "Don't try to get me out. The ship could go anytime."

The tail of the craft settled a bit with a metallic screech that set Brandt's nerves jangling. Above, the volcano vented its loudest roar yet, and the patter of debris was continuous. He wondered how his own lifeboat was faring. It would be ironic to escape from here, only to find that they couldn't get back to the ship in orbit. Wherever a man drew courage from during a crisis, Brandt felt that his account was overdrawn.

He reached the ship. Because of the way it was lying, slightly towards its starboard side, Brandt couldn't see the control cabin. But the entry hatch was askew and he entered through that, paying out the rope as he

went. Speed was essential now. His weight might be enough to tip them both into eternity. The lifeboat shifted and his heart-beat surged. He went into the small cabin.

The lifeboat was wedged in such a way that the floor of the cabin was sloping down towards the chasm wall. The control console and the pilot's chair had jack-knifed, so that they almost met. He could see the top of Pryde's head.

"Hullo, Pryde," he said quietly, pulling himself along the port side then across to the astrogator. Pryde turned his head and there was blood splotted on his face. "Commandant..." He smiled faintly and Brandt could see gaps where teeth had been.

Brandt knelt and examined Pryde's leg, which was trapped between the chair and the console. Before he left the ship in orbit, Rangone had given him a small medical kit, with instructions on how to use it. Pryde's leg was held just above the knee and there was a lot of blood. It was dry, which was a good sign. He gave Pryde a drink of water.

"I'll see if your leg's broken." As gently as he could, he cut the trouser away and probed at the flesh, especially around the trapped part. No bones were sticking out and he thought that, at worst, there was a fracture. But the leg was badly gashed by the metal. He could do nothing until Pryde was free. He gave him a pain-killing injection.

A glance told him that his bare hands would be useless. He'd brought a small, high-powered saw: within two minutes he had cut through the metal. The background noise was loud and incessant and everything was shaking. Once or twice, Pryde cried out, but Brandt didn't stop or look up. He was working to save both their lives. The leg was starting to bleed again and Brandt hastily applied a bandage. Then he levered up the last piece of metal and Pryde was free.

"All we have to do now is get out of here before the sky falls in on us." He wasn't usually flippant, but he was trying to keep their courage up. He gave Pryde another drink, then covered his nose and mouth with a cloth. Slipping an arm under Pryde's right armpit, and gripping his left side, he eased the injured man out of the chair. He knew that Pryde would be unable to support himself on his injured leg. His task was further complicated by the adverse slope of the cabin floor. Pryde was a lightweight and he tried to give as much help as he could. They pulled

themselves towards the cabin door and then to the entry hatch. They did not rest. There was no time.

Now came the really difficult part: getting Pryde to the top. Brandt would have to climb up, then lower the rope to Pryde, who would have to tie it round his waist and be hauled up. Brandt hoped that he hadn't exceeded the pain-killing dose that Rangone had advised. He would never be able to hoist up a dead weight.

He told Pryde of his plan and took hold of the rope.

He was still staring at the frayed end when the world erupted.

Brandt came to, thankful that he was still alive. But how— He was in the ship he knew, for he could see the entry hatch straight overhead. There was dusty daylight! He tried to move but immediately lay back, his skull threatening to split. Nausea rushed into his throat and he turned on his side to prevent himself from choking. He saw Pryde, half out of the cabin, not moving. The deck was smeared with blood. He reached out and touched it. Almost dry.

Pryde would keep for a minute. Brandt stood up slowly on what was normally the wall, and gazed out of the hatch. They'd been there at least thirty minutes; the star had sunk perceptibly lower in the cloud-riven sky, a bilious mess of yellows and grays, tinged with red. Their escape had been—he hesitated to use the word—miraculous. When the quake had come, the chasm had opened out instead of caving in, so that the chasm walls had become level ground. Behind him the volcano was muttering quietly. Apart from that there was a deep silence. Even the wind had stopped roistering up and down the cliff. The ground was still. Nature was at peace again.

He turned his attention to Pryde. The astrogator's head had taken a nasty knock, but he was breathing steadily. When Brandt stood up again, he noticed that the hull was cracked, a few feet toward the tail end. He went to look at it. The hole was wide enough to allow access to the ground. It would save him a lot of trouble, and Pryde a lot of pain.

His own lifeboat would have been saved from toppling over by its low center of gravity. His immediate task was to get Pryde to it. Going back, he saw that Pryde was stirring. The leg bandage had held and there was more bleeding. Pryde opened his eyes, blinking.

"You got us out, after all..."

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Obviously, Pryde didn't know what had happened nor how lucky he was to be alive.

"I'm taking you back to the other lifeboat." He helped Pryde to get up.

"But we're still in my ship!" He stared around him, bewildered.

"There was a quake. The lifeboat was thrown up with the chasm walls, and here we are. But we'll have to move. After we get outside, I'll try to carry you part of the way."

Brandt realized how near he was to exhaustion, but he rejected any thought of what that gesture to Pryde might cost. He was still the Commandant and he had a responsibility to his subordinate. They got to the hole with Pryde, supported by Brandt, hopping on his good leg. Pryde propped himself up, while Brandt let himself down to the ground, about four feet below. He then stood with his back against the hull.

"Ease yourself down onto my back. That's right, arms around my neck, legs on my hips."

He felt Pryde's arms tighten. Brandt gripped Pryde's thighs, and they were off, a modern Sinbad and his Old Man of the Sea sailing across an ocean of rocks. After a few steps, Brandt thought that he was going to collapse. Pryde seemed to be heavier. The physical and mental strain of the past hours hit him hard. He staggered. Pryde's grip was strangling him. He fought for breath. His lungs threatened to burst. A red haze fogged his vision. The lifeboat blurred. But they were almost there.

After two attempts, Brandt got Pryde aboard the lifeboat and they rejoined the ship in orbit. Minutes after Pryde had been taken away for examination, Rangone returned to the bridge.

"Pryde's dead." He didn't tell the Commandant that the man he had risked his life to save was already dead when they reached the ship. "He had severe internal injuries..."

"But he sounded so lucid, mentioned his injured leg, nothing else."

"Even badly injured men cling to hope. No one could have done more to

try and save him than you did."

They sent Pryde's body out on a timeless journey among the stars that had been his companions in life and would now guard him in death.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brandt ordered a landing be made on the first of the three sites he had surveyed. Then, leaving Durbin to supervise the final approach to the plain, he excused himself from the bridge. Rangone waited for a minute or two and then followed the Commandant to his cabin.

His knock brought no response. He went in. Brandt was sprawled across the bunk, one foot trailing on the floor. Rangone suspected a minor heart attack and he was correct. He wasted no time in getting the Commandant to sick bay where Donlevy took over. Rangone returned to the bridge. Templeton was intent on watching the ship's landing. Rangone waited. At the spot where the river flowed into the lake, the ship sank slowly toward the plain. There was an hour of daylight left.

* * *

THEY felt a slight lurch as the splayed absorbers took the shock of the ship touching the ground. The ship, which had journeyed farther than any manned vessel before, had found her last resting place.

For a minute no one spoke. The twilight, a fuzzy merging of blue, soft purple, and bronze-green, had given way quickly to the onset of night. Though this was their first experience of a new world, there was little to see. They watched as the dim red star fell into the rocky arms of the mountains far beyond the wind-flecked surface of the lake.

As Durbin activated the force-field, Templeton turned and saw Rangone.

"Brandt has had a minor heart attack. It's not serious. Provided he rests, he'll be all right. The strain of everything caught up with him, that's all."

"Can I see him?"

Rangone knew how close the aide was to Brandt, but medical considerations came first.

"He's under sedation. Wait until the morning. I'm going back to see him, now. May I suggest that you two go to the messroom? I asked Laura to prepare a meal for us, once we had touched down. I'll see you there shortly."

"There should be a man on the bridge at all times," Templeton said.

"I have a marine waiting outside. I know the watch should be supervised by an officer, but I think we can dispense with that rule on this occasion."

Templeton nodded and Rangone called in a marine sergeant; he informed him that the aide would give him his instructions.

Barbara Restall glanced up as Rangone entered the medical room. In the subdued light, her face seemed curiously devoid of any expression. Neither of them spoke. Then she rose and they held each other. He could feel her sobbing a little.

"We're safe, now."

She moved away, patting her hair and dabbing her eyes.

"You'd better go and get your meal. Let the others know what is happening. They'll be anxious."

Jim Donlevy came in.

"How is he, Jim?"

"Resting. He hasn't suffered any great damage, but he's going to be out of action for a while. Are you going to the messroom?"

"Yes. I'll see you later, Barbara."

They went out.

"Brandt won't like being confined and cut off from the activity."

"He'll just have to like it, Carlo. You're in command, so don't let him

bully you. Threaten to keep him under sedation."

"I can just see *that* working. Anyway, you're his doctor, so you can do it."

When they were settled in the messroom, Rangone told the assembled people about Brandt's condition, emphasizing that he was in no danger, but that he would have to rest. The idea that he was in no danger brought some chuckles and helped to relax the group.

Once the meal was over, Rangone invited the officers to the bridge.

"We all need a rest badly, gentlemen, so I shall not detain you for long. Against all the odds, we have managed to reach a planet that appears to be habitable. We have yet to make tests to confirm that."

He paused; there was no comment. Each face was solemn.

Rangone continued, "I am not going to awaken any of the hypno-sleepers until those tests are made. In the morning, I would like a report on our present food supply from you, Captain Templeton. The tanks are your responsibility, Mr. Hertz, so you report on them. Mr. Durbin, you report on the state of the ship's support systems, please!"

Then he said to Essenden, "I might have to amend my comment about the sleepers, Major. As this is a hospital ship, we have no robotic means of planetary investigation, so I shall probably require a small foraging party. I'll let you know in the morning. One final thing: I want you all to see Dr. Donlevy for a medical check. The past few days have not been easy. Will you arrange that, Jim? Include Laura and Barbara Restall, of course."

"And don't forget yourself, Commander," Donlevy said.

"I'll find the time, I promise you. Should any of you need help in the morning, I'm sure that we can find someone to oblige."

"Till tomorrow then, gentlemen, and whatever it may bring."

As they said their goodnights and filed out, Hertz reported that he'd carried out a brief, preliminary check of the tanks and that all was in order.

"Those people are fortunate to be in such efficient and diligent hands—"

"On the contrary, Commander, it's on your hands that they will have to rely. After they are revived, my job is finished. Good night, Commander."

When the cabin door closed, Rangone stood looking down at his hands. The hands that had removed the arms and legs of the people in the tanks. Ironically, those hands might restore to them an arm at best, if regeneration were successful. He did not want to think about the people whose bodies would inevitably reject the serum, for one reason or another.

It took him an hour to log the day's events. He disliked the vocalog system. Because it recorded both oral and punched card reports, and thus provided a better co-ordination of a ship's activities, he supposed it was efficient. But it was no longer exclusively the Captain's report. And it wasn't always conducive to concise thought and expression. He had found that the younger breed of officer was devoted to the vocalog system, thinking it, no doubt, the ideal medium for recording deeds of valor in the heat of battle. But, battle was seldom all glory and heroics. It was sometimes victory, sometimes defeat; but it was always tainted with death and mutilation, of the body and of the mind.

From early childhood, Rangone had kept a journal. Right from the start, he'd determined it was going to be more than a mere diary, a simple chronicle of examination results, visits to relatives and birthday parties he had attended. He had sought to get on paper the thoughts that revealed his most significant self, insofar as he was capable of recording it objectively. The journal was the record of his conscience, his touchstone with reality. He could look back and see, in his own handwriting, a record of the many times he had been vain and shallow, conceited and credulous. He always found reading it a sobering experience.

What would he write today? I lived, when I might have died? I reached a haven that might yet be a hell?" Having written nothing, Rangone got up and doused the bridge lights. Gradually his eyes became used to the darkness, and he stood at the porthole looking out at his first night on a new planet. He could see nothing from that side. There were no stars and no moon. He was standing on a tiny knoll at the edge of a hundred thousand million suns, measuring his soul against the immeasurable.

Here and there were fugitive smudges of light, like cosmic

afterthoughts. More knolls, each as isolated as his own. He caught his reflection, limned mistily on the glass. An inch away? Or ten million light-years?

First man on a virgin world? Or the last man in a raped universe? He was on the edge of the unknown shore.

Feeling like a man who was about to drown, he went to the other side of the bridge. There in the sky was a lifeline: the Galaxy, raised like a shield against the night.

He put a small console light on, opened his journal, and wrote down his account. Tomorrow did not seem so bad. One of the nurses brought him a beaker of hot milk, his usual supper. When he finished the drink, he went to make a final check on Brandt. The medical room was dimly lit and a nurse was asleep on one of the cots. He tip-toed in, but she was instantly alert and he apologized for waking her. He saw from the clip-charts that the Commandant was making progress. Wishing the nurse goodnight, he returned to his cabin and went to bed.

It rained heavily during the night, as if the planet was trying to cleanse itself of the newly-arrived infection. In the distance, volcanoes rumbled mightily in their slumber.

CHAPTER NINE

Rangone was on the bridge at 8 a.m. By planetary reckoning, the hour looked a bit later. Everyone would have to become adjusted to planetary time. Templeton was already present with Essenden. The aide, in his efficient way, had organized a general routine. The hypno-sleepers had been awakened.

A technician was also there. Templeton indicated why by asking the man to project a ghostly photograph onto a small screen. There were a number of shapes similar to one another on it, milling about in frozen attitudes.

"When was that taken?" Rangone asked the technician.

"This particular one was recorded at 2.05 a.m., our ship time, sir. The infra-red camera picked up the shapes from 1.52 until 2.21 when the

images began to fade."

Rangone studied the screen. "Can you tell where they came from?"

"We suppose from the forest, Commander. They were heading in the direction of the east side of the lake." He pressed a button and another image appeared, this time showing two shapes, both blurred and apparently much smaller than those seen minutes before. "Taken at 2.11, sir."

After the technician had gone, Rangone said, "There seem to be two types of animal on the planet. We can't be sure until we view them in daylight, although we won't be able to do that if they are nocturnal. The smaller shapes might simply have been the same type of animal farther away."

"Bison," Essenden said unexpectedly. The two men turned to look at him. "That's what they remind me of, bison, a large animal that used to be found on Earth in the 19th century. North American, I believe. They travelled in herds."

Rangone said solemnly, "It means we'll have to be careful when we are outside. More importantly, we might have a meat supply on our doorstep."

"The other two animals were probably predators, not bison," Essenden went on, as if he hadn't heard. "Male and female, of course." Essenden absorbed Templeton's acid remark with polite indifference. "Naturally."

Rangone was amused to see Templeton topped, but he did not show it. "You may be right, Major Essenden, we shall see. Now—"

The communicator bleeped. Opening the channel, Templeton said, "Bridge."

"Donlevy. Is Commander Rangone there, please?" Rangone answered.

"Commandant Brandt would like to see you, sir."

"I'll be right with him." To Templeton, he said, "I won't be away too long. We'll have a lot to discuss when I return."

Having made that ambiguous remark, he went out. Brandt was just

finishing breakfast when Rangone knocked and entered the cabin. A tray lay on the swingover table. Even sitting up in bed with his pyjamas on, Brandt still exuded authority and discipline. Rangone saluted briskly and said, "Good morning, Commandant, I see you have things well under control."

"Don't sound so surprised, Commander. That's what routine is for: to ensure that things run smoothly under all circumstances."

"I discern the hands of Captain Templeton and Miss McDonald."

"You sound as if you've almost taken a liking to my aide," Brandt observed archly. "Now! Come and do whatever it is you doctors do and then tell me that I can get up."

Rangone smiled. "In the first place, sir, Mr. Donlevy is directly responsible for your treatment. But I can say that if you are allowed up at all, it will be for only a short time. Your experience was a considerable strain, to say nothing of the one you've been under these past weeks." He took Brandt's pulse and temperature. Both were normal and Rangone said so. "However," he added a warning, "you are still suffering from exhaustion and even this examination will make you tired."

Rangone stood up. "Rest until lunchtime. We don't want to drug you more than is necessary. I'll give you a full report of the activities when it is obvious that you are fit to resume duty, which won't be for a few days."

Brandt started to protest, but Rangone overruled him firmly, "as senior doctor *and* as the officer temporarily in charge of the ship during your indisposition, I have given you a double order... sir. Till lunchtime."

Rangone saluted. Brandt was smiling reluctantly as the Commander went out.

The few days' rest would revitalize the Commandant. Brandt was not as bad as he had made out, but Rangone needed time to think and to plan. They were in the position of having to wrest an existence from this planet without colonists. (He preferred the term "colonists" to that of "castaways." The psychological factor was small, but significant.)

They were not totally helpless. They were fortunate in having a large medical staff and an abundance of other skills and knowledge ready to

solve many of the problems they would face in the immediate future. Also, the ship had both a computer and a machine shop; even if the latter was not likely to be very big, he was sure that Durbin could work a few more of his engineering miracles.

The planet itself was the unknown factor in the equation that determined life or death. They already knew about the volcanoes and what their presence implied. But the planet probably had other hazards in store for them.

Templeton was alone on the bridge when he returned. Brandt had been shrewd. Rangone was coming to like the man, certainly to admire him.

"Is the Commandant all right?"

"He'll be fine. However, I'm going to make sure that he is kept off active duty for a few days. He needs the rest much more than he realizes or will admit."

"Don't we all," Templeton replied. He glanced at Rangone. "Apart from medical considerations, what are your other reasons?"

The aide's blunt question didn't perturb Rangone. "I see that you prefer frank talking, Captain. You're right. There is much to do, and, as a doctor, I don't want a half-fit man making decisions. I know you have been close to Brandt for a long time, but you see him differently from me. He's been pushing himself too hard and too often."

"And medically, that's not good?"

"Right. During the time he is on the sick list, I, as the man temporarily in command, have many important decisions to make. I want to know now if I am to have your support. I'm in no way denigrating Brandt as a leader and administrator: I merely want to save him from an early grave."

Templeton looked at him steadily until Rangone began to feel uncomfortable.

"I'm surprised that you thought you had to ask, Commander. Yes, I'll support you. I'm a soldier and I'll obey whatever orders you give to my fullest ability. Besides, I admire both Brandt and you."

"Thank you." Rangone lifted a sheet of paper. "I've been studying the rules and regulations, and I see that the commanding officer is empowered to re-position a man during the course of action. I'm going to take advantage of that and appoint you to the rank of acting Lieutenant-Colonel, effective as of now."

Templeton, who had been perched on the edge of the chart table, stood up slowly. Rangone was unable to gauge the meaning of the expression on Templeton's face, and he wondered if perhaps he had breached sacred regulations in some way.

"You realize that I'm a bit old to be starting out on the career of a senior officer? Some of my so-called friends used to say, within my hearing, that if you were still a Captain at thirty, then you'd retire as one. I got so that I believed them." He straightened abruptly. "I'm forgetting myself, Commander. My apologies."

"There's no need to apologize, Colonel Templeton. I'm glad to see that you're as human as the rest of us. Congratulations."

They shook hands and saluted. Rangone gave him the sunburst insignia of his new rank. "I'll leave you to complete the formalities, Colonel. My main concern is the allocation of the serum. That duty would devolve on me, anyway. The other problems are social, disciplinary, and exploratory. I know that you are ably qualified to cope with them. Let's talk about them for a moment. I'll need to know as much as possible about every person in the tanks: age, fitness, skills, everything. I'd like to have you compile the basic data from which I can work."

Templeton stared out of a porthole. The scene was peaceful; the only movement was the undulation of multi-hued flowers and the distant flight of some birds. The sky was a cold, coppery blue, devoid of clouds. Templeton asked, "Do you intend to awaken the people in the tanks soon?"

"Yes. I think it's the best thing to do." Templeton turned away from the porthole. His fingers caressed the gold insignia. "Many people might not agree with you, Commander. They'll realize how marginal our position is and think that they could make a better start without the sleepers. In fact, they already think of the sleepers as utterly alien to themselves. I've heard references to the 'Ells,' the limbless. It's not a pretty description."

"Nicknames seldom are, but I can understand why people would use it.

We have a limited food supply and the planet's resources are unknown to us. Why add to the problem? It seems logical. But we are dealing with people, not pawns in an academic chess game. Viewed sentimentally, they have a right to live. I am a doctor; I am pledged to uphold that right. Viewed practically, the sleepers, with their many skills, will increase rather than diminish our chances of survival. It sounds brutal, but many of them don't need legs for the tasks we have ahead of us."

"I don't envy you the job. How are you going to tackle it?"

They were interrupted by a knock and Barbara came in with two cups of coffee and two tiny biscuits. Both men greeted her.

"Just what we need," Rangone smiled. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, thank you, Commander. Glad to be on solid ground again."

"It was rather a trying time," Templeton said, handing Rangone a cup. "It's good to know that we have such pretty nurses to look after us."

Barbara smiled uncertainly. Templeton had never been one for jocularities and she was wary as she went out.

"Lovely girl," Templeton remarked with a speculative glance at the door.

Templeton seemed to have found a new lease on life with his promotion and Rangone sensed a possible rival in the field, but that was the least of his worries.

He began, "I'll have to interview each person and try to explain my decisions."

Templeton was shaking his head. "You've appointed me Devil's Advocate, Commander, so watch out for my forked tail again. I appreciate the fact that you feel you've taken away too many of their human rights already, but I suggest that you present the sleepers with a *fait accompli*. You would then be in a position of strength. We're still involved in a war, although it's against a new enemy, and they are still under military jurisdiction. They did sign the necessary forms. Besides, most of them will accept an accomplished fact *provided* you can convince them that they will still be useful."

He took a quick sip of coffee and continued, "If you do it your way, each person is going to cause trouble. Why must it be me, why can't it be him—that kind of thing. People aren't rational about such matters and we have no right to expect them to be. You'll only make it harder for them, for yourself, and for the rest of us. There is bound to be resentment, no matter how it's handled. Every time they see a finger idly scratching a nose or someone walking hurriedly, it will be an affront to them. You can minimize their agony."

Rangone put his cup aside. "I'm still thinking too much like a doctor and not enough like an administrator, Colonel. You're right, of course, although it is hard to admit it. Now that we've settled that, we can discuss the other outstanding problems."

Templeton consulted a clipboard. "I've checked our food supply. It depends on how many mouths we'll have to feed. With a degree of rationing, the present personnel could be sustained for 5.3 weeks, according to the computer. We have practically no water, so if we don't find it palatable here, we're finished.

"Will you arrange to get samples of water, and of soil and plant life, please? Those are priorities."

The aide made a note. "I'll detail Major Essenden to take out a party. He'll know how to handle it. He won't let anyone stray."

"The animals—if that's what they were—detected on the scanner will have to be investigated. Ask Essenden if any of his men are adept at setting snares or traps. There should be some tracks by the lake and these might indicate the size of the animals, if the men don't actually see any during their foray.

"The other major problem will be mainly Durbin's responsibility: the provision of accommodation for the limbless. Each will need to have an enclosed couch of some kind that will take care of their hygienic and sanitary requirements."

"That's going to be quite a feat of designing, engineering, and plumbing," Templeton mused. "Obviously Durbin will need a fairly extensive area in which to house all the people. I can see the ship being cannibalized out of all recognition. You'll want individually partitioned units?"

Rangone nodded. "The privacy angle is very important. The screens can be movable in case some people don't want them. The partitions won't have to be elaborate. A great deal of care will have to be taken in the assigning of neighbors, but that's another problem. Fortunately, there's no need for us—or Durbin—to work out all the solutions for ourselves. There are bound to be sleepers with experience in architecture and industrial design. They can be revived first to help out and to act as guinea pigs."

As Templeton reached the door, Rangone said, "Have you any ideas for a name to give our new home?"

"I haven't thought about it. We come from a variety of planets. The only place we have in common is the ancestral planet, Earth, and I suppose that name would be as good as any. We don't want Ultima Thule or Galaxy's End. I'll think about it."

He saluted and went out. About thirty minutes later, he returned, to report that Essenden and four men had just left the ship. They were to stay within sight of the ship, keep in touch by radio, and they were not to venture too near the forest. Their initial objective was to gather samples. Exploration would come later, if the basic requirements for survival were discovered.

Rangone began his rounds of the ship by going to visit Brandt. He was very much awake, demanding to know what was happening.

"First of all, Commandant, I've given Templeton the temporary rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He's a very able man and I think he deserves the promotion. I shall certainly confirm his appointment within a few days."

Rangone, used to judging the true meaning of facial expressions, was surprised to note that Brandt's told him nothing. The Commandant remained silent for a minute or so. Then he said quietly, "With one little slice of your scalpel, you've done the one thing I have never found the courage to do, Commander."

He shifted his position in the bed and continued, "You've probably wondered, from time to time, why Templeton seemed stuck at the rank of Captain. Very few people know the real reason. I have a deep affection and a great respect for Sam Templeton. Funny, the name Sam doesn't suit him somehow. Anyway, about nine or ten years ago, we were involved in a bit of military diplomacy on behalf of our political masters. It was more than

a trifle shady, you understand, and it blew up in our faces.

"It was entirely my fault, at least that part of it I could control, which wasn't much. There were strings pulling the strings that held my strings. At the inquiry, Templeton insisted on covering up for me, and I let him. I was a full Colonel then, with every prospect of further promotion. His stance killed his chances of promotion, of course, and he should have left the service for his own good. But his family has a long military tradition, so he stayed on."

He sighed at the recollection of these bitter memories. "To rub it in, the top brass assigned him to me as my permanent aide. And, of course, I never reached the dizzy heights of a Staff officer. It's ironic that his family practically disowned him. Now they'll never know that he's soon to be a Colonel."

"*He* knows, and that's the main thing. If his family failed to stand by him, then that was their loss, not his. I'm pleased that you approve of my action."

"If I didn't know you better, I'd accuse you of being hypocritical, Commander." Brandt was smiling as he spoke. "What else is happening?"

"Templeton is compiling a list of the limbless people. We're primarily interested in their skills at this stage. Our idea is to provide each person with a special private unit. Major Essenden is cooperating after his own fashion, and is out with a party collecting samples. If he doesn't find drinkable water, then we won't have to make any plans. There will be a meeting when he returns. Everything is being done efficiently, as you would want it to be. I've instructed the nurse to let you up to walk around for ten minutes, Commandant. You are not to make it difficult for her by getting into mischief. You're progressing, so don't spoil it. I'll give you a personal report on the meeting."

"I don't see much of that hallowed bedside manner you doctors are always boasting about," Brandt complained.

"You know perfectly well that it would be wasted on you, Commandant."

"I suppose so. I'd like to see Sam, if he has a minute to spare."

"I'll tell him right away." He looked straight at Brandt. "I'm not going to ask what you did for Sam to make him act as he did but it must have been something special, Commandant."

Brandt started, but said nothing. He was still staring at the wall when Templeton entered the cabin.

Rangone went next to see Jim Donlevy, his medical assistant. He brought the doctor up-to-date on the situation and concluded, "It all depends on what Essenden brings back. The water could be poisonous. Without water, nothing else matters. However, till then, life goes on. Is there any change in Dunmurry?"

Donlevy beckoned him into a small, dimly-lit room. The former astrogator rested on his side on a cot facing the door, but his eyes saw nothing. He was thin and wasted-looking.

"He's in another space, another time," Donlevy said, making no attempt to keep his voice low. "He might hear what I'm saying, but the words will mean nothing to him."

They went out, leaving Dunmurry in his own private continuum.

"He's getting all the care and attention we can give him, and that's plenty, but there's been no response, so far."

"Tomorrow I think we should begin chemico-therapy, Jim, and see if that does any good." He glanced at the little room. "He looks further gone than any case I've ever seen, so it might not work."

"I'm not surprised, after his experience. It's odd, though, that Templeton didn't go the same way."

"No two people react alike to a given stimulus. And Sam seems to be rather a remarkable man."

"Yes. I'm beginning to feel that I'm the only ordinary mortal aboard this ship," Donlevy commented dryly, but without malice.

Rangone slapped his back. "Good old Jim. Keep it up. I really don't know what I'd do without you."

Rangone continued his rounds of the ship, trying to gauge the feelings of those on board, all the time sensing something in the air that he could not identify. It began to worry him. Perhaps, he fretted, he was seeing specters where none existed. The ship's personnel had survived a strenuous and frightening experience and perhaps he was catching the backwash of emotion. But try as he might, he could not rid himself of the notion that all was not well aboard the ship.

Sam Templeton was waiting for him when he had completed his rounds and returned to the bridge.

"Essenden has reported in," Sam said. "He hasn't encountered anything dangerous so far. No sightings of the animals detected by the scanner, although there seems to be plenty of small wildlife around, mostly scaly and reptilian-looking. Nothing's been caught, but a few snares around the ship should trap some specimens."

Abruptly he stopped talking, as if he realized that he had been talking too quickly. Their eyes met.

"What did Gerhard Brandt say about my promotion, Commander?"

"It's been quite a day for names and blunt questions, Sam. He said the same to me as I'm sure he said to you. He approved. You didn't expect him to do otherwise, did you?"

Templeton didn't answer.

"Now you tell me something, Colonel," Rangone went on, "What did Brandt do for you that made the sacrifice of career and family so worthwhile?"

The aide's mouth tightened. Then his face softened and Rangone could see by his eyes that he was somewhere back in time, remembering.

"He saved my life, away back at the beginning of the Enemy war. I'd landed the men of my first command into a dangerous situation. Brandt, I think, defied orders that I was to be abandoned. He led a rescue squad in and snatched us to safety right under the noses—if they have any—of the Enemy, luckily for him, without casualties. From that time on, he was my hero, and he still is. Middle-aged junior officers are not supposed to have heroes, but there it is."

"Anyone can have heroes, Sam, even Colonels. I guessed that Brandt's deed must have been very important to you. I hope you didn't mind my prying? After the Commandant had told me half the story, I just had to know the rest."

"I don't resent your questions. Before we're much older, we'll know each other more intimately than either of us might have thought possible, or even desirable. If that Enemy missile had missed the ship, life would have gone on normally for us and we'd still be disliking each other."

Rangone smiled. "They say adversity makes strange bedfellows."

He squinted as a sudden river of sunlight flowed across the bridge. "Unoriginal, if apt. To return to business, I've asked Durbin and Hertz to come here at 12.00—that's anytime now. There's no reason why we should sit and twiddle our thumbs, waiting for Major Essenden to return. The things we have to discuss don't concern him anyway, at least not at this stage. He'd probably ask a lot of irritating questions and set everyone else on edge. This isn't exactly courteous conduct towards a fellow-officer."

"No, it isn't. But it's sensible!"

A knock announced the arrival of Durbin and Hertz. After they'd settled themselves, Rangone began. "We all have too much to do to sit around talking, so I'll be as brief as possible. We have food for five and a half weeks, provided we don't revive any of the sleepers. There is practically no water left, so finding some is top priority. Major Essenden is out with a party to collect samples of liquid and of soil and plant life. If this liquid isn't palatable, then the remainder of this discussion will be academic.

"However there is no harm in being prepared. Our immediate problem concerns the sleepers. Colonel Templeton will shortly have a list of the principal characteristics of each one, and I'll base my allocation of the available serum on that list. The most any one person will get will be enough to regenerate one arm with a hand. Some might not even get that. Skills will be taken into account for the allocation."

Hertz, at present directly responsible for the lives of the sleepers, was worried. "Won't there be a lot of trouble, Commander? They'll take it very hard."

"I realize that and that's why they are not going to be given any choice

in the matter."

Hertz was suddenly pale, but he said nothing.

Neglecting to mention that the idea had been Templeton's suggestion, Rangone kept any possible blame and recrimination to himself. He stared a warning at the aide.

"If we are to survive here, everything must be subordinated to the common good, at least at the beginning. You can call the decision harsh, brutal, inhuman, any adjective you like, but it is the only safe and practical thing to do. I think most of the sleepers will realize the wisdom of my actions, even if it does take them time. The ones who don't adjust will need all the help we can give them."

If only, he thought, *it were going to be as simple in practice as it sounded in theory*. He paused briefly to let them assimilate the information before outlining the plans he'd discussed with Templeton for the welfare of the sleepers when they were revived. Durbin and Hertz were both enthusiastic, and the Drive Engineer said that many parts of the ship could be cannibalized. Durbin was back in his own realm. He visualized the use of simple servo-mechanisms and various other ideas and was obviously anxious to get started. Hertz, with his knowledge of the tank systems, would be invaluable in helping to plan the unit layouts.

Rangone mentioned the idea of reviving people who had industrial design experience or some allied skill. The engineers agreed, though they recognized the guinea pig aspect of such a selection.

The communicator sounded: "This is Brandt! We've got a mutiny on our hands!" Two shots crashed out in quick succession. "Group trying to break into the tank area. Get here on the double, but be careful!"

CHAPTER TEN

Templeton strode to the weapons locker as Rangone snapped, "Someone has taken advantage of Essenden's absence to cut down the odds against survival by destroying the tanks."

He took the gun Templeton handed him, thinking that he and the engineers, who were looking warily at their weapons, had little chance of

hitting anyone. They'd all had small-arms training at one time or another, but marksmanship was for the soldiers.

Brandt's voice broke in again over the communicators. "I'm actually in the tank area, so I *can* cover them whichever side they come from. Whoever planned this knows that four of you are in there, so someone will be watching, expecting you to come."

There was another shot.

"We'll get there as soon as we can, Commandant." Rangone closed the channel.

When Templeton opened the cabin door, he was greeted with a shot. He shut the door hurriedly. Rangone went into the communications room, just off the bridge, and told the operator to inform Essenden of the situation.

Re-joining the group Rangone said, "They're clever. They've got four of us caught in here and five men outside the ship who can easily be kept out. Various others are incapable of resistance. It must have been quite a shock when they discovered that Brandt was missing, but they might have assumed that he was here. Their mistake. But for that, they would probably have accomplished their task and finished us off at leisure if we didn't agree to their terms."

Templeton said, "We're not going to get out of here by the front door. Durbin, you know the ship well. Is there a service hatch or anything like that?"

The engineer thought for a second. "There's one in the observation bubble. It connects with the stern of the ship by a catwalk and there are other hatches at various intervals."

"That's our way out, then," Rangone said. "Templeton, you and Hertz stay here and keep our friend out here occupied. Durbin and I will see if we can reach the tank area. We won't use the communicator again. The mutineers would be able to hear all that we said."

Rangone followed Durbin into the bubble and the engineer opened the hatch, which was about the width of a man's shoulders. Durbin led the way. "Better keep quiet from now on. They could hear us if we make too

much noise and we don't want a reception committee waiting for us."

They heard sporadic shooting as they went. Rangone had suspected there would be trouble of some kind, but not so soon nor so violent. An opportunist had seen a chance and taken it. He might intend to kill everyone who stood in the way of his plans. He would have to kill any dissenters or be killed. Rangone hoped that Barbara, Laura, and the others were safe. Perhaps the mutineers had thought of hostages, which would complicate matters. What did they hope to gain? The salvation of everyone depended on pooling skills and resources. Yet here he was, a gun in his belt, on his way perhaps to kill.

Durbin indicated that they were nearing the hatch leading into the tank area at the rear. The shooting had stopped and Rangone wondered if that were a good or a bad sign. The engineer edged the hatch open slowly. When he thought it was safe, he went through, gun in hand. There was no shot. Rangone went through after him. The hatch was next to the rear wall of the tank room and the rows of tanks were above and in front of them.

They began to move forward, taking their time. They came to an access ladder and Durbin pointed upward. The mutineers would be less likely to spot them up there. They climbed onto the first catwalk and started walking forward. Durbin stayed on the port side while Rangone patrolled the starboard. The engineer could see the full length of the area to the entrance door at the port side. A maintenance cubicle obscured Rangone's view.

There was a sudden flurry of shooting from two places. Men and women burst in and one went down as Brandt fired back. But he couldn't cover everyone, as the mutineers spread out quickly, firing as they came. Seven men and two women got into the area. Some kept firing to keep Brandt's head down, while the others began to move to encircle him. They didn't know that Rangone and Durbin were behind the Commandant.

The engineer leaned over the catwalk and shouted to the mutineers to stop. Getting off some shots, they scrambled for cover. Now it was a game of cat and mouse. Who was cat and who was mouse depended mainly on luck. Both Rangone and Durbin crouched where they were, watching and listening for any betraying movement or sound. Brandt would know he had support, but they didn't want to shout and reveal their position. One or other could be hit by a stray shot.

The area was silent again except for ominous dripping noises from a number of sources. Rangone signalled that he was going to try and plug the leaks and he started to move up. One of the damaged tanks was just ahead of him, one level up, and he made for that. The nutrient was flowing out of an individual tank and not from a feed line. The catwalk was slippery. He reached for the repair kit hanging on the rail. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man two tanks away, his gun raised ready to shoot.

Rangone's foot slipped from under him as two shots cracked, one after the other; as his face struck the rail, he saw the man rear up like a frightened stallion, stumble against the rail and pitch over, a constricted gurgling sound spewing from his throat. There was a woman's cry.

Rangone glanced groggily across the catwalks, his vision hampered by blood running into his eyes. Durbin waved to him. The engineer seemed to be enjoying himself. Rangone waved back.

He wiped the blood away, then patched the leak and went on to the next one. It was three tanks ahead, at the top level. There was more shooting as he climbed. This one was seriously damaged. A feed line had been severed. He placed a clamp over the pipe and examined the gauges. Two were at danger level but beginning to rise again. He wiped more blood away and continued to work. The shooting had stopped and the area was silent, each side waiting for the other to make a move.

Finishing that repair, he went forward, then paused, knowing he would be an easy target for anyone who spotted him. He couldn't examine the tanks from the rear or the sides. They were obviously damaged at the front and beyond repair. At least the occupants would never know what had happened.

As he worked his way backwards and downwards, more shooting broke out on the port side. Someone screamed as a shot found its mark. From his position, Rangone could see both the entrance door and the emergency door on the starboard side. A man, then a woman, slipped out of the area. Somewhere below, a wounded man was groaning.

"They're all gone now," Durbin called. He shouted to the wounded mutineer to throw his gun away. The sound of metal on metal was sharp. Rangone scrambled to the deck.

"Carlo!"

He turned and looked up. "Barbara! What are you doing here? Are you all right?"

"Yes. But Commandant Brandt is wounded."

Durbin came forward, pushing the wounded, limping man before him. He was a marine. Rangone went up the ladder and along the catwalk to where Brandt rested, his eyes closed. Barbara had patched up the wound in his left shoulder. Rangone was conscious of her proximity as he said, "We can't move him until the situation settles down. Keep an eye on him. Durbin and I will have to try and get back to the bridge again."

Their eyes met briefly; then he went back to join Durbin and the prisoner.

"Try and talk to Templeton. I'll check this man's wound."

"Watch him closely, Commander. Anyone desperate enough to participate in a mutiny will try anything."

"He's in no condition to start trouble," Rangone answered, "but take my gun, just in case."

Durbin went to the control console and called the bridge. He listened, then said to Rangone: "It's all over. The mutineers were holding Dr. Donlevy and some other hostages, but they broke out and diverted the attention of the man watching the bridge. Major Essenden is back, bristling I'll bet, at having missed the fight."

"You could be right. I hope it's the last one we see on this planet. Anyway, ask them to send two men to get the Commandant, and an escort for this man. He'll be able to walk. Hertz had better report here to examine the tanks. Barbara, did you hear that? The mutiny is over."

And now comes the reckoning, he thought grimly. With Brandt wounded, he was now undisputed master of the ship and indeed, of the planet. The thought gave him no pleasure, especially in view of the mutiny. He would have to deliver the verdict on the surviving mutineers, a prospect he dreaded. Under military law, there could be only one verdict and his training told him what the penalty should be.

The escort and the medical helpers came, followed by Hertz and Templeton, who was still carrying his gun in his hand. Rangone realized that he hadn't used his gun. He was glad; his profession was saving lives not destroying them. Templeton saw the direction of his glance and holstered the weapon. "How is Brandt?" the aide asked, anxiously watching the men climbing up the ladder.

Barbara appeared and called down, "The Commandant is unconscious and the wound has started to bleed again."

"It might not be too serious," Rangone said. He knew that Templeton was concerned. "What's the situation?"

"Two of our people wounded, neither badly. Three of the mutineers killed, two wounded, one of them critically, according to Dr. Donlevy. Essenden is guarding the other mutineers. What happened here?"

The escort took the wounded mutineer away.

"One dead—fell over the rail, but, I think he was killed by a shot—and two wounded, including Brandt."

Brandt was brought along the catwalk and put in the lift, while Barbara came down the ladder and waited on the deck. She accompanied Brandt to the medical room. Rangone and Templeton followed; Durbin had gone to assist Hertz.

"We'll have to convene a court-martial, Commander," the aide said.

"I know nothing of such matters, Colonel, so you'll have to attend to the details." He hesitated, then added, "I assume that I shall have to act as President of the Court, or whatever the title is?"

Templeton nodded. "And we shall have to appoint people to represent both sides."

"That's going to be awkward in our present circumstances. The only ones not involved in the affair are Essenden and his four men. I suppose the Major will have to be the defence counsel and the men will act as the jury."

"The regulations of martial law provide for all or nearly all

contingencies when civil rule has been abrogated on colonized planets." Templeton smiled and went on, "Don't worry Commander. Everything will go smoothly. Law has a subduing effect on most people, especially military personnel. I'm not relishing this particular trial one little bit. I've been at a number of mutiny trials, but never one like this. It won't be pleasant for anyone. No matter what the outcome, everyone will feel guilty. We can't afford that emotion when we all have to work together for the rest of our lives."

They reached the medical room and went in. Donlevy was examining Brandt's shoulder while Barbara looked on. "The bullet's still in, but it won't be difficult to remove," he said. Brandt was still unconscious. The other wounded were being treated and it seemed as if there had been a heavy battle instead of an exchange of shots. A marine, gun in view, lounged against a wall.

"He's lost a lot of blood," Donlevy continued, "and that's the real danger. We don't have much in stock, so we'll have to get a pint from those fit to give it. Laura is organizing that."

"What's happened to the bodies of those killed?" Rangone asked his assistant. Donlevy glanced up from his messy task. "The ones killed here are in the freezer. They haven't brought in the one from your end, yet." His voice was unemotional. He'd seen too many cadavers, most of them in a worse state than the present ones, to show concern. He wasn't callous, merely inured.

Rangone said to Templeton, not without an edge in his tone: "Do regulations cover them too?"

"They do. Strictly speaking, they have no rights any longer. They were mutineers, perhaps the worst type of criminal in the military book."

"But they are human beings—"

"So were the people in the tanks, Commander. I didn't frame the regulations. I apply them when I'm ordered to. Otherwise there would be no point in having discipline. I'm not prejudging the mutineers. There's never anything personal in such proceedings."

Further embarrassment was averted as Laura came in and said to Rangone, "I suppose Surgeon Donlevy has explained about the blood by

now. Can both of you come, please?"

"I can manage," Donlevy said. "There's nothing very serious and I'll be finished with the Commandant in a few minutes."

The two men went with Laura, who settled them on tables. A nurse came forward with a needle.

Templeton grimaced. "I never did like this," he confided, shutting his eyes.

"Courage, Colonel," The nurse said and he opened his eyes to look at her, then decided to keep them open. The view was pleasing.

Barbara came in to tell them that Donlevy had successfully removed the bullet from Brandt's shoulder and that he was now getting a transfusion.

"He'll be out of action for a week or two," she concluded. She spoke as if Rangone were there alone. She wished he were, but there was little hope of privacy as things were.

"That puts you firmly in command," Templeton said, "and I can't say that I envy you the job."

"I'll be relying heavily on you," He reminded the aide, who had resumed his contemplation of the nurse. He grunted, unruffled.

After a short time, the nurse announced the finish of the blood-letting, but warned them that they'd have to rest before resuming duty. They agreed meekly as she led them to an adjoining room and made them lie down on bunk beds. Two more persons went in to give blood.

Once they were settled, Rangone said, "I suppose that the court-martial should be convened as quickly as possible?"

Templeton was lying with his hands behind his head, staring at the low ceiling. "Yes. The procedure is normally long and complicated, to ensure that the accused get a fair trial, but I don't think that we can afford to dwell on the niceties in this case. There is a short form of court-martial designed for use in special circumstances, although nothing remotely like this was ever envisaged. Just the essentials, no frills."

"Something like a drum-head trial?"

Templeton affirmed that. "But a lot more than just a drum-head. When we return to the bridge, I'll brief you on the requirements."

They were silent for a minute. The attractive nurse brought them mugs holding only a small ration of tea and she blushed at Templeton's bold scrutiny.

"Much more interesting than court-martial procedure," Rangone commented, after she'd gone.

"Much."

Rangone smiled briefly, then resumed their former conversation. "We're in the invidious position of having to talk about something we shouldn't discuss because we're directly involved. A case for Solomon."

"We're all involved here. The actions of one person will affect all the others, so things aren't going to be easy. In a way, we're fortunate in having a ready-made defence counsel in Essenden."

Rangone propped himself up on one elbow. "Defence? What defence can there be for mutiny? The mutineers almost certainly had reasons and I could even guess what they were, but nothing that is put forward by way of defence can have any force. They did try to take over the ship by armed action and they killed people. Until Hertz makes a count, we won't know how many."

"You're prejudging them, natural as that is. But that's what laws are for: to prevent natural instincts from leading to natural, usually violent actions. The end result may be the same. But the accused will have been fairly treated. Laws also salve troubled consciences."

Rangone lay down. His voice was toneless as he said, "I'm glad that I became a doctor and not a lawyer."

Templeton laughed without humor. "You're not really much different, if I may be allowed to be cynical. I'm not talking about the 'normal' run of duties that a doctor has, such as treating disease, injury, things like that. It's the treatment of patients with terminal illnesses. You doctors do your best, with all your machinery, to keep them alive as long as possible, even

after life has completely lost any meaning. I hope when I go that it's swift and definite."

Surprisingly, Rangone was very calm. "We doctors have argued about that for thousands of years, and will, no doubt, for as many years to come. After one has tried to take into account all the available factors, it always comes down to a personal decision. I've let patients slip away quietly when I've known that they were beyond all medical help. I was accused of malpractice on one occasion—a contributory reason to my joining the forces—but the case was dropped when it was shown that the plaintiffs were, as the judge sarcastically phrased it, 'A trifle less than sincere,' and I left the court without the traditional blemish on my character."

He smiled at the memory. "The plaintiffs were two spinster sisters. It transpired that they inherited a great deal of money when their dear brother died."

"Would you let the people in the tanks die if you thought that was the best thing?"

Rangone, who'd been gazing at the ceiling, turned his head to look at Templeton. "Yes," he said, and swung his legs off the bunk. "I'm going to see the wounded, then to see Major Essenden. If the water is undrinkable, then we won't need euthanasia or a court-martial. Coming?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Templeton had briefed everyone expertly and clearly; the court-martial went without a hitch. The mutineers were found guilty. As required by the regulations, the death sentence was pronounced. Rangone, as President of the Court, exercised his right to waive the penalty, and the accused were given parole under the supervision of Essenden, who had displayed disconcerting flashes of brilliance as defence counsel. A rider was added that, should the parole be broken in any way, the offender would be banished from the colony.

That disposed of, the colonists settled down to the really important problem: that of gaining a toehold on the planet.

The water was potable but heavily laced with minerals, especially sulphur, and it was hard on metabolisms used to a more refined variety.

Essenden's patrol had done well. They brought many samples of roots and berries, and most of them proved edible although all tasted of sulphur to some degree.

The third evening after the mutiny, two of the marines caught one of the animals at the waterhole. It couldn't be left there overnight, or the predators would eat it, so they were faced with the task of getting it back to the ship, a distance of more than a mile. When the news was radioed back, someone suggested that two medical trolleys be lashed together and used to bring in the animal.

That was done and four marines set out for the lake amid banter and laughter. They were at the top of a small rise leading down to the shore when they heard the terrible screeching and the sound of shots. As the men ran toward the commotion, they saw a huge shape rising against the sky with something trailing underneath. It passed across the early stars and was gone in the direction of the forest. Torches revealed the two hunters with most of their clothes torn off, but otherwise, apparently undamaged. They were picking off animal hair and some kind of feathers.

At the ship, they were treated for some minor cuts, then went to the bridge to report to Rangone and Templeton.

"It all happened so quickly, sir," one of the men addressed Rangone. "We were on the alert for possible attack from the ground, having been warned about the two animals spotted by the infra-red scanner, but not from the air. We didn't even hear the thing coming in, no wing flapping, nothing. It just seemed to appear on top of us and dragged the animal into the air, as if it weighed a pound or so. When it lost its grip, the animal fell almost on top of us. We were shooting by this time and the thing came right at us, grabbed the animal again, and flew off. I'm sorry we couldn't stop it, sir."

"You did very well in the circumstances, and you are both safe, which is the main thing. We'll just have to find a way of trapping one of the animals in daylight. Maybe our nocturnal intruder won't be so daring then. Get off to bed and sleep well."

After they'd gone, Rangone said, "That could have been a nasty accident."

"I think that the thing got as big a fright as they did." Templeton

commented. "Those birds, or whatever they are, have had it all their own way on this planet until we came along, so we'll have to watch out for them. They can see in the dark and they may have rudimentary intelligence. Have any of them been spotted in daylight?"

"No one has reported seeing one, but that doesn't mean they are purely nocturnal. They might not frequent this area in daylight."

"That forest could stand a bit of investigation, if the bird was making for there."

Rangone agreed. "We'll need to secure our immediate environment before we can think of our other problems. We have food and water of sorts. There might be fish in the lake. The animals we know of, and there might be other sources of food in the forest. Essenden's taking a party out tomorrow to reconnoiter the fringe. We can't be too cautious."

"That was quite a formidable list of skills the computer threw up," Templeton said, changing the subject. "It's amazing the diversity of things people can do. We have the makings of an excellent colony among that lot. Have you decided who you are going to awaken and treat first?"

"Yes. As we discussed earlier, we need people with the skill to design living quarters for the limbless. Durbin and Hertz will be able to meet our engineering, plumbing, electrical, and electronic requirements. There's a girl, Ingrid Immelmann, who was an industrial designer before she joined the services. Jack Mannock, a Navy pilot, was an architect and designer, so we'll have him. That covers all the basic skills we'll need, I think."

"So they're your guinea pigs in the regeneration stakes?" Templeton said. "Is there any danger that, because of the long delay involved, they might not react to the treatment?"

"Fortunately, all our experience indicates that a time lag will have no effect, provided that the body of the patient is otherwise healthy. Our sleepers are all fit. It's the psychological reaction that I'm worried about. It could have adverse effects. The serum might not work or it might result in partial regeneration."

Templeton sighed. "Those aren't exactly cheerful prospects. I'm almost sorry I asked the questions."

"Don't be, Sam. You can be sure that the same question is in everyone's mind, at some level or other. Coming back to Immelmann and Mannock, I hope to regenerate an arm and a hand each, for writing and drawing: Durbin and Hertz can work from roughs. They won't need anything elaborate. The designers are probably used to maneuvering tools with one hand, anyway. I want to try and have enough serum to give everyone a hand, if it can be managed. Then they won't have to feel so dependent on others. But it might not be possible."

Templeton said practically, "It might not even be necessary, from the skills' aspect, I mean."

"Agreed. But it will be an immensely valuable morale booster if everyone has a hand with which to wash his face. None of them will ever have legs, which will create all sorts of problems for them, and for us. The early stages of regeneration can be started while they are still in the tanks. In fact, I wish I could risk leaving them in the tanks until the process is complete, but there are various factors involved that preclude that. Also, I don't know if full regeneration would work under those conditions. I'll have to keep them under steadily diminishing sedation so that they don't have the shock of watching an arm and a hand grow and come to realize that it's all they'll ever have..."

"Unless you manage to synthesize more serum."

"Your faith in medical science is touching. It took men infinitely more clever than I am many years and millions of dollars to develop the serum, so you can forget that. People are going to have to live with their handicaps."

"What about the next generation," Templeton changed his tack. "Will they have all their limbs?"

"Aren't you looking rather far ahead?" Rangone was genuinely amused. "But, if you really want to know: they will. The genes of the prospective parents aren't affected."

Laura appeared with coffee and a single biscuit for each man.

"How is the patient?" Rangone asked her.

"Making good progress. The Commandant demands ten times a day to

be allowed up and about more, but I'm not letting him browbeat me."

"That," Templeton said with a straight face, "would be difficult."

Laura smiled sweetly. "Naturally. Now I'm off to make the final rounds before going to bed. Goodnight, gentlemen."

They thanked her. After she was gone, Templeton said, "She's a great asset to us, Carlo, and witty, too. I'm going to follow her example and go to bed. By the way, when do you intend to begin the regeneration on the first candidates? You didn't tell me."

Rangone gazed into the bottom of his cup. "Tomorrow. I'm afraid if I postpone it any longer, I shall lose my courage."

Templeton pushed at the door. "That's one thing you won't lose, I'm sure. We had the Devil's own luck in finding this planet, and we're going to survive. As a doctor, you're essential to that survival. I know we have Dr. Donlevy, and trained nurses, but you have the vital ingredient that marks out a good leader. Believe me, I know. I've seen enough of them to recognize one when I see him. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Sam, and thanks. Even doctors need their confidence restored now and then."

When the door had closed, he sat thinking about the morrow, but the thought depressed him, so he busied himself making up the log for the day.

He decided to go and take a look at the patients before turning in.

There was a timid knock on the door, and sighing, he called, "Come in."

His weary heart jumped at the sight of Barbara. Guiltily, he realized that he'd hardly said a word to her since the mutiny.

"I came to see how you are..." She let the sentence tail off, as if she were uncertain of her reception.

Rangone went across to her, smiling, and took her hand. "Come and sit down. It's good to talk to you again, Barbara. I've been neglecting you."

"So you have," she pointed out. "You should be ashamed of yourself. But

I shouldn't scold you. I know that you've been busy and so have I. No one can say that nursing isn't a full time occupation."

Rangone found himself marvelling at the relationship that had grown up between them almost unbidden and without conscious effort on either side. It seemed more natural that way. They could approach each other as mature adults, without adolescent artifice. Rangone knew instinctively that she was his wellspring of courage and love. But he was going to have to pick his way with care and understanding. Barbara wasn't quite at ease with him even in private, he suspected, because of his rank and position. There was also the question of the disparity in their ages.

He set about breaking down the barriers by saying, "I'd like you to call me Carlo, when we're alone, Barbara."

Her face glowed with pleasure. "It's a lovely name... Carlo."

"But don't," he warned her with mock severity, "use my Christian name during working hours. I might have to clap you in irons."

They laughed and he could sense the air of relaxation. He was glad she had come in, and told her so with a kiss. There was a wondering look in her eyes, as if she wasn't quite sure what she was getting involved in or if she would be able to cope with it.

"Off to bed with you now," Rangone said, rising. "I'll see you in the morning."

She reached up quickly, pecked him on the cheek, and was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The following day was fresh and bright, and Rangone enjoyed his rationed breakfast with a gusto that drew amused and knowing glances from some of his colleagues. The ship's grapevine seemed to be working overtime, even in the present circumstances.

He called in to see the patients, then went to the bridge to attend the daily 9.30 conference of key people. It was only the fourth meeting and already everyone was working in harmony. They were determined to be good colonists. The conferences were as brief and concise as possible. Each

person reported on his or her sphere of responsibility. Once the colony was firmly established, then there would be many other things to discuss and make decisions about.

Major Essenden was preparing to go on his field trip and he outlined his plan to the others. "Initially, we won't attempt to penetrate too far into the forest, especially after last night's episode. A man with a radio will be stationed at the edge of the forest, and we'll maintain contact between the men actually in the forest. I thought of taking six men, Commander, if that meets with your approval."

"Yes, Major. You're the best judge of how many men you'll need for the job. We want to have your general observations. Don't take any risks. We can't afford to lose anyone. What time do you intend to start?"

"10.30, Commander. I estimate that it will take us at least an hour to reach the forest. I'll arrange for rations. There is one other thing, sir. I'd like to include Whyte in the group."

Rangone frowned. "He was one of the instigators of the mutiny, Major."

"I know that, Commander. But he's a good soldier and a very handy man to have around if there's trouble. If he's to fit in with the rest of us, then he'll need every opportunity to prove himself."

"It's your decision, Major. He's on parole to you, so you have my agreement. Good luck."

Essenden gave him an impeccable salute and left.

When the meeting finished at about 10.20, Rangone went to see Donlevy, who had just completed the morning sick parade.

"Anything serious, Tim?" He took the proffered clipboard and perched himself on the edge of the table. He ran his eye down the surprisingly short list as Donlevy shook his head and yawned.

"Not unless you call toothache, a sprained wrist, or feeling off-color, serious."

"How are the two marines?"

"Funny you should mention them. You mean the ones involved in the incident with the bird or whatever it was?"

"Yes, what exactly did you find wrong with them?"

"That's just it, Carlo, nothing. As I've said, both of them complained of feeling 'off-color.' "

"When did it begin to happen—last night, after breakfast?"

"After breakfast, both of them. If you are suspecting food-poisoning, no one else complained. They didn't show the symptoms of food-poisoning, nor the symptoms of anything else, for that matter. I couldn't find a thing wrong with either of them. I gave them an excused duties' chit, just in case. Last night's experience must have been frightening, especially on a strange planet, so it could be a mild form of delayed shock. But I don't think it was."

Their eyes met. "I don't like mystery illnesses," Rangone murmured, a frown still creasing his brow. "Could they have been malingering?"

"Definitely not. Both were disappointed that they wouldn't be able to go on the forest patrol, and they were sincere. You'll have to look for your cause elsewhere, Carlo."

Rangone put the clipboard on the table. "I wonder... could they have received some infection from that bird when it scratched them?"

"You'd expect some evidence, a rise in temperature or one of the standard indications."

"That's just it, Tim, we can't judge this world's standards by our own. We know nothing about it. I think we'd better get a blood sample from both of them and test right away. Come on."

Within minutes, they had the marines in the clinic and the blood samples taken. Donlevy started the tests while Rangone quizzed the men. Barbara and Laura hovered in the background, ready to help if needed.

"How do you feel, now." Rangone asked Crosbie, the older of the two. He was lying with his hands behind his head, a thermometer stuck in his mouth at a crazy angle. He spoke round it with ease.

"I feel fine, sir, except that I'm... off-color. I can't describe it any other way. I don't have any aches or pains."

The other marine, Lacey, nodded his agreement, adding that after he'd eaten his breakfast, he still felt hungry.

"Crosbie, did you have that feeling? The rations are adequate."

He thought he might be heading in the right direction, even if he didn't know exactly where it might lead. What was delaying those blood tests?

Crosbie said, "I was hungry after breakfast, Commander, but I didn't think it was important. The meal wasn't that big, and I like good helpings." He was smiling.

"Are both of you hungry now?"

Both were.

Was that another part of the puzzle? Perhaps. Rangone turned to Laura. "Would you please arrange another meal for Crosbie and Lacey?"

As she went out, a medical technician came in. He saluted and said, "Doctor Donlevy will have the tests completed shortly, sir, but he sent me to tell you that there is definitely something peculiar about both samples."

"Thank you. Please let the doctor know that the marines have complained about feeling hungry, although under normal circumstances, they couldn't possibly have digested the food they ate at breakfast."

Barbara was standing quietly. She came forward and examined the thermometers. "No rise, Commander."

He smiled his thanks but his mind was wholly given over to the problem. The men did not manifest any signs of illness, and yet they maintained that they did not feel well. Donlevy insisted that they were not malingering and he agreed with his colleague. And there was something wrong with their blood.

Laura returned with a tray of food and the men ate as if they had not tasted food for days. They were not fastidious, cramming the food in as fast as they could, ignoring the other people present. When they had

finished and the mess had been cleared away, they lay back looking satisfied.

Rangone thought *they're just like two tigers having eaten one meal and anticipating the next*. The intercom buzzed. "Commander Rangone, Major Essenden reporting. I'm ready to go on patrol and I will keep in radio contact with the ship."

Rangone switched to transmit. "Fine, Major. Be careful to see that the men don't get scratched or bitten by anything. It could be serious. Observe and report. Good luck."

Donlevy came to the door and beckoned to him. Rangone joined him in another cabin. "They've caught a virus of some kind, Carlo, nothing that I can recognize. Have a look for yourself."

Rangone bent over the microscope, examining both samples simultaneously. He identified the normal denizens of the blood. And there was also a minute forked intruder, lusty and active.

"That's what seems to be causing the trouble, but how? As you said, Tim, the men have no temperature, no sickness, none of the normal indicators."

"Do you think the fact that they are feeling hungry so soon after a meal is significant?"

"It might be, but it's too soon to start drawing conclusions. Arrange for stomach X-rays and further blood samples to be taken and tested at 12.00. That will allow about ninety minutes between tests. It's a bit quick, I know, but I want to keep on top of this. The implications for the safety of the ship worry me. I'll have to postpone awakening any of the sleepers until the problem is resolved. I'm not happy about that. The longer it's put off the more reasons, or excuses, will be brought forward to prove that they should not be revived."

"One thing at a time, Carlo. I'll get those jobs done."

"I'll be on the bridge, if you want me."

On the way, he called in to see Brandt and keep him informed of events. He usually went in after the morning conference, so he explained the cause

of the delay. The Commandant did not detain him for long; he realized the pressures of command. Rangone also had his medical responsibilities to consider.

Templeton was talking to Essenden on the radio when Rangone reached the bridge. When he was finished, Rangone recounted recent events. "I've ordered further blood tests and X-rays," he concluded, "so we'll just have to wait for results."

"It sounds serious. What do you suspect the virus is doing?"

"Speeding up the digestive action of the stomach by causing the release of excess acids. The tests might confirm my idea. If I'm right, how do we stop it? The men would be eaten alive if the virus continues to stimulate the manufacture of acid."

"It's like a kind of cancer, then?"

"Yes, in that it resembles an uncontrolled multiplication of certain cells."

Templeton asked, "Would surgery be effective?"

"Perhaps, if it can be applied in time. But we don't know how fast the virus is working."

Donlevy came through on the intercom. "They are complaining of feeling hungry again. I've taken the X-rays. You'd better come and see them."

"I'm coming immediately. Take the blood samples now. We can't wait until noon." To Sam he said, "Please wait here on the bridge. We might have to get in touch with Essenden."

Rangone sprinted to the medical room where Donlevy was waiting. The first plate was in the viewer. He saw that the stomach was practically empty, a physiological impossibility under normal circumstances. The virus must be very quick-acting. Donlevy slipped in the second plate and it revealed the same story.

"They are beginning to feel pain, now." Donlevy said.

"No wonder! Who's working on the blood samples?"

"Barbara Restall. She came up with a good idea, one neither of us thought about. She suggested that we put the two marines in suspended animation. I did a quick test on a piece of infected stomach tissue, but the virus just kept on going."

"Clever. A pity it didn't work. You'll have realized by now, Tim, that they have a form of cancer. It's exceptionally virulent and causes the production of massive doses of excess stomach acids. The samples should confirm that. I think we'll have to operate."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"Surgery might not be the answer. Our only other hope is to catch a bird, get some of its blood, and see if we can synthesize an antidote. Essenden is on his way to the forest with a patrol."

"It might not be as simple as that, Carlo," Donlevy said soberly. "This is a new, unknown world. You said old standards will not necessarily apply here. The virus might merely thrive on the antidote. If so, the men will die."

"I know that. But they will certainly die if we do nothing. I'm hoping for a miracle to start us off in our new home."

Barbara brought in the latest blood samples and prepared smears on the plates. Rangone examined them quickly, then motioned Donlevy to the microscope.

"As I feared, the virus is multiplying at an alarming rate. Please prepare the theater for emergency surgery, Barbara."

Rangone left Donlevy in charge and hurried to the bridge. "The men are worse," he told Templeton. "We're going to operate to try and stop the virus from spreading. Are you in touch with Essenden again, yet?"

"No. I'm watching for them visually. It should take only a few minutes. What do you expect him to be able to do?"

Rangone explained the possibility of making a serum from some of a bird's blood. "It's a desperate chance."

"It is. Essenden is not even at the forest, yet. Then he has to catch a bird and get it back here, without transport."

"Not without transport: order the scout craft out. And tell Essenden to shoot a bird and not waste time trying to catch one alive. I'll be in the operating theater."

This was something he felt competent to deal with.

Donlevy met him, white-faced.

"Everything's ready. I think they have only hours to live if we fail."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The patrol was finding the going hard. The ground yielded a little, like peat, and it sapped their strength. They were out of sight of the ship and pushing their way through the tall flowers. The men were feeling slightly claustrophobic. As they trudged on, they could see some of the birds wheeling and gliding hundreds of feet overhead. Hardly any wing movement was noticeable.

"They must be riding the thermals," a marine commented. "I used to do it myself, before I joined up; don't get the chance anymore."

"Ride the thermals?" a companion asked. "What's a thermal?"

"I was a member of a gliding club. An aircraft used to tow us up into the air, release the gliders, and we would glide for many miles riding the warm air currents. Sunlight heats air at ground level and it begins to rise. Cold air rushes into the space and helps to push the hot air up. It was a thrilling sport; no noise except the wind—a wonderful sense of freedom."

Essenden, who was ahead of the grounded bird-man, had been listening with a fraction of his attention to the conversations going on around him and he took up the one about gliding.

"You seem to know a bit about gliding. I suppose you did a lot of it?"

"Yes, sir." The marine was taken aback by

Essenden's friendly inquiry. The Major had never been one for mixing

with the men in the ranks.

"I was champion of the Vega system for the last four years previous to the war, and twice runner-up in the All-System Finals."

"Very impressive."

Somehow the man felt depressed by Essenden's flattery, sincere as it seemed.

"Could it work here?" Essenden pursued the question.

"Once the gliders were up there, yes. But that's the problem: we don't have any aircraft to tow them into the sky, although we might be able to build a very primitive plane, powered by a steam engine. Anything else would be too sophisticated."

"Why bother with gliders at all if you think that aircraft could be built?" someone asked.

"It would be a difficult task to construct even one engine, although I'm sure that we have the necessary knowledge among the people with us. One plane can tow any number of gliders up, and a glider can do many things that an aircraft can't. And it doesn't need any power once it is in flight."

Essenden continued to listen in silence.

Everyone was beginning to join in the spirit of the debate, enjoying the exercise it gave their minds and imaginations.

"Couldn't a glider be floated up by means of a hot-air balloon," another suggested.

"It would take a lot of balloons!" the glider expert replied.

"Never mind aircraft and gliders then. Let's have balloons themselves. It would be nice drifting about up there, free as the wind."

The patrol was struggling to the top of the rise when they heard the noise of the scout taking off. As soon as he sighted the ship, Essenden reported in. He got no chance to say anything. Templeton was talking urgently, outlining the situation and the action to be taken.

"It is imperative that we get one of those birds back here quickly. The scout will pick you up and take you to the forest. Try and shoot one of them over open ground to make recovery easier. Two of you should manage it. Tell the patrol to join you promptly if they are needed."

"Understood." The scout appeared overhead and dropped to the ground just ahead of the patrol as Essenden gave the men their orders. Essenden climbed aboard the scout as the marines tried to raise a mild gallop.

He greeted the pilot, a marine corporal, settled himself as best he could—there was only one seat in the little craft—and checked over his high-velocity rifle.

"This is not going to be a clay pigeon shoot, sir," the pilot commented, lifting the ship off smoothly. "I'll try and keep her as slow and as straight as I can."

"Thanks," said Essenden, sighting along the barrel. He watched over the man's shoulder as they approached the forest. When they neared the trees, they could see that what had looked black from a distance was actually a dull, heavy green. The trees themselves grew densely, even at the forest's edge, and were very tall and slender, perhaps about forty or fifty feet high. Their large leaves began to grow about a quarter of the way up the trunks. Although irregular in shape, the trees seemed to be all of one type; the branches did not spread out more than ten feet from the trunks.

"As you said, no pigeon shoot," Essenden grunted. "I wonder where Templeton thinks I am going to find anything in that jungle."

The pilot curved the scout away, grazing the edge of the forest, and reached for his radio switch. "Over position now. Can't see a single bird."

The scout was now flying parallel to the forest edge, while Essenden scanned the trees. Suddenly the air was full of shapes and wings and the pilot took instinctive evasive action, causing Essenden, who was not strapped in, to bang his head on a projection. When the cursing had subsided, Templeton could be heard calling, demanding information, which the pilot gave him.

"Shoot one of those birds and get it back here!"

The scout had easily outdistanced the birds and turned to make

another run; unconsciously adding to Essenden's already sour disposition, the marine asked, "Think you can get one on the fly-by, sir?"

The Major snarled. "I can hit a flea off one of them at two miles with this."

"Just as well, Major," the pilot said, unimpressed. "I can't fly too close."

Essenden opened a hatch and prepared for his shot. There were so many of the dark-green birds that, even if he had shut his eyes and fired, he could hardly have missed. The birds were bigger than any he had ever seen, with thin, wiry bodies, long heads and beaks, and wings of huge span and area. Even he appreciated their peculiar grace as they seemed to feel that the danger was past and started to glide effortlessly, rising higher and higher.

The officer fixed one in his sights, aiming for the neck. The bird had detached itself from its fellows, which were drifting back over the forest. He squeezed the firing stud gently and barely felt the projectile hurtling away from the recoilless rifle. The bird jerked in the air as if it had struck an invisible barrier and began to fall, very slowly, like a reluctant autumn leaf. The scout started to circle, waiting for it to hit the ground.

In a panic, Essenden noticed that the winds were getting under the huge wings and carrying the bird towards the trees. One or two of its inquisitive comrades came wheeling around to investigate, and their plaintive, squeaking cries grated on Essenden's nerves. He fired another shot but missed. At last the big bird struck the ground and the scout landed nearby.

"Come and give me a hand," Essenden said curtly. "It's probably a lot heavier than it looks."

They climbed out and walked across to the corpse. The patrol was a hundred yards away. At close range, the men could see the sheen on the dark green feathers and the membranous underside of one of the wings that had partially crumpled on impact. Between them they managed to get a rope looped round the body and by that time the patrol had reached the scene.

"Some size," a marine panted. "Those wings must span at least twenty feet..."

"That's enough of the nature study," Essenden cut in. "Start pulling."

The men obeyed. The bird was heavy, and they had to sit down after they had dragged it to the ship. Overhead, thirty or forty other birds were turning in great sweeps. The men watched them warily, recalling the incident at the lake and its results. When their brief rest was up, the thought of that incident made them work with a will.

The hatch of the scout had not been constructed to take something as large and as unwieldy as the bird, at least not without a struggle. They pushed and pulled and cursed and finally got it into the scout, where it took up most of the available space.

The pilot had had the foresight to get into his seat before this performance. He shouted, "Sorry, Major, you'll have to walk home!"

Essenden contented himself with a snarl and shouted at the men to get out of the way as the scout took off and headed for the ship. The birds continued to wheel overhead.

Wearily, the patrol started the return journey, muttering at Essenden's deliberately fast pace. He did not feel energetic himself but his need to vent his ill-temper was greater than his weariness. They had gone a few hundred yards when one of the men noticed that the birds were following them perceptibly lower in the sky. Everyone started to watch them, making sure that rifles were ready.

"Fire a couple of warning shots," Essenden told a marine. The man took accurate aim and hit one bird. It wavered in flight but did not fall. The patrol pushed on, keeping an eye on the accompanying birds. Essenden did not want to waste time by stopping to shoot. The birds were now only forty feet up and making a terrific din.

Abruptly, one of them folded its wings and fell like lead. Before anyone could move it was upon them. Unfurling its great wings to act as brakes, it snatched one of the men. It soared away with its struggling, screaming victim, while the other marines were still trying to gather their wits. The bird rose fast. Some of its companions swooped in low, as though creating a diversionary action. The marines were firing at random, and the hits they did score were lucky ones.

The birds seemed to have achieved their purpose, for they swung away

and followed the others to the forest.

Essenden ordered the marines to stop firing, reported the incident to the ship, and was instructed to get back as quickly as possible. The men needed no urging. With occasional fearful glances over their shoulders, they jogged along, their faces drawn and sick-looking, all spirit knocked out of them.

At last they reached the ship, and Essenden went to the bridge. Templeton was there. Rangone and Donlevy were in the medical room trying to save the lives of the two marines.

Essenden gave a fuller account of the abduction, emphasizing that every precaution had been taken but that the patrol had been completely surprised by the speed of the bird.

Templeton said: "A search party has to go out. Your party will be flown to the forest in the lifeboat. Commander Rangone was hoping to keep it solely for exploration but this is an emergency. Corporal Manners will be in the scout and will try to spot the man from the air. He'll keep in touch with you by radio. Your orders are to return before dusk, whether or not you have found the missing man. We can't afford to risk any more lives. Any questions?"

Essenden shook his head sullenly. He resented both Templeton's promotion and the feeling that he was being held responsible for the marine's abduction.

"Have I time for a wash, Colonel?" he asked, an edge of sarcasm in his tone.

Templeton refused to be ruffled. "You have, Major. Please let me know when you are ready to leave. Commander Rangone conveys his thanks to you for your excellent shooting. It might help to save two lives."

Essenden, prepared for a snappish answer, was deflated.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Rangone saw the size of the bird, he ordered it to be removed from the scout and left on the ground. As it would take too long to

maneuver the carcass into the ship, he and Donlevy would work in the open. Besides, he wanted to prevent any possible contamination of the ship. At present, it was their only refuge.

An interested crowd gathered as the doctors prepared to take the blood necessary to make the serum. It was unpleasant work. Already, in the heat of the sun, the pterodactyl—someone had observed the bird's resemblance to the pre-historic flying reptile— was beginning to smell, and this soon persuaded the onlookers to retreat.

The doctors took samples of a thick, greyish substance and went aboard the ship for the next part of the procedure. Though speed was essential if the marines were to be saved, every step had to be checked to make certain that a mistake did not snuff out their lives and endanger the rest of the living. The emergency operation had not been effective in halting the spread of the virus. If the serum failed...

Outside, willing hands had dragged the "dactyl" off to what they considered a safe distance, burned it, then returned to the ship. They had to strip and scrub down outside, which caused a much needed relief of tension. Their clothes were also burned.

The patrol came out and boarded the lifeboat while Manners took off in the little scout. The craft landed at the edge of the forest. While the men relaxed, Essenden and Manners leaned against the scout's hull. The marine said, "You know that we have an almost impossible task, sir. The forest stretches for many miles and covers a considerable area. We don't know how far the man was taken or in what direction. He could have been carried to the far side of the river."

He stared at the trees, fifty yards away. "Even when I travelled as near to the tree-tops as I dared, I could see practically nothing. Talk about not seeing the wood for the top of the trees. And one other thing: there was only one bird to a tree, as if they each had their own particular one."

Essenden's brief interest died down. While Manners had been talking, he had been scanning the sky, but there were no dactyls aloft. "That's a common trait among birds and animals: to stake out their own territory and kill to preserve it. Another point is this: with the wing span those dactyls have, I doubt if more than one could nest on a tree."

"There was something else. It might be significant, I don't know. I saw

quite a few dead trees. And they had no birds on them."

"Symbiosis! It's a possibility!" Essenden pushed away from the hull. I take it your idea is to look for trees that are dying, because their symbiotes are dead."

"It's a time for playing very long shots," Major Manners said.

"I'll report to the ship to let them know what we are doing. Then in we go. We should be quite safe from the birds in the forest. They couldn't get down to the lower levels. I hope that there's nothing on the ground that we'll have to worry about."

"Would you ask Colonel Templeton what he wants me to do, sir?" the pilot said. "I suppose I'll have to stay with the scout."

"Probably. Although you might not be of any use upstairs. We might lose contact."

"There are some flares in the scout. And anyway, if we find our man, it would be very difficult to rescue him from the ground."

Essenden used the scout radio to report to Templeton. After a couple of minutes, he said to Manners, "You have to take the scout up to act as a radio relay to the ship while we go in on foot. And the Commander says that there is a possibility of truth in the symbiosis idea. They noted two openings just behind the neck of the dactyl which, they think, might be receptacles for suckers or something like that. Well, here we go."

The men, who were finally comfortable, grumbled at being roused, but there was no real complaint. They were talking to convince themselves that there was nothing to fear in the forest.

Essenden spaced the men out in a line, each positioned so that he could see his neighbor. "Try shouting. I think if Hunter were conscious he would have heard the scout going over and made some noise." He didn't really believe that. Hunter might be many miles away. Or he might be dead. But he had to try something.

In concert, the men shouted, then stopped to listen. Their voices bounced back at them but there was no answering call. Silence fell again under the trees.

"Once again."

Still there was no reply. Essenden called the men to him. "We are going to keep fairly close together, so that no one gets lost. If you see anything moving, shoot it. We can't take chances. We are looking for trees that appear as if they are dying." He pointed to one nearby. "The living ones seem to have a curious sheen about them, so presumably, dead or dying ones will not have it. I think we are more likely to find Hunter on a tree like that. I'm just guessing, there's nothing definite to go on. I'll go in the middle of the line with three men on either side. Don't push forward, don't straggle behind. I'll mark trees as we proceed, to act as guides back to the edge. Good luck."

They glanced around them at the forest. Unbidden, the thought formed in their minds that it could mean almost certain death to be lost in there. One could see along the ground for perhaps twenty yards in any direction, but overhead the branches and leaves of the trees formed a seemingly impenetrable umbrella. The men were immersed in a deep green gloom.

Essenden contacted the pilot in the scout and told him they were going in. Weapons at the ready, the men went forward, their feet sinking into the peaty soil. A man on the right was the first to discover a tree without its sheen. Essenden examined it. The marine happened to look upwards and exclaimed: "I can see bits of sky!" Essenden craned his neck. It was true. That seemed to be another feature of dead or dying trees—they began to lose their leaves and thin out. He called to everyone to keep their positions, then beckoned to Whyte .who had experience as a lumberjack. Whyte had fashioned crude crampons in Durbin's machine shop and he also carried a rope.

"Think you can do it?"

Whyte unslung the rope. "I've climbed ones twice that height without trouble, Major. Even allowing for the extra gravity, I'll be up there in no time."

"Watch out for dactyls."

"I have a gun."

Sam Templeton had been vehemently against letting any of the mutineers carry arms. Essenden, just as strongly, had pointed out that

Whyte was under parole to him, and that in a strange world, he could not be expected to fulfil his duties without arms. Also, if Whyte felt that he was not to be trusted completely, then, Essenden argued, he might be tempted to rebel again. Templeton was not happy about Essenden's dubious psychology, but he permitted Whyte to carry a handgun.

Whyte tied on the crampons expertly, looped the rope round the tree, and started climbing. His speed was incredible. Within a minute, he had reached the lower branches about thirty feet above the ground and began to head for the top. Shortly after, he was on his way down again.

"Nothing. The nest, I suppose you could call it, is decaying." He paused to catch his breath. Essenden suspected he had made quicker time than was prudent in order to impress the Major. "The other trees around me each had a dactyl on it, but none of them showed any activity."

"Everything helps, Whyte. Pass the word along for the men to keep looking overhead from time to time. Thinning out could indicate a likely tree. Dead ones have absolutely no sheen, so I think we can ignore them."

The scout passed overhead. Manners was searching in a pre-set pattern, hoping to spot the missing man—but so far there was nothing to report. It was stifling in the forest and the men were beginning to feel fatigued. The line moved forward again, Essenden marking trees as he went. From each cut in the wood, a thick, grayish substance oozed. Essenden also noted that there was a brief but violent agitation from the dactyl on top of each gashed tree.

There was another call, this time from the left, and he went over. The tree was thinning on top, but the sheen was still there, although it was not bright. Whyte climbed to the top, more slowly, Essenden noticed, then descended with nothing to report.

Essenden called a halt and checked with Manners. One of the marines said, "Excuse me, Major, but do you hope to find Hunter up on top of one of those trees?"

The officer explained the symbiosis idea and why it was thought that the missing man might be on top of the type of tree they were examining.

"Symbiosis." The questioner let his voice tail off, then he added, "Doesn't that involve some sort of joining-up, union?" The other marines

were muttering among themselves and looking decidedly jumpy.

"I'm not quite sure myself what it involves, Alexander," Essenden replied with false candor, "but those are my instructions."

His evasiveness was not lost on the men who knew that Essenden liked to be considered a walking encyclopedia.

"Rest time is up," Essenden said hastily. "Take your positions as before. Keep alert."

As he finished speaking, there was a short, scuffling noise somewhere ahead of them. They stopped as if rooted to the spot. Weapons were gripped tightly, knuckles showed white. Whatever had made that noise took on monstrous proportions and qualities in their minds. But they stood their ground. Far away, but approaching, was the familiar sound of the scout. Otherwise there was silence.

"Probably a small animal," Essenden said, attempting to allay their uneasiness, and his own. It occurred to him that they had seen nothing moving on the ground since they had entered the forest; that thought gnawed at his nerves. He steeled himself not to let the men see that he was uncertain. Contagion of that sort spread through the ranks like fire in an oil refinery. He knew, oh! how he *knew*. His conduct on Canopus One shamed him, even though he knew that he had been helpless to prevent it.

He had failed on Canopus One and men had died. *He* was on trial, more so than Whyte or any of the other mutineers. He had to prove to himself that he was fit to take his place among men again. Being castaway on this planet without hope of rescue was providential. It gave him a chance to start again, to try and redeem himself in his own eyes and in those of his companions.

Contrary to what most of them thought, Essenden did not delude himself about the defects in his character. Rather, he recognized them and tried to wall them off. His anxiety to be in the right all the time was one manifestation of his reluctance to face up to his defects. Perhaps his stubborn championing of Whyte was another facet of that reluctance.

The scout went overhead and turned to make another pass over the forest. Essenden checked with the pilot, then the line moved on again. The farther they penetrated into the forest, the deeper the gloom became. They

felt as if they were wrapped in green shrouds. And there was an unnatural silence. A forest on any of their own worlds was alive with animal sounds. Here there was nothing.

They also had to fight the mounting conviction that Hunter was no longer alive, otherwise he would have made some attempt to reveal his presence. Doggedly, Essenden led them on. Four times a tiring Whyte climbed likely trees, with negative results. Essenden knew that there was little time left. The men were very edgy and Whyte would not be able to do much more climbing.

Suddenly they heard a dragging sound, off to the left. Hysterically, a marine started firing. Essenden almost had to club him to get him to stop. Overhead, the dactyls were making a din, which gradually subsided. Quickly the green silence crept back among them. Telling them to stay where they were, Essenden moved in the direction of the sound. He was functioning on a brute, physical level. His mind seemed to be icing over. Strangely, he was unafraid.

He reached the source of the sound and cried out in disbelief. It was Hunter! The man was trying to pull himself free of thin, gray creepers that sprouted from the nearest trees. They were firmly coiled around his limbs and body. Hunter was obviously in the last stages of exhaustion.

Essenden called the other marines to him and they hacked Hunter free. He could not stand, but he didn't seem to have any serious injuries. They left the spot briskly. The severed creepers were whipping about in great agitation and the dactyls were screeching in a frenzied chorus. Essenden gave Manners the news and told him that they were retracing their steps to the edge of the forest.

But the markers he had gashed into the trees had *vanished*. The most recent one was still visible as a shadowy scar. He radioed the pilot, explained the trouble, and asked him to bring the scout directly overhead. The scout could hover and move forward slowly like helicopters of former times. When the scout was in position, the party made its way out of the forest.

Hunter was put aboard the scout and taken to the ship, while Essenden and his men followed on foot. There was some banter in their voices again. They felt they had accomplished something, had won a round with this seemingly hostile planet.

Essenden was greeted at the ship much as a triumphant Caesar. He learned that the serum, taken from the dactyl he had shot, had begun to stem the spread of the cancer in the two marines.

Essenden could have wept when he realized he derived no abnormal satisfaction from being a hero. No longer did he want to hog the limelight, to be the man who was right all the time. That journey into the forest had altered him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Considering his recent experience, Hunter made a remarkably rapid recovery. He had escaped serious injury and was unaffected by the scratches and bruises he did receive. Sitting up in bed, surrounded by Rangone, Donlevy, and Templeton, he told his story.

"When the bird first snatched me, I was scared to death. My automatic reaction was to struggle. I soon realized that if I did manage to get free of the bird, I would almost certainly be killed in the fall. So I hung on grimly and waited to see what would happen. I discovered those birds aren't carnivorous. They don't have any teeth."

"We noticed that when we examined the specimen Major Essenden shot," Rangone said, waiting for Hunter to continue.

"The bird deposited me on top of a tree, and flew off. I lay there for a few minutes and got my breath back while the panic wore off. Then I felt movement around me. The part of the tree I was lying on was smooth, with holes here and there. I don't mind telling you, sir, that I nearly went out of my mind when I saw thin, gray tendrils weaving out of the holes. Two of them, thicker than the others, came out of holes that were side by side."

Hunter had gone pale at the memory. "That was enough for me. A man-eating tree I didn't fancy, so the only option was to go over the edge. I climbed down the branches, and I think I slid most of the way down the trunk..."

"Your hands have friction burns," Donlevy commented.

"Before I left the top," Hunter continued, "I noted the direction of the

quickest way out, or so I thought. After a few minutes at the bottom of that green hell, I was going round and round. Creepers were trying to encircle me. I was almost done for when Major Essenden found me."

"That's enough talking for now, Hunter," Rangone said. "You rest until I say that you can return to duty."

He left the room accompanied by the other men. After Rangone instructed the nurse to keep Hunter sedated, the men went to the bridge to get a fuller account of Essenden's trip into the forest.

They listened in silence until the Major remarked on the thick, gray substance that had oozed from the gashed trees and how the gashes had very quickly closed up.

"We can't be certain without taking a sample and making a test," Rangone said, "but I'm sure that the substance will prove to be the same as the material we took from the dactyl."

"That seems to clinch the symbiosis theory," Donlevy interjected.

"I noticed another strange thing, Commander," Essenden said. "There seems to be no animal life in forest, no insects or small bird life. I didn't see any and I think the others in the patrol will say the same."

"The trees and the dactyls must form a closed life-cycle," Rangone said. "Other types of life on this planet probably learned ages ago to steer clear."

"Something else interested me," Templeton said. "Hunter is very sure that the dactyls are not carnivorous. Why, then, did they snatch him?"

"That's something we're not likely to learn," Rangone stated, "but I think we have one less hazard to worry about. If we don't go near the forest, the dactyls won't worry us."

"That still leaves another puzzle," Essenden remarked. "Why did the dactyl try to take off with that animal by the lake side?"

Three pairs of eyes locked on Essenden.

"Again, we don't know," Rangone replied. "We still have to find out what part the animal plays in the planetary ecology. It might involve triple

symbiosis or it might furnish food on the hoof for predators. We aren't going to solve all the problems on this planet in a short time. Some of them we'll never solve, but we'll have to be on the alert when we are outside the ship until we know our way around. What seems innocuous might be deadly. Anyway, tomorrow is another day—I suppose that remark was once original. You'll be relieved of all duties tomorrow, Major, as will the members of your patrol. That will be all, gentlemen. We'll have the usual meeting in the morning. Tim, would you stay here, please?"

After Templeton and Essenden had gone, the doctors settled down in companionable ease.

"It looks as if the serum is going to stop the spread of the cancer. Its initial rate of spreading has slowed considerably, but that was to be expected. The thing that concerns me is the possibility of dangerous side-effects."

"There's no use worrying about that, Carlo. I don't see that there is anything we can do to guard against them."

A knock on the door signalled the entry of a nurse with their supper. They both glared at the mug of weak, steaming liquid, then at the nurse. She explained apologetically that it was the last of the coffee.

"So we're making do with stewed sulphur!" Rangone said jokingly. "Thanks very much, nurse."

"You wouldn't thank me if you had tasted it first, Commander," she said, on her way out.

Rangone took a sip. "I have to agree with her," he said to the closed door.

"Is there a change in Essenden?" Tim Donlevy asked conversationally, "or is it just my imagination?"

"He does seem changed in some subtle way. Something happened in that forest to frighten him, to make him take stock of himself, and that can only benefit us all. Mind you, there were signs that he wasn't one hundred percent beyond redemption anyway. He had Sam Templeton on the defensive a few times at the court-martial."

"Am I hearing right? Are you beginning to like Essenden?"

"Let me put it this way, Tim: I'll get used to this sulphur-soaked brew, but I won't like it. The taste will always be in my mouth. It's the same with Essenden."

Donlevy grinned and managed to take a drink without grimacing too much.

"There are one or two more medical matters I want to discuss with you, Tim. I'm going to begin the regeneration process with Immelmann and Mannock first thing in the morning. During the early stages of the treatment, they can stay in the tanks. That should take about a week to ten days; by that time the limbs will have grown appreciably if the serum takes effect. We'll need to work closely together on that."

Donlevy grunted and put down the mug. "The process will need very stringent supervision, Carlo. I hope that it works."

"It will, Tim. Call on any help you may require. The other thing is this: I want to start the training of Barbara Restall as a doctor."

Donlevy raised his thick eyebrows a bit, but said nothing.

"We must provide for the future. The limbless are going to place a great strain on us, and we'll also have to contend with 'normal' illnesses and injuries. Barbara is young, intelligent, well-qualified, and she's a woman."

"She is, she certainly is!" Donlevy agreed blandly.

"Tch! Don't misunderstand me, Tim. She'll be invaluable in many ways."

"I understand you only too well," Donlevy said meaningfully, adding, "I think that it's a great idea. And she'll be popular with everyone."

"Good. I want you to undertake her training. I'll test her from time to time. Formal examinations won't be possible here, but we'll do the best we can. I'll tell her in the morning."

Donlevy appraised him. "Our little series of mishaps has uncovered hidden qualities in you, Carlo. You're running everything as if you were

born to command. If I were Brandt, I'd be getting worried just about now."

"I'm enjoying the challenge, Tim. But I won't really be sorry when the Commandant resumes his duties. He's chafing at the bit, like the old warhorse he is. I think he'll be fit to come back within a few days. Then I can get back to the doctoring business."

It was quite dark in the cabin and Rangone switched on a subdued light.

"He's going to find things a lot different," Donlevy said.

"Sam's promotion, you mean?"

"Yes. How did the two of them react, by the way? They've been serving together for a long time now, I believe."

Rangone related what both men had told him. "The promotion won't affect their relationship, Tim. One of the traits I like and admire in Brandt is that he respects people regardless of their rank. It's one of the things lacking in these knuckleheads who blocked their advancement. That, and compassion."

Donlevy sighed and stood up. "Those knuckleheads are about twenty thousand light years away now, so they won't trouble us anymore."

He wandered over to a port and stared across the dark leagues of space to distant Andromeda.

"It's all so remote, the people we loved, the familiar things we cherished or feared; conflict, war, the Enemy, all seem unworthy of notice or concern. Looking out at the stars has always had a sobering effect on me, Carlo. The concept of time and space is an ego-shrinker. Yet, I draw immense comfort from the fact that I am significant enough to exist."

He turned to face Rangone, laughing in embarrassment. "Listen to me, getting philosophical." He shook his head. "It must have been the sulphur..."

They grinned like two schoolboys sharing a secret joke. After Donlevy had gone, Rangone set about making up the log for the day. As he worked,

the Duty Nurse, Durbin, and Hertz reported that all was in order within their sphere of responsibilities.

He completed the log and put out the light prior to leaving the bridge. On impulse, he opened a porthole. The night smells wafted over and around him. The odor of sulphur was absent. The air was cool on his skin, the sensation stimulating. The planet was cocooned in a vast silence, awaiting the emergence of spring. The days were lengthening perceptibly.

As he was about to close the port, he thought he heard a sound from outside and strained his ears to listen.

Then he heard it. Faintly, far away, something was singing, a song of incredible beauty and clarity. Long after it had ceased, he stood there, willing with all his being for it to begin again.

But it did not.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next few days passed in a flurry of activity. While the lives of the two marines had hung in the balance and the third marine had been missing, the reluctant colonists had seemed to live in suspended animation.

Now they were determined to make the best of their new world. Rangone called them to an open-air meeting and explained plans for the immediate future. The news that Barbara Restall was to be trained as a doctor was enthusiastically received, for she had become exceedingly popular. A quieter reception greeted the announcement that regeneration treatment had been started on two of the sleepers. Memories of the mutiny were still too fresh.

Rangone asked Durbin and Hertz to outline the scheme for providing for the welfare of all the sleepers, once they were awakened. Laura McDonald called for the utmost sympathy in their regard. The meeting, when it ended, left everyone with a sense of unity stronger than they had ever before experienced.

In a way, the planet was their foe. But they would have to adapt to it and learn its pitfalls and pleasures. Various working parties were formed,

each under a supervisor. Securing a permanent food supply was their most important priority. One party was detailed to make an exhaustive study of the roots and berries first discovered and brought in by Essenden's initial foray and, in particular, to look for anything that resembled wheat, corn, or barley. The other food party's task was to find meat and, if possible, fish.

They knew that animals existed. But except for the one that had been trapped at the lake edge, none had been seen near the landing site. Herds had been observed grazing beyond the far bank of the river, but these were thus far inaccessible. It would be possible to use the lifeboat to ferry people across the river, but there were too many snags to make hunting in that manner a feasible proposition.

In any case, as the colonists would eventually want to settle on the far side of the river, a bridge was the answer to the problem, provided that suitable building materials could be found. There was a limit to how much the ship could be cannibalized, and it might not be possible to get "timber" from the nearby forest. This was just one of the projects Durbin had in mind as Master of Works. If it became necessary to build a bridge, there was civil, engineering experience to draw on among the colonists.

The first job the exploration party undertook was an investigation of the lake. It *seemed* harmless, but that remained to be proved. Examination of high-altitude photographs, taken from orbit, revealed the contour of the lake. The shore adjacent to the landing-site shelved gradually for about five hundred yards and then plunged into very deep water.

One of the discovered currents originated somewhere near the western side of the lake and curved in toward the shore about a mile from the ship. The team decided to go there first. As they neared the spot where the current came inshore, Nancy Sinclair, a statuesque black from Lincoln Two, ran forward, sticking in the tip of her finger and exclaiming, "Warm! *Beautiful!*"

And so it was. The water *was* comfortably warm for a stretch of about a hundred yards. The party splashed about like happy children. One or two individuals swam out a bit, but not too far from the shore. When they emerged unwillingly, the heat of the overhead red star soon dried their clothes.

There was speculation as to the source of the heated water. Geysers or some underground connection with the distant volcanoes seemed the two most likely causes. But the true answer would have to wait. A makeshift, reliable raft had been built for the team. Two members were going to go fishing while the others became beachcombers, looking for anything of interest along the gravel edge of the lake.

The raft was launched to a chorus of cheers while the occupants paddled furiously. They had no intention of going out from the shore on this occasion. Both were strong swimmers, but there was no way of knowing what dangers might lie below the surface. After their initial mad dash for the benefit of those on the shore, the two men proceeded carefully, moving the raft out slowly, observing as they went.

The distant volcanoes could be heard rumbling again. They had started around three o'clock and been intermittently active since then. From time to time, great sulphur-laden clouds rolled across the dull red sun, casting a sinister gloom over the land. Something primeval stirred in every mind and heart. The colonists had been born on planets that were old, long since cradled in the cosmic twilight of their existence. This new world was young, bursting with violent energy, seeking to flex its muscles with earthquake and storm and tidal wave. They would accord it fear and respect, but they intended to tame it.

When they were about three hundred yards from shore, one of the men threw out a line while his companion acted as a lookout. The scene became peaceful: two men in a boat fishing; people resting and laughing on the shore; a cool breeze tempering the moderate heat of the sun. And no big city nearby, with its attendant noise and filth.

The fishermen stayed put for fifteen minutes, then paddled out a bit farther, following the curve of the hot current. If there were fish in the lake, they weren't biting today.

"Maybe they stay out of the way when the volcanoes are active," one man said. The other smiled, said nothing, and kept on fishing.

"They're shouting something from the shore," the talkative one remarked, "but I can't hear what it is. This light wind must be carrying their voices away."

"Peter, the peculiar sounds that pass for human speech have never been

heard here until recently. Please don't try and make up for the million-year deficit. No wonder the fish aren't biting." He sighed patiently and resumed his fishing.

Peter tapped his shoulder. "Phil, Nancy's trying to attract our attention, I think. She's jumping up and down."

But Phil was staring at the water. "She's not the only thing that's jumping up and down." Suddenly he was alarmed. "Let's get to the shore! Quickly!"

Momentary panic overwhelmed them, and they started to paddle desperately. The water was shuddering and abrupt little spouts shot off the surface. The sun was obscured again. For the first time, they became conscious of a steady throbbing that was both sound and sensation. They heard the shouts and saw the agitated waving of their friends who had crowded to the water's edge.

What followed happened with appalling slowness, like a slow-motion nightmare. They were lifted high into the air on a towering geyser of steam. As the planetary spasm passed, the geyser collapsed and the two men plummeted like stricken birds into the lake. Not heeding possible danger, some of their companions struck out for the disaster area while help was summoned from the ship.

The fishermen, both unconscious, surfaced and were taken back to the shore. As they were brought on to the land, the lifeboat arrived with Donlevy in attendance. The men were badly scalded and had to be handled expertly. Rangone was waiting in the medical room aboard the ship and immediate remedial treatment began.

Brandt was again on duty, and the exploration team members gave him their version of the incident. They were told to confine their activities to the land until it was considered safe to resume investigation of the lake. The accident had yielded one bonus; various creatures had been killed and washed ashore. This was the team's chance to collect specimens and bring them to the ship where an amateur biologist dissected and analyzed them.

"It's a pity about the ban on the lake, Commandant," Templeton said when they were alone. Splashing about in water, especially warm water, has always been very relaxing."

"Are you speaking for yourself, Sam?" Brandt smiled, then added, "I agree with you. I like swimming, and a good, long soak would ease this shoulder of mine.

"After all they've had to endure, I'd like our people to enjoy themselves as much as possible. But quite a few geysers were reported on the lake during the volcanic activity. I'd feel more secure if I allow a day or two to pass before letting anyone swim."

Sam Templeton made no comment.

"There's a time for caution, Sam, and a time for action. It's my job to try and choose the right one in a particular circumstance."

"You're right, of course. But the thought of that lovely, warm water..." He let his voice trail off wistfully.

Rangone joined them.

"Are they going to be all right?" Brandt asked.

"In a few weeks, yes. The burns aren't as serious as we first thought."

"We've had our share of medical problems," Brandt said. "Sometimes I think we haven't left the Station."

"I'm hoping that Tim Donlevy and I will have nothing but minor troubles to deal with from now on. We could do with a break before we begin the mass regeneration program. By the way, we had a stroke of luck back at the Casualty Transfer Station. The last consignment of supplies for the hospital ship hadn't been completely put aboard, but fortunately some of the improved type of serum had. That has simplified our problem here."

"That reminds me, Carlo," Brandt said, lifting a sheet of paper, "you seem to be very pleased with the progress of Immelmann and Mannock."

"Yes. Both should have fully grown arms and hands within another week or so. I want to awaken them tomorrow and get them gradually conditioned to their situation. I have to find that delicate balance between letting them know too much and not letting them know enough."

"Wouldn't it be better to awaken them when their limbs are fully

grown?" Sam asked.

Rangone shook his head.

"Tim Donlevy, Laura, and I have discussed this. Under normal circumstances, when the patient still had other limbs, and was just awaiting the regeneration of one or at the most two, we would follow the procedure you suggest, Sam. But the sleepers agreed to the severance of their limbs reluctantly, in the full expectation of complete regeneration within hours. No matter how careful we are, I think that we'll lose some of them through shock."

Brandt and Templeton were listening intently.

"Immelmann and Mannock are guinea pigs in every sense. We want to see their reactions as they watch their regenerated limbs grow to maturity. It sounds callous and it *is* callous, but we think that this method will help them. It will tend to make them grateful for what they have."

He caught the glance that passed between Brandt and Templeton.

"I know, I know," he appealed to them, "It sounds sadistic, brutal, anything you want to call it."

"You don't have to justify yourself to us or to anyone on this ship, Carlo," Brandt reproved him. "We know your great concern for the sleepers, indeed for all of us. No one is better suited to his profession than you are, and we know that you'll do what is right. Faith is a very old-fashioned word, but that is what we have in you."

"So it is tomorrow then?"

"Tomorrow."

Rangone left with plenty to think about. His skill and courage were going to undergo a very severe test in the coming days. The success or failure of the colony would depend on him.

Tim Donlevy almost knocked him down as he entered the medical room.

"Carlo! The unbelievable has happened!" He grabbed Rangone's arm.

"Come and see for yourself."

Donlevy pushed him forward into a small rest room.

"Hullo, Commander."

It was Dunmurry, gaunt, gray, but back from the edge of madness and hugely pleased with his slurred greeting.

Rangone smiled at the man. What he wanted to do was to laugh out loud, laugh until he ached.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Durbin and Hertz had labored well to construct the prototype unit. Basically, it was a lightweight metal cylinder, three feet in diameter, thirty inches high, and open at the top. The bottom twelve inches were left empty for sanitary purposes, and a reinforced shelf positioned at that level. The upper part of the cylinder was packed with stiff padding around the outside while the inner portion was lined with soft foam. There was a headrest and supporting straps that could be criss-crossed over the shoulders and across the torso, if necessary.

Two parallel bars, three feet apart, protruded from the unit. A flat surface could be placed on them to make a tray or a working table. The prototype had wheels set so it could turn easily and safely in any direction. Apart from the convenience to the people who would be working with the units, these wheels would help the limbless men and women within to realize that they could get about.

The second unit also had been assembled. The two engineers stood aside while the units were examined by Brandt, Templeton, and the senior medical staff. Brandt congratulated them.

"You've done an excellent job. You seem to have thought of just about everything."

"Thank you, Commandant," Hertz replied, "but we won't feel satisfied until we've tested what we've built. In this instance we can't do that."

Durbin added, "We had to try to put ourselves into the physical and

mental situation of the limbless people in order to visualize the design from their viewpoint. We think that we did very well, but there are bound to be snags we haven't even considered."

"That still doesn't diminish your achievement," Rangone said. "Commandant, may we proceed now?"

"As soon as you are ready."

They filed out of the small machine shop, Durbin and Hertz wheeling the units. Brandt and Templeton returned to the bridge while the others went to the tank area. The appropriate slots were disconnected from the system and their containers brought to deck level. Immelmann and Mannock were removed, placed on prepared trolleys and taken to the medical room. The remaining occupant of each container was plugged back into the storage system.

Rangone and Donlevy began the long and delicate process of bringing the patients back to consciousness. Though they would not be aware of anything, they would require constant supervision to ensure their controlled emergence to complete possession of their faculties. Too much or too little sedation at the wrong time could be fatal.

For Rangone, events merged into a blur of intense concentration. Jack Mannock regained consciousness first. Rangone was relieved. He thought, perhaps wrongly, that his task would be easier with a man who had been tempered and hardened in the white heat of battle in space where the slightest error was punishable with instant extinction.

The room in which Mannock lay was deliberately kept dim. Aware of Tim Donlevy's reassuring presence behind him, Rangone began talking to the Navy pilot, gently but firmly, telling him what had happened. All the while, Barbara Restall sat by the man's cot, mopping his brow, and seeking to soothe him with her womanly attentions.

Mannock's eyes were closed but Rangone knew that his mind was receiving the words being spoken to him. He was like a man awake and yet still dreaming. His dream must not be allowed to become a nightmare. During the first session, Mannock's features remained surprisingly calm. All his reactions seemed to be funnelled through the embryo arm and hand, which twitched continually as though they, and not his mind, were his lifeline to reality and sanity.

When this encounter was over at last, Rangone was drained of energy.

There were tears on Mannoek's cheeks and Barbara wiped these away gently. She then put a hand on Rangone's forearm and they left the room.

"You need some fresh air. Take a short walk."

He stopped and looked down at her. "If you come with me."

Outside, people were relaxing after the activities of the day. The evening was calm and warm, the heat from the slowly westering red sun was unhindered by either cloud or wind. Rich waves of fragrance wafted up from a nearby sea of flowers, and the idle waters of the lake shimmered in copper-tinted silver. There was quiet laughter and a guitar was strumming a song of the old Earth. Nothing disturbed the serenity of the evening.

Rangone and Barbara strolled away from the lake and the ship. "I heard a bird singing the other night."

She smiled at him, keeping her silence. She sensed that he might need to talk, not to hold a conversation. For his part, he was reinvigorated simply by being with her.

"I feel that if we can phase ourselves into harmony with this land, it will be as if we have always been here."

They were walking about a yard apart and yet they could not have been closer, more intimately in tune. They came to a piece of ground that had been cleared, roughly tilled and levelled. The food team had been very industrious. Various plants were in neat rows in the dark-colored, lightly textured soil. Rangone bent, lifted up some of that soil and let it trickle through his fingers.

"We'll get good crops here," Barbara said. "Look, Carlo, this one is like wheat." She fondled the pale green ears, marvelling at their silkiness.

He joined her, some of the soil still in his palm.

"Yes. That's the one we hope will provide us with a basic cereal. The exploration people discovered acres of it about ten miles to the northwest and brought some of it back here. If it is suitable, then we'll have to learn

how to improve the strain and to cross it with others if we find any. We have some ex-farmers and a botanist aboard the ship, so we'll have full stomachs!"

As they turned to go back to the ship, Rangone stopped her, signalled for silence, then pointed to the far side of the plot. Stalking intently between the furrows were two birds, about the size of thrush. They were brilliantly hued with yellow bodies and wings tipped with turquoise, the same color as their heads. A black streak ran from their ochre beaks down their backs to their tails.

"Your songbirds, maybe?" Barbara whispered, fascinated at the sight of so much color and beauty in so small a bundle.

Without haste, the birds rose and were soon lost to sight.

"Perhaps they are. I hope so."

There was a pleasant coolness on their faces as they walked back to the ship. They went immediately to talk to Tim Donlevy and to hold the first session with the girl.

Tim smiled as they entered the room. "I can see that you're feeling better now, Carlo. Mannock is sleeping and he hasn't shown any signs of being upset, although we both know that there might be trouble when he is fully revived."

"We'll worry about that if and when it happens. Meanwhile, I'm happy about the present situation. I hope it goes as well with the girl."

Laura McDonald came in, and Rangone explained that they were going to begin the first session with Ingrid Immelmann while Laura looked after Mannock.

She responded, "Astrologer Dunmurry is making very satisfactory progress with his speech, Commander. He'll never regain it perfectly, of course, but he can make himself understood."

"Laura, you're an angel in disguise," Rangone replied with deep affection in his voice. "And I've kept tabs on what you've been doing—that touch of command went to my head, I think—and I know that you've been spending a lot of time with Dunmurry. I appreciate it."

"He's always been a favorite of mine."

"You are mother to us all, Laura, and we need you more than ever now."

For a brief moment, he thought he detected pain in her eyes, but it was quickly replaced by her usual expression—half intimidating, half gentle.

The first thing he became aware of when he entered Ingrid's room was the scent of flowers. Barbara had gathered them and put them in a pot by the cot side. The colors seemed to glow in the dim light. She read approval in his lingering glance.

Tim Donlevy was in charge of this session while Rangone was the observer. Donlevy's voice had the soft sound of waves on sand and Rangone found himself lulled by it.

When the session was over, Rangone said, "You almost had me hypnotized, Tim. I don't think I've actually concentrated on listening to your voice before."

"It's really quite simple, Carlo. Didn't you know that the Irish are always permanently intoxicated, and I don't just mean with the hard stuff. They have a kind of mental laughing gas and it gives all of them silver tongues."

Barbara was laughing. "With the weight of the precious stuff you must have in you, it's a wonder that you can move at all!"

"You must have some of the Irish in you," Donlevy returned smartly, with a twinkle. "The truth of the matter is this: my pre-historic ancestors were always falling into peat bogs and they had to learn to talk fast to dissuade the dinosaurs from eating them."

Barbara said triumphantly, "Dinosaurs didn't eat people."

"Irishmen," Donlevy replied with mock dignity, "are irresistible."

"Seriously, Tim," Rangone broke in, "You're the the key to the whole regeneration program. I want you to continue the sessions with Ingrid and Jack to see what effect you have on them. Apart from being too tense, I don't think that I have the right approach. Psychology was never a strong subject with me."

"What you really mean, Carlo, is that you are not sufficiently topped up with laughing gas. Of course I'll take on the job. You've had more than enough to do."

"Thanks. I'll sit in on the sessions in case I'm needed. I'm going to do the rounds before I see Brandt. I'll return in good time for my turn on duty."

All was quiet on the medical front, and Rangone went to the bridge. "You're just in time to join us for supper, Commander," Brandt greeted him. A nurse was setting down a tray as Sam Templeton commented, "Sulphur brew again, I'm afraid. Could we have another one for the Commander, please?"

When she had gone, the aide said to Rangone, "If you don't mind my saying so, you look as if you've just had a long ride on a bucking bronco. Are you feeling all right?"

"Who is the doctor here, anyway?" Rangone began, only to be interrupted by Brandt.

"Are you all right, Carlo?"

"As right as I'll ever be." He held out both hands straight in front of him. "Look, not a quiver, As you know, we've started the sessions with Immelmann and Mannock; it's probably a reaction to this you are catching."

The nurse came in with his drink, and he resumed when she left, relating what had occurred.

"Is it going to be successful?"

Rangone met Brandt's level gaze.

"Ask me if my heart will still be beating an hour from now." He put his cup aside. "I have no way of knowing what the outcome will be. The limb growth rate is satisfactory. If anything, it's quicker than I anticipated. It might be that these particular patients required less serum than the average dose. Again, it might be due to something else."

Neither man challenged his remarks. Rangone himself wasn't quite

sure what had prompted him to say what he did.

Instead, Brandt said, "I'm allowing swimming in the lake. It has been under observation since the accident. No more geysers have been reported. However, swimmers must keep close to the shore and Mr. Durbin has rigged up two rafts, which will be on hand for rescue work. If there is any volcanic activity, then everyone gets out of the water on the double."

"Incidentally, the eruptions threw up four species of edible fish," Sam Templeton said. "Not pleasant to look at, but edible."

"We can always close our eyes as we eat it. I'll see you in the morning."

Rangone made his way outside, leaned against the hull of the ship, and let the silence permeate his being. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he looked first towards Andromeda, and then towards the softly glowing filigree of misty light that formed the Galaxy.

The sound of a guitar and of someone singing quietly if not tunefully came to his ears, and he stood there listening.

* * *

*We are notes
adrift in a stream
of space and time and stars.
Our dreams forever yearn
for a love lost in a remembered land.
Now are we again reborn
in a world beyond the reach
of hate and lust and war,
as it was on that first glorious morn
when all the suns were new.*

*For there is no returning
to enter that beloved door;
our hearts are outward turning
we have reached the unknown shore.*

* * *

A man stood up, black against the ghostly spread of the Milky Way.

"I didn't know that you could sing, Mr. Durbin."

The figure turned. "Oh, good evening, Commander. I can't, but the singer isn't important; it's the words that count."

"Did you compose the words yourself?"

Durbin strummed the strings. "I'm not *all* nuts and bolts and slide rules." He sounded defensive.

"Nor am I all stethoscopes and scalpels. I happen to think that the words and the music are beautiful, and we are going to need all the beauty we can find on this planet."

"It will be better once I've polished it up a bit." He was flustered now.

"Leave it as it is," Rangone advised. "You've got it to just the right tolerance."

Durbin laughed at the use of the engineering term.

"Sing it for me again."

Once again the song floated into the night across river, lake, and forest, perhaps to be heard by ears to which music was a strange yet wonderful sensation. The very planet seemed to have stilled.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They had succeeded. Rangone looked back on the awakening of the two

sleepers with a sense of having been somewhere beyond human reality. Unlike many of his colleagues, in his work as a doctor, he had never managed to reconcile religion with the pain and the hardship of living. But at this time, out at the edge of the intergalactic abyss, he was deeply tempted to think again.

Against all the odds, Immelmann and Mannock survived their ordeal and retained their sanity. Basically, both had been very stable people. Rangone would not have used them as test subjects otherwise.

He involved them at once in the activity of the fledgling colony. Brandt sanctioned an open-air party. Durbin played his guitar and Donlevy revealed a tuneful tenor voice which he attributed to "these peat bogs."

The two handicapped individuals responded with enthusiasm, displaying no tendency to self-pity or recrimination. To their credit, the others acted in as natural a manner as was possible under the circumstances. Rangone found it difficult to be himself; he kept having pangs of guilt. The girl, Ingrid, seemed to sense his uneasiness, and Rangone took her efforts to help him as a measure of her adaptation to her disability. One of the most poignant moments occurred when she and Durbin played the guitar together. It was both comical and brave and was greeted with applause into which everyone seemed to pour their relief.

Mannock took the affair quietly although he joined in the singing with a lustiness that was forced but understandable. When he thought that no one was observing him, he held up his hand and flexed the long, well formed fingers. Then he became aware of Ingrid's gaze. He looked up, and, for a brief time, their hands and hearts touched.

Rangone saw this and turned quickly away. His mind drifted back over the events of the past few days as Durbin struck up another tune. Tim Donlevy had been superb in his sessions. Rangone had not thought him capable of such compassion. Subtly, he had magnified their hopes and diminished their fears until they were confident that they still had important roles to play in the life of the colony. And both had proved it by suggesting modifications to the prototype units. Often Rangone had wished for half as much courage as those two showed.

Someone was shouting; at first the words did not penetrate the fog of his recollection. Then he snapped back to the present. It was the long and leggy Nancy Sinclair, standing up to her knees in the lake and telling

anyone who would listen that the water was just right for swimming.

Rangone's heart jumped. "Mannock, he knew, had been a good all-round athlete and swimming had been one of his best sports. Rangone watched, unable to say anything as Mannock's hand clenched and unclenched. Ingrid was almost jumping out of her unit, her eyes sparkling. She leaned forward and spoke past Mannock.

"Commander Rangone, I want to go for a swim."

His mouth must have fallen open for she went on imperiously, "I know that I shall be as funny as a drunk crab, but I want to feel that lovely water on my body."

Quite a few people had gathered round, interested in what was going to happen. While Rangone was still trying to make up his mind, Jack Mannock said, "Let's make that two drunk crabs!"

Rangone joined in the laughter. "Right! Barbara, Laura, you look after Ingrid. Sam and I will try and keep up with Jack."

Mannock smiled at him, appreciating what Rangone was doing. The word spread and soon the water was full of people, swimming and splashing about under the warm sun. Ingrid had never been much of a swimmer and she contented herself by floating about in the shallows, attended by Barbara and Laura who were enjoying the activity. The Navy man was determined to get about and, to their surprise, managed to propel himself along just like a crab in slow motion.

Nancy went powering past Mannock like a barracuda and she yelled, "Come on, navy boy, what's keeping you?"

"Give me a half mile start and we'll see about that. Anyway, just you wait till I get my tin arm and legs, Nancy."

* * *

AT the first design session, both Ingrid and Jack had been adamant that Durbin and Hertz make prosthetic limbs according to their specifications. The girl was the most insistent.

Durbin proved doubtful. "We don't have the facilities to produce limbs

of the quality we had back home."

"Angus!" She had let her knowledge of his Christian name sink in. "Angus, *this* is now home. The situation back there has no comparison with our present one. Very few people failed to respond to regeneration there, but if they did, they received prosthetic limbs that were marvels of technology."

"But—"

"Angus, don't 'but' me. People have been making artificial limbs for thousands of years. I don't want to spend the rest of my waking hours in this tin bucket. Jack and I, and all the others when their turn comes, are going to have legs, too. I don't expect them to be fancy, streamlined, or easy to wear and use—not at the beginning anyway."

She had held out her beautifully shaped hand to him. He had taken it in his without thinking. The skin was still pale, but firm. She'd looked at him, with no trace of self pity in her eyes.

"There is only enough serum to regenerate an arm and a hand for each of the people in the tanks so this is all I am going to have."

Ingrid's voice had been steady. Only Durbin knew of her anguish and tension from the fierceness of her grip on his hand.

"There would be many problems..."

Ingrid had gone on, to the amusement of all there, "Are you going to tell me that a great engineer like you is going to fail over a little thing like this?"

Durbin had seemed to puff up to twice his usual size, and he said with pride, "Scottish engineers do not fail at anything. When do we start?"

"Good for you Angus," Ingrid had finished. "Some day I want to swim, really swim in that sea far beyond the mountains and you are going to give me the means to do it."

Rangone strolled to the edge of the lake. He'd left Jack with Sam and Nancy a few minutes before. "Ingrid, Jack, you'd better come out of the water now. That's long enough for your first time."

They were brought ashore and taken into the ship to be dried. Once that was done, and they were dressed, they were wheeled outside again in their tin buckets. Jack started to make some sketches while the girl combed her long chestnut-colored hair in the mirror provided by Durbin.

Essenden came by, looking very fit and tanned in his uniform.

"You're like a mermaid," he said lightly, "sitting there to entice unwary sailors."

She stopped combing her hair and smiled up at him. He seemed to be very large and shadowy standing there with the sun behind his shoulders. It had been the wonder of the colony that Ingrid had immediately taken to Essenden. But then, in recent days, many people had found good cause to revise their none too charitable opinions of the Major. This was one leopard who had changed his spots and sheathed his claws.

"Come round here where I can see you better." she commanded in that imperious voice everyone found engaging. He complied and squatted down beside the bucket, resting his forearms on his thighs.

"That's more like it."

"Did you enjoy being in the water, Ingrid?"

Briefly her face clouded, but it was clear again as she gazed past him toward the lake and the mountains which were basking like great black cats in the distance.

"It was wonderful. I felt some of the joy that a dolphin must feel: free, weightless, almost part of the water itself."

She glanced at him, her eyes misty, then looked again at the mountains. "I'm longing to get to the sea."

"The last free place," Jack said unexpectedly.

Ingrid started as if she had forgotten that he was there.

"Hemingway was a twentieth century writer from Earth. I think that he felt about the sea as you do, Ingrid. I want to go there too someday."

His hand gripped the side of the tray. Essenden stood up. "You'll both

get there, I'm sure of it. Be patient. The sea can wait for you."

Rangone was back inside the ship at work with Donlevy and his assistants on the second batch of sleepers, ten in number. They had to be given the serum and gradually revived. Two died from shock but the remaining eight would survive. Meantime, Durbin and Hertz were busy constructing units for the newly emerged. They were also working on the first prosthetic limbs for Ingrid and Jack. It took all of Durbin's skill and craftsmanship.

Durbin had taken measurements of the new arms and hands of Ingrid and Jack. He got the details of their height from medical records and he then calculated what length their legs would have to be. Donlevy explained to him the positions and functions of muscles, sinews, and bones, and Durbin translated the data into mechanical terms. Using the ship's computer, he calculated the load-carrying factors that he would have to incorporate into the limbs, taking into account such diverse actions as those employed by the thumb in a grip, and the bending of a knee joint.

The materials he had to work with were restricted.

Prosthetic limbs designed for those few unfortunate people who failed to regenerate back on Earth or on the other civilized worlds were works of art, custom built, costing much in time and money. The latest plastics made the limbs look and feel natural. The sensation of touch was incorporated into the tips of the fingers.

Durbin had to utilize what was on hand, mainly light alloy metals and unsophisticated plastic. Also, as the ship had only a rudimentary machine shop, he was handicapped by the lack of suitable tools. Nothing daunted, he designed his own jigs and made the tools he needed. The work made satisfactory progress.

To revive everyone in the tanks was going to be a long, delicate, and arduous undertaking. None of the twelve revived so far had rejected the serum but that had been good fortune. The mental and physical effect on Rangone and Donlevy was the most important aspect of the program in the long run. Until Barbara Restall was qualified, which would not be for some years, they were the colony's only doctors.

Brandt, who had sat in on some of the sessions and realized how exhausting they were, called the doctors to the bridge. Sam Templeton

was there, sitting silently in the background.

"I want you to slow down the program, Commander." He was as blunt and direct as a cudgel. "You are wearing yourselves out and I can't afford to let that happen. The future of the colony depends on you."

"But things are going so well, Commandant," Rangone protested.

"Have a good look at yourself, Carlo," Brandt retorted harshly. "You're burning yourself up because you feel responsible for the predicament of those poor devils in the tanks. You and Donlevy were the instruments, yes. But *I* made the decision and *I* bear the responsibility."

He paused, then resumed in a quieter tone. "Since that Enemy missile hit the ship, we've had much more than our share of good luck. We've been on this world only a short time, not nearly long enough for us to take its measure. I want us all to be fit to face anything that might confront us in the coming months. We'll have little chance if our two doctors are themselves on the sick list."

He faced them squarely. "Just do as I ask, for all our sakes."

The doctors traded glances. "It seems we have no option," Rangone conceded. Donlevy agreed. The sessions had drained him more than he wanted to admit. Always at the back of his mind lurked various fears about the patients, such as the shock that had killed two of the sleepers.

He asked the Commandant just how much he wanted to slow down the program.

"Reduce the groups to five and have a few days' rest between each lot. After all, there is no urgency. Smaller groups will be easier to assimilate into the colony, I think. The amputees are bound to feel a close comradeship with one another because of their handicap, but the last thing we want is two separate communities. That could happen if too many of the sleepers are revived within a short time."

Sam Templeton spoke for the first time. "Integration could be an even bigger problem than the actual reviving process. You'll both agree that there seems no prospect of them ever regenerating their limbs— too much is involved—and they'll have to live with prosthetic limbs that are poor imitations of those we have seen in use, despite Durbin's skill.

Resentments may flare up and be difficult to dampen. I think that the Commandant's request is fair and sensible."

"They're ganging up on us, Tim," Rangone smiled wearily.

Donlevy said, "Let's retreat while we can."

They returned to the medical section.

Barbara Restall looked up as they entered. She gave them a concise report of the condition of the group of sleepers going through the awakening process. In addition to that, Crosbie, one of the marines who had been attacked by the alien virus, had come in only a few minutes before to complain of a recurring pain in his side.

"I didn't know how long you would be with the Commandant, so I sent him away and asked him to return in an hour."

"Is there anything that needs immediate attention?"

"No, Commander. An orderly was in with a cut hand. It wasn't serious. He had been helping the engineers to make buckets. And there was the usual quota of people suffering from stomach upsets."

"They'll soon get used to sulphur with everything," Donlevy said. "I've forgotten how food tasted without it."

"It's fortunate that the human metabolism is so adaptable," Rangone commented, scanning Barbara's neatly written notes. "The long term effects of the sulphur interest me. Incidentally, has anyone been troubled more than once by stomach upset?"

"Offhand I don't know. Of course, I haven't been on duty all the times they've been reported, but I can check."

She consulted a folder for the computer code, then asked the machine for the information. Four names flashed up on the screen.

"Thanks, Barbara. We'd better have them in for check up, if you'll arrange that. Say ten o'clock. Does that suit you, Tim?"

"I've noted it, Carlo. If you don't want me for anything else, I'll go and look in on the sleepers."

They had no time to themselves. Nancy Sinclair, breathless and pale under her dark skin, burst into the room.

"Commander! There's been an accident! Whyte. Major Essenden is bringing him up."

Rangone called for Tim and told Barbara to inform the bridge of the accident and that they'd give more details when they had them.

Essenden came striding in with Whyte in his arms, his head lolling. He laid the marine on a trolley just as Donlevy appeared, saying, "They've just brought Dunmurry in. He looks..."

He broke off as he saw the deep, raw gash in Whyte's right temple. He and Barbara were already on their way to prepare for surgery as Rangone examined the patient.

Essenden explained in a low voice what had happened.

"Dunmurry was on one of the rafts, anchored about a hundred yards offshore. Whyte was there swimming around, keeping an eye on him. For some reason, Dunmurry must have panicked. He started jumping about and fell off the raft. Whyte went to his rescue and in getting him aboard the raft again struck his head. He went under. We managed to find him and get him to the shore."

"Your quick action might save him, Major. Let's hope so." He saw Sam Templeton standing at the door. The aide said, "I caught most of what the Major said. Has Whyte a chance?"

"Not much," Rangone said, "The wound is very deep and he was almost drowned. I suspect that Dunmurry's in the same condition."

"I'll let the Commandant know."

"I suppose you'll have to tell the people something, Sam, so just say that we are doing our best for them both."

Rangone and Donlevy worked for two hours trying to save Whyte's life. Exhausted, Rangone stopped at last. No one spoke.

He peeled off his gloves. "I'll tell Brandt."

Barbara wanted to go with him, but that was impossible. In any case, if she wanted to become a doctor, then she would have to face many such experiences in the years to come. Gently, she drew the sheet up, then carried on with her duties.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Whyte's death had a sobering yet inspiring effect on the people of the colony. Their tenuous hold here could be broken so easily by any one of a number of unforeseen factors. As if to remind them that they were invaders without security of tenure, hardly a day or a night passed undisturbed by the menacing rumble of the volcanoes. Swimming in the lake was again banned. For hours at a time, its surface erupted as the steaming geysers shot toward a cloud-riven, purple-gray sky. The teeming and varied life of the lake was washed ashore in increasing numbers. The herds had disappeared from the far side of the river, although some of the animals had been captured and were being studied in their corral near the ship. Over the forest, great masses of birds could be seen milling about, their screeches faintly heard. And as it rained almost all the time, the people were confined to the shelter of the ship. They came to accept the ground's continual tremoring and kept their fears to themselves.

Teams went outside only to get essential supplies. Brandt saw to it that everyone had plenty to do helping in the various study groups and assisting in the rehabilitation of the revived sleepers. There were now nineteen surviving men and women, each with only an arm and a hand. Rangone had split them into two groups and appointed Ingrid and Jack as guides. He regretted that they had to be restricted to the ship so much. Whenever the rain showed signs of slackening, he took them outside in their buckets. They revelled in the sights and sounds of the new world and wanted to stay and let the rain run down their faces. Rangone stood in the rain with them enjoying the childlike glee of his patients.

Hertz, who considered them very much his responsibility, organized a sketching and painting class. Some of the rock samples, when ground and mixed with water, provided quite satisfactory colors. Hair from the captured animals had been made into rudimentary brushes. He suggested subjects for them to paint, such as still life, portraits, copies of photographs from the ship's library, and pitted one group against the other in competitions.

There were readings from poetry and prose, and two of the limbless individuals were writing a play dealing with their recent experiences. One was active in the group who were investigating the possible construction of a glider or, more ambitiously, a steam-driven aircraft. Preliminary designs were drawn up and the project was making progress. But, as transport on land was of more immediate usefulness, two of the animals had been hitched to a crude wagon. They hauled it without protest at a fast pace, stopping only when the wagon hit a bump and tipped over on top of the driver. Fortunately he was not seriously injured.

Rangone and Donlevy were still fully occupied. They had benefited from Brandt's wisdom in suggesting that the batches of sleepers being revived be reduced from ten to five. To a great extent, the strain was removed from them. Durbin had been busy fashioning the first pair of prosthetic legs and Ingrid had insisted on being the guinea pig. The medical staff, Brandt, Templeton, and Durbin gathered to watch her trying out the legs for the first time.

Behind a screen, Laura McDonald and Barbara Restall strapped her into the harness, a series of belts designed to be comfortable and to give her confidence. Durbin had built a short walkway with supporting rails running its full length. Apologizing for the inelegance of her legs, she took her first step. It was evident that the harness was hurting her despite Durbin's efforts. He would have stopped her, but she waved him away. Her eyes were moist, perspiration stood out on her face, and she bit her lower lip. She had a stubborn courage. The people in the room willed her on. But after three steps, Rangone suggested that she have a rest and she was sensible enough to agree. The women helped her to her cot and gave her a sedative.

"I will walk," she said, clutching Barbara's hand. "I *will* walk."

The rest of the party went their own ways. In their little office, Rangone and Donlevy were studying X-ray plates of Crosbie's abdomen. He was the marine who had complained of the pain.

The doctors were both puzzled and excited. Rangone pointed. "His appendix is undoubtedly growing again. The inference, in a word, is that regeneration has taken place."

"But it might just be a fluke," Donlevy said. "All it tells us is that regeneration is possible here, as it was among some animals on many of

the worlds. And look at the time and the money it took to find a serum that would work for human beings. The failures were horrific."

"Granted all that, Tim. But at least we *know* that there might be a chance of regeneration, and we can start looking for the cause. Let's keep this as strict a secret as possible. As far as Crosbie knows, he is being treated for stomach pains. If we have to remove that appendix, then Laura and Barbara will have to know. I'm not telling Brandt or Templeton. And keep these plates out of sight. To raise hopes, however slender, would be the cruelest thing we could ever do."

"What about the marine?"

"Medical mumbo-jumbo will satisfy him. It's not ethical, but it's necessary."

Donlevy filed the plates away where they would not be found casually. "Everyone who has been in contact with those birds has healed rather quickly, Carlo."

"And things have been too hectic for anyone to have time to think about it."

* * *

THAT evening, the rain abated and the cloud layer began to break up. Glimpses could be seen of the dull throbbing sun as it began to dip westward. A cosmic storm was commencing.

The whole solar system seemed to be in torment. Few people managed to sleep soundly that night as the volcanoes roared and the ground trembled. The animals broke out of their pens. Strong winds rocked the ship, flattened the flowers and churned up the surface of the lake where the geysers writhed in scalding frenzy.

Early the next morning, Brandt called an emergency meeting on the bridge. "Durbin's been taking measurements. He thinks the situation is going to get worse. We might be right astride a fault line in this world's crust. It will be safer to leave the ship."

"Do you mean 'go out of the ship temporarily,' or 'leave the area altogether,' Commandant?"

Brandt glanced at Rangone. "The latter, Commander. And I know what that means. We would have to abandon the sleepers still in the tanks."

"Aren't we being too hasty?" Donlevy asked. "Things might settle down."

"On the contrary, they seem to be worsening. Manners is out in the lifeboat right now and he reports wide-spread lava flows from all the volcanoes in the nearest group."

The ship lurched alarmingly, lending weight to his next words. "I have made a decision that some of you may not agree with and certainly will not like. We are going to leave the area and head north to the sea. We have no option." He forestalled any objection. "Major Essenden is already organizing the evacuation and preparing the wagons. There's no time to waste. I am going to tell the ship's personnel."

Rangone stayed behind after the others had gone. "You've been expecting this, Commandant, and preparing for it." He had meant to make it accusatory, but it did not come out that way.

"Of course. In my position as Comandant, I have to see all sides of the situation and make plans accordingly. I have another site selected, the route to it explored, and you might have noticed that internally the ship looks very bare. Durbin and his crew have been busy. We have enough panels available to build temporary accommodations until we can construct permanent quarters."

Rangone had a thought. "Is that why you persuaded me to cut the batches down to five, and to rest in between?"

"My first and most important concern was for you and Donlevy, Commander. You must believe that. But, yes, I did want the number of limbless people reduced, so that the rest of us would have a better chance of survival."

Rangone sat down. "Sometimes I wish that you weren't so honest and straightforward with your answers," he said bitterly. "Oh, I know you are doing what is best for us, the ones who are lucky enough to have their limbs..."

"That will be enough, Surgeon-Commander." Rangone's head snapped

up. Never had he seen Brandt so stern, so resolute.

"Back at the station, I made the decision to have the limbs of the sleepers removed. No one could foresee the consequences of my decision. You don't know what is going to happen after you operate on a patient. You have past experience to rely on, but that's all. You have nothing with which to recriminate yourself, Carlo. Now, are you ready to do what must be done?"

Humbly, Rangone nodded and left the bridge. The ship was seldom still. Tremors continued through its cannibalized frame.

He found Hertz at the tanks. They exchanged troubled looks, but said nothing. The moment Rangone had dreaded, had tortured himself with a thousand times since the Enemy missile had struck, was here, unavoidable and stark.

They efficiently carried out the brutal business, their mouths tight, set in lines of disgust and compassion.

In his absence, Tim Donlevy had taken everything that would be of use to them medically and could be moved; he had seen that it was stacked aboard the wagon allocated to them. Although the volcanoes continued to rumble and the lake was still in turmoil, the weather had cleared. The ship was tilted over quite far now, and the ground around it was fractured in many places. The wagons were lined up, each with two animals hitched to it. Beside each wagon were men and women, carrying small personal bundles. They were silent, looking toward the ship. As Rangone walked up the line to the place where Brandt, Templeton, and Essenden were waiting, no one would meet his eyes.

No one except Barbara. She reached out, took his hand, and smiled at him briefly, saying nothing. It was not a time for words. He moved on. Off to the right, the last of the limbless people in their buckets were being hoisted aboard the lifeboat. Someone waved. It was Ingrid. He waved back. Suddenly he felt better.

Rangone reported to Brandt that his orders had been carried out. The Commandant thanked him as Sam Templeton called everyone to attention. They stood in silence for a minute, each thinking his own thoughts about those who had died, both out in space and here on the planet. The marines lifted their weapons and the volley of shots echoed

and reechoed across land and water. Brandt signalled the start of the trek to a new site. The lifeboat lifted off and was soon lost to sight.

To the west, the volcanoes sounded as if they might shatter themselves to pieces at any moment. Rangone wondered what lay in store for the survivors of the colony. Perhaps the new site would not be safe either. Yet they had no choice but to go to it and take their chances.

As they moved away from the doomed ship, he glanced sideways at Barbara who was beside him, her head held confidently high and her shoulders thrown back. She had not once looked behind her.

He speculated on what the future held for them. They would get married, that was certain, although he had never mentioned the subject. What would life be like for their children, here in a harsh and forbidding land?

They had been moving steadily up a gentle hill, thick with flowers, the dark forest to their right. He was relieved that the sun wasn't too warm. So far the going was not difficult. But, recalling the rough map he had seen, he knew that conditions would get worse. The sun was still a fair bit from its zenith. He couldn't get used to the shorter days on this world. He felt that he was living his life at twice the normal pace.

Lost as he was in his thoughts, he was not at first aware of the increasing volume of sound that filled the air. The colonists halted and everyone gazed back towards the ship and the lake. At first, nothing much seemed to be happening. Then, with a slowness that was terrifying in its majesty, the whole western end of the lake exploded in an eruption of lava, rocks and water that rose three or four hundred feet into the air. Smoke and steam swirled madly in the conflicting air currents.

The ship, seeming small by now, was still visible. Breathlessly, they watched the scene. More explosions followed and shining fountains of lava sprayed over the land starting fires here and there. Toward the region of the volcanoes, smoke towered in insubstantial cathedrals of twisting darkness. Bits of stone and other debris began to patter around the colonists. No one moved.

When it seemed that the violence was over, and the noise was beginning to roll away toward the horizon, the ground on the northern shore where the ship was began to heave and shudder. Abruptly, there was

a cave-in and the ship was gone. Seething and bubbling, water poured into the hole. Calmness then gradually spread across the blackened, tortured land; then the waters grew calm.

They turned away and moved on, north toward the sea. Behind them, all was silence. No trace of their presence remained. Two hours before noon, they had their first rest. Although it was not much above Earth normal, the gravity was tiring. Rangone did not realize how weary he was until he slumped down against a rock. He drew in some deep breaths. For once, the air did not reek of sulphur and it refreshed him. Maybe the air would be better at the ocean's edge. Barbara brought him a drink and they sat talking quietly.

Taking it in easy stages, along a well planned route, they reached the sea early in the evening of the third day after leaving the ship. They found themselves in a wide, half-moon bay, backed by forest and low hills. There were two small rivers. The water was fresher than that in the river at the first site, but the sulphur was still evident.

Rangone and Barbara stood entranced by the slow swell of the sea. It was gray green with tinges of dark plum, unlike the colors of seas they remembered. He felt an excitement rising in him as his eyes sought the indistinct line where sea and sky merged. Now their real life on the new planet was beginning. Some day his sons—his and Barbara's—would sail that sea, perhaps to settle somewhere else on the vast continental area.

He went to help with the erection of the huts.

Permanent dwellings would be an immediate priority. There was plenty of stone and timber nearby. After the work was done for the day, the colonists gathered to watch the star setting in the westward ocean. When it was gone in a wreath of bronze-gold and magenta, the sky at first seemed very dark. Then gradually, undulating across the whole northern sky, they saw great rippling curtains of pale, glowing light in all the colors of space.

Later around leaping fires, they had supper. Rangone and Barbara walked to the shore and watched the sea. Ingrid had wanted to walk and to swim in the sea. Soon, she and the others would be able to do just this.

As they strolled back to the site, they heard the guitar playing and Durbin singing his own song. They listened as the words hung on the quiet

air.

*For there is no returning
to enter that beloved door;
Our hearts have stilled their wandering
we have found the unknown shore.*