

MIND OUT OF TIME

One

Strapped tight in the padded acceleration couch in the command cell of the extrasolar exploratory module, Lieutenant-Colonel Jake Vanderguerre tensed against the tell-tale bubbling sensation high in his chest, the light, tentative pin-prick of an agony that could hurl itself against him like a white-hot anvil. The damned bootleg heart pills must be losing their punch; it had been less than six hours since he'd doped himself up for the mission

. . .

Beside him, Captain Lester Teal cocked a well-arched eyebrow at him. "You all right, Colonel?"

"I'm fine." Vanderguerre heard the ragged quality of his voice; to cover it, he nodded toward the ten-inch screen on which the clean-cut features of Colonel Jack Sudston of Mission Control on Luna glowed in enthusiastic color. "I wish the son-of-a-bitch would cut the chatter. He makes me nervous."

Teal grunted. "Let Soapy deliver his commercial, Jake," he said. "In a minute we'll get the line about the devoted personnel of UNSA; and there might even be time for a fast mention of Stella and Jo, the devoted little women standing by."

". . . report that the module is now in primary position, and in a G condition," Sudston was saying heartily. "Ready for the first manned test of the magnetic torsion powered vehicle." He smiled out of the screen; his eyes, fixed on an off-screen cue card, did not quite meet Vanderguerre's. "Now let's have a word from Van and Les, live from the MTE module, in Solar orbit, at four minutes and fifty-three seconds to jump."

Vanderguerre thumbed the XMIT button.

"Roj, Mission Control," he said. "Les and I are rarin' to go. She's a sweet little, uh, module, Jack. Quite a view from out here. We have Earth in sight, can just make out the crescent. As for Luna, you look mighty small from here, Jack. Not much brighter than good old Sirius. MTE module out."

"While we wait, Van and Les's words are flashing toward us at the speed of light," Sudston's voice filled the transmission lag. "And even at that fantastic velocity—capable of circling the world ten times in each second—it takes a full twenty-eight seconds for—but here's Van's carrier now . . ."

"Roj, Mission Control," Vanderguerre listened as his own transmission was repeat-beamed to the television audience watching back on Earth.

"Damn the stage machinery," he said. "We could have flipped the switches any time in the last two hours."

"But then Soapy wouldn't have been able to air the big spectacle live on prime time," Teal reminded him sardonically.

"Spectacle," Vanderguerre snorted. "A fractional percentage capability check. We're sitting on a power plant that can tap more energy in a second

than the total consumption of the human race through all previous history. And what do we do with it? Another baby step into space."

"Relax, Jake." Teal quirked the corner of his mouth upward. "You wouldn't want to risk men's lives with premature experimentation, would you?"

"Ever heard of Columbus?" Vanderguerre growled. "Or the Wright boys, or Lindbergh?"

"Ever heard of a guy named Cocking?" Teal countered. "Back in the 1800s he built a parachute out of wicker. Went up in a balloon and tried it. It didn't work. I remember the line in the old newspaper I saw: 'Mr. Cocking was found in a field at Lea, literally dashed to bits'."

"I take my hat off to Mr. Cocking," Vanderguerre said. "He tried."

"There hasn't been a fatality directly attributable to the Program in the sixty-nine years since Lunar Station One," Teal said. "You want to be the first to louse up a no-hitter?"

Vanderguerre snorted a laugh. "I was the first man on Callisto, Teal. Did you know that? It's right there in the record—along with the baseball statistics and the mean annual rainfall at Centralia, Kansas. That was eighteen years ago." He put out a hand, ran it over the polished curve of the control mushroom. "So what if she blew up in our faces?" he said as if to himself. "Nobody lives forever."

". . . fifty-three seconds and counting," Sudston's voice chanted into the silence that followed Vanderguerre's remark. "The monitor board says—Yes, it's coming down now, it's condition G all the way, the mission is go, all systems are clocking down without a hitch, a tribute to the expertise of the devoted personnel of UNSA, at minus forty-eight seconds and counting . . ."

Teal twisted his head against the restraint of his harness to eye Vanderguerre.

"Don't mind me, kid," the older man said. "We'll take our little toad-hop, wait ten minutes for the tapes to spin, and duck back home for our pat on the head like good team men."

"Fifteen seconds and counting," Sudston's voice intoned. "Fourteen seconds. Thirteen . . ."

The two men's hands moved in a sure, trained sequence: READY lever down and locked. ARM lever down and locked.

". . . Four. Three. Two. One. Jump."

In unison, the men slammed home the big, paired, white-painted switches. There was a swiftly rising hum, a sense of mounting pressure . . .

Two

Teal shook off the dizziness that had swirled him like a top as the torsion drive hurled the tiny vessel outward into Deep Space; he gripped the chair

arms, fighting back the nausea and anxiety that always accompanied the climactic moment of a shot.

It's all right, he told himself fiercely. Nothing can go wrong. In three hours you'll be back aboard UNSA Nine, with half a dozen medics taping your belly growls. Relax . . .

He forced himself to lean back in the chair; closed his eyes, savoring the familiarity of it, the security of the enclosing titanium-foam shell.

It was OK now. He knew what to do in any conceivable emergency. Just follow the routine. It was as simple as that. That was the secret he'd learned long ago, when he had first realized that the military life was the one for him; the secret that had given him his reputation for coolness in the face of danger: courage consisted in knowing what to do.

He opened his eyes, scanned instrument faces with swift, trained precision, turned to Vanderguerre. The senior officer looked pale, ill.

"Forty-two million miles out, give or take half a million," Teal said. "Elapsed time, point oh, oh, oh seconds."

"Mama mia," Vanderguerre breathed. "We're sitting on a live one, boy!"

The voice issuing from the command was a whispery crackle.

". . . that the module is now in primary position, and in a G condition," Sudston's distance-distorted image was saying. "Ready for the first manned test of the magnetic torsion powered vehicle . . ."

"We passed up Soapy's transmission," Teal said.

"By God, Teal," Vanderguerre said. "I wonder what she'll do. What she'll really do!"

Teal felt his heart begin to thump-ump, thump-ump. He sensed what was coming as he looked at Vanderguerre. Vanderguerre looked back, eyeing him keenly. Was there a calculating look there; an assessing? Was he wondering about Teal, about his famous reputation for guts?

"What you said before about spotting the record," Vanderguerre's voice was level, casual. "Is that really the way you feel, Les?"

"You're talking about deviating from the programmed mission?" Teal kept his voice steady.

"We'd have to unlock from auto-sequencing and reprogram," Vanderguerre said. "It would be four minutes before Soapy knew anything. They couldn't stop us."

"Roj, Lunar Control," Vanderguerre's voice cracked, relayed from the moon. "Les and I are rarin' to go . . ."

"The controls are interlocked," Vanderguerre added. "We'd have to do it together." His eyes met Teal's, held them for a moment, turned away. "Forget it," he said quickly. "You're young, you've got a career ahead, a

family. It was a crazy idea—"

"I'll call your bluff," Teal cut him off harshly. "I'm game."

Say no, a voice inside him prayed. Say no, and let me off the hook . . .

Vanderguerre's tongue touched his lips; he nodded. "Good for you, kid. I didn't think you had it in you."

Three

"I've locked the guidance system on Andromeda," Vanderguerre said. The pain was still there, lurking—and the jump hadn't helped any. But it would hold off a little while, for this. It had to . . .

"How much power?" Teal asked.

"All of it," Vanderguerre said. "We'll open her up. Let's see what she'll do."

Teal punched keys, coding instructions into the panel.

". . . UNSA Station Nine has just confirmed the repositioning of the double-X module in Martian orbit," the excited voice of Colonel Sudston was suddenly louder, clearer, as the big lunar transmitter beam swung to center on the new position of the experimental craft. "Van, let's hear from you!"

"You'll hear from us," Vanderguerre said, "You'll hear plenty."

"Board set up," Teal said formally. "Ready for jump, sir."

"Van and Les have their hands full right now, carrying out the planned experiments aboard the MTE vehicle," the voice from the screen chattered. "They're two lonely men at this moment, over forty million miles from home . . ."

"Last chance to change your mind," Vanderguerre said.

"You can back out if you want to," Teal said tightly.

"Jump," Vanderguerre said. Two pairs of hands flipped the switch sequence. A whine rose to a wire-thin hum. There was a sense of pressure that grew and grew . . .

Blackout dropped over Vanderguerre like a steel door.

Four

This time, Teal realized, was worse—much worse. Under him, the seat lifted, lifted, pivoting back and endlessly over. Nausea stirred in him, brought a clammy film to his forehead. His bones seemed to vibrate in resonance to the penetrating keening of the torsion drive.

Then, abruptly, stillness. Teal drew a deep breath, opened his eyes. The command screen was blank, lit only by the darting flicker of random noise. The instruments—

Teal stared, rigid with shock. The MP scale read zero; the navigation fix

indicator hunted across the grid aimlessly; the R counter registered negative. It didn't make sense. The jump must have blown every breaker in the module. Teal glanced up at the direct vision dome.

Blackness, unrelieved, immense.

Teal's hands moved in an instinctive gesture to reset the controls for the jump back to the starting point; he caught himself, turned to Vanderguerre.

"Something's fouled up. Our screens are out—" He broke off. Vanderguerre lay slack in the elaborately equipped chair, his mouth half open, his face the color of candle wax.

"Vanderguerre!" Teal slipped his harness, grabbed for the other's wrist. There was no discernible pulse.

Sweat trickled down into the corner of Teal's eye.

"Interlocked controls," he said. "Jake, you're got to wake up. I can't do it alone. You hear me, Jake? Wake up!" He shook the flaccid arm roughly. Vanderguerre's head lolled. Teal crouched to scan the life-system indicators on the unconscious man's shoulder repeater. The heartbeat was weak, irregular, the respiration shallow. He was alive—barely.

Teal half fell back into his chair. He forced himself to breathe deep, again, and again. Slowly, the panic drained away.

OK. They'd pulled a damn fool stunt, and something had gone wrong. A couple of things. But that didn't mean everything wasn't going to come out all right, if he just kept his head, followed the rules.

First, he had to do something about Vanderguerre. He unclipped the highly sophisticated medkit from its niche, forcing himself to move carefully, deliberately, remembering his training. One by one he attached the leads of the diagnostic monitor to Vanderguerre's suit system contacts.

Fourteen minutes later, Vanderguerre stirred and opened his eyes.

"You blacked out," Teal said quickly, then checked himself. "How do you feel?" He forced his tone level.

"I'm . . . all right. What . . . ?"

"We made the jump. Something went wrong. Screens are out; comlink too."

"How . . . far?"

"I don't know, I tell you!" Teal caught the hysterical note in his voice, clamped his teeth hard. "I don't know," he repeated in a calmer tone. "We'll jump back now. All we have to do is backtrack on reverse settings—" He realized he was talking to reassure himself, cut off abruptly.

"Got to determine . . . our position," Vanderguerre panted. "Otherwise—wasted."

"To hell with that," Teal snapped. "You're a sick man," he added. "You need

medical attention."

Vanderguerre was struggling to raise his head far enough to see the panel.

"Instruments are acting crazy," Teal said. "We've got to—"

"You've checked out the circuits?"

"Not yet. I was busy with you." Silently Teal cursed the defensiveness of his tone.

"Check 'em."

Teal complied, tight-lipped.

"All systems G," he reported.

"All right," Vanderguerre said, his voice weak but calm. "Circuits hot, but the screens show nothing. Must be something masking 'em. Let's take a look. Deploy the direct vision scopes."

Teal's hands shook as he swung his eyepiece into position. He swore silently, adjusted the instrument. A palely-glowing rectangular grid, angled sharply outward, filled the viewfield: one of the module's outflung radiation surfaces. The lens, at least, was clear. But why the total blackness of the sky beyond? He tracked past the grid. A glaringly luminous object swam into view, oblong, misty and nebulous in outline.

"I've got something," he said. "Off the port fan."

He studied the oval smear of light—about thirty inches in width, he estimated, and perhaps a hundred feet distant.

"Take a look to starboard," Vanderguerre said. Teal shifted the scope, picked up a second object, half again as large as the first. Two smaller, irregularly shaped objects hung off to one side. Squinting against the glare, Teal adjusted the scope's filter. The bright halo obscuring the larger object dimmed. Now he could make out detail, a pattern of swirling, clotted light, curving out in two spiral arms from a central nucleus—

The realization of what he was seeing swept over Teal with a mind-numbing shock.

Five

Vanderguerre stared at the shape of light, the steel spike in his chest for the moment almost forgotten.

Andromeda—and the Greater and Lesser Magellanic Clouds. And the other, smaller one! The Milky Way, the home Galaxy.

"What the hell!" Teal's harsh voice jarred at him. "Even if we're halfway to Andromeda—a million light years—it should only subtend a second or so of arc! That thing looks like you could reach out and touch it!"

"Switch on the cameras, Les," he whispered. "Let's get a record—"

"Let's get out of here, Vanderguerre!" Teal's voice was ragged. "My God, I never thought—"

"Nobody did," Vanderguerre spoke steadily. "That's why we've got to tape it all, Les—"

"We've got enough! Let's go back! Now!"

Vanderguerre looked at Teal. The younger man was pale, wild-eyed. He was badly shaken. But you couldn't blame him. A million lights in one jump. So much for the light barrier, gone the way of the sound barrier.

"Now," Teal repeated. "Before . . ."

"Yeah," Vanderguerre managed. "Before you find yourself marooned with a corpse. You're right. OK. Set it up."

He lay slackly in the chair. His chest seemed swollen to giant size, laced across with vivid arcs of an agony that pulsed like muffled explosions. Any second now. The anvil was teetering, ready to fall. And the dual controls required two men to jump the module back along her course line. There was no time to waste.

"Board set up," Teal snapped. "Ready for jump."

Vanderguerre raised his hands to the controls; the steel spike drove into his chest.

"Jump," he gasped, and slammed the levers down—

The white-hot anvil struck him with unbearable force.

Six

Teal shook his head, blinked the fog from before his eyes; avidly, he scanned the panel.

Nothing had changed. The instruments still gave their dataless readings; the screen was blank.

"Vanderguerre—it didn't work!" Teal felt a sudden constriction like a rope around his throat as he stared at the motionless figure in the other chair.

"Jake!" he shouted. "You can't be dead! Not yet! I'd be stuck here! Jake! Wake up! Wake up!" As from a great distance, he heard his own voice screaming; but he was powerless to stop it . . .

Seven

From immense depths, Vanderguerre swam upward, to surface on a choppy sea of pain. He lay for a while, fighting for breath, his mind blanked of everything except the second-to-second struggle for survival. After a long time, the agony eased; with an effort, he turned his head.

Teal's seat was empty.

Eight

What did it mean? Vanderguerre asked himself for the twentieth time. What had happened? They'd jumped, he'd felt the drive take hold—

And Teal. Where the hell was Teal? He couldn't have left the module; it was a sealed unit. Nothing could leave it, not even wastes, until the techs at UNSA Nine cut her open . . .

But he was gone. And out there, Andromeda still loomed, big as a washtub, and the Milky Way. It was impossible, all of it. Even the jump. Was it all a dream, a dying fancy?

No, Vanderguerre rejected the idea. Something's happened here. Something I don't understand—not yet. But I've got data—a little data, anyway. And I've got a brain. I've got to look at the situation, make some deductions, decide on a course of action.

From somewhere, a phrase popped into Vanderguerre's mind:

"Space is a property of matter . . ."

And where there was no matter, there would be . . . spacelessness.

"Sure," Vanderguerre whispered. "If we'd stopped to think, we'd have realized there's no theoretical limit to the MTE. We opened her up all the way—and the curve went off the graph. It threw us right out of the Galaxy, into a region where the matter density is one ion per cubic light. All the way to the end of space: Dead End. No wonder we didn't go any farther—or that we can't jump back. Zero is just a special case of infinity. And that's as far as we'd go, if we traveled on forever . . ."

His eye fell on Teal's empty seat. Yeah—so far so good. But what about Teal? How does the Vanderguerre theory of negative space explain that one?

Abruptly, fire flickered in Vanderguerre's chest. He stiffened, his breath cut off in his throat. So much for theories. This was it. No doubt about it. Three times and out. Strange that it had to end this way, so far away in space and time from everything he'd ever loved.

The vise in Vanderguerre's chest closed; the flames leaped higher, consuming the universe in raging incandescence . . .

Nine

Vanderguerre was standing on a graveled path beside a lake. It was dawn, and a chill mist lay over the water. Beyond the lazy line of trees on the far side, a hill rose, dotted with buildings. He recognized the scene at once: Lake Beryl. And the date: May first, 2007. It all came back to him as clearly as if it had been only yesterday, instead of twenty years. The little skiers' hotel, deserted now in summer, the flowers on the table, the picnic lunch, packed by the waiter, in a basket, with the bottle of vine rosé poking out under the white napkin . . .

And Mirla. He knew, before he turned, that she would be standing there, smiling as he had remembered her, down through the years . . .

Ten

The music was loud, and Teal raised his glass for a refill, glad of the noise, of the press of people, of the girl who clung close beside him, her breasts firm and demanding against him.

For a moment, a phantom memory of another place seemed to pluck at Teal's mind—an urgent vision of awful loneliness, of a fear that overwhelmed him like a breaking wave—he pushed the thought back.

Wine sloshed from the glass. It didn't matter. Teal drank deep, let the glass fall from his hand, turned, sought the girl's mouth hungrily.

Eleven

"Van—is anything wrong?" Mirla asked. Her smile had changed to a look of concern.

"No. Nothing," Vanderguerre managed. Hallucination! a voice inside his head said. And yet it's real—as real as ever life was real . . .

Mirla put her hand on his arm, looking up into his face.

"You stopped so suddenly—and you look . . . worried."

"Mirla . . . something strange has happened." Vanderguerre's eyes went to the bench beside the path. He led her to it, sank down on it. His heart was beating strongly, steadily.

"What is it, Van?"

"A dream? Or . . . is this the dream?"

"Tell me."

Vanderguerre did.

"I was there," he finished. "Just the wink of an eye ago. And now—I'm here."

"It's a strange dream, Van. But after all—it is just a dream. And this is real."

"Is it, Mirla? Those years of training, were they a dream? I still know how to dock a Mark IX on nine ounces of reaction mass. I know the math—the smell of the coolant when a line breaks under high G—the names of the men who put the first marker on Pluto, the first party who landed on Ceres, and—"

"Van—it was just a dream! You dreamed those things—"

"What date is this?" he cut in.

"May first—"

"May first, 2007. The date the main dome at Mars Station One blew and killed twelve tech personnel. One of them was Mayfield, the agronomist!"

Vanderguerre jumped to his feet. "I haven't seen a paper, Mirla. You know that. We've been walking all night."

"You mean—you think—"

"Let's find a paper. The news should be breaking any time now!"

They went up the path, across the park, crossed an empty street; ten minutes later, from the open door of an all-night dinomat, a TV blared:

". . . Just received via Bellerophon relay. Among the dead are Colonel Mark Spencer, Marsbase commandant—"

"An error," Vanderguerre put in. "He was hurt, but recovered."

". . . Dr. Gregor Mayfield, famed for his work in desert ecology . . ."

"Mayfield!" Mirla gasped. "Van—you knew!"

"Yes." Vanderguerre's voice was suddenly flat. "In the absence of matter, space doesn't exist. Time is a function of space; it's the medium in which events happen. With no space, there can be no movement—and no time. All times become the same. I can be there—or here . . ."

"Van!" Mirla clung to his arm. "I'm frightened! What does it mean?"

"I've got to go back."

"Go . . . back?"

"Don't you see, Mirla? I can't desert my ship, my copilot—abandon the program I gave my life to. I can't let them chalk up the MTE as failure—a flop that killed two men! It would kill the last feeble spark that's keeping the program going!"

"I don't understand, Van. How can you—go back—to a dream?"

"I don't know, Mirla. But I've got to. Got to try." He disengaged his arm, looked down into her face.

"Forgive me, Mirla. A miracle happened here. Maybe . . ." Still looking into her face, he closed his eyes, picturing the command cell aboard the MTE, remembering the pressure of the seat harness across his body, the vertigo of weightlessness, the smell of the cramped quarters, the pain . . .

Twelve

. . . the pain thrust at him like a splintered lance. He opened his eyes, saw the empty chair, the blank screens.

"Teal," he whispered. "Where are you, Teal . . . ?"

Thirteen

Teal looked up. An old man was pushing through the crowd toward the table.

"Come with me, Teal," the old man said.

"Go to hell!" Teal snarled. "Get away from me, I don't know you and I don't want to know you!"

"Come with me, Teal—"

Teal leaped to his feet, caught up the wine bottle, smashed it down over the old man's head. He went down; the crowd drew back; a woman screamed. Teal stared down at the body . . .

. . . He was at the wheel of a car, a low-slung, hard sprung powerhouse that leaped ahead under his foot, faster, faster. The road unreeled before him, threading its way along the flank of a mountain. Ahead, tendrils of mist obscured the way. Suddenly, there was a man there, in the road, holding up his hand. Teal caught a glimpse of a stern, lined face, grey hair—

The impact threw the man fifty feet into the air. Teal saw the body plummet down among the treetops on the slope below the road in the same instant that the veering car plunged through the guardrail . . .

. . . the music from the ballroom was faint, here on deck. Teal leaned against the rail, watching the lights of Lisboa sliding away across the mirrored water.

"It's beautiful, Les," the slim, summer-gowned woman beside him said. "I'm glad I came . . ."

An old man came toward Teal, walking silently along the deck.

"Come with me, Teal," he said. "You've got to come back."

"No!" Teal recoiled. "Stay away, damn you! I'll never come back!"

"You've got to, Teal," the grim old man said. "You can't forget."

"Vanderguerre," Teal whispered hoarsely. "I left you there—in the module—sick, maybe dying. Alone."

"We've got to take her back, Teal. You and I are the only ones who know. We can't let it all go, Teal. We owe the program that much."

"To hell with the program," Teal snarled. "But you. I forgot about you, Jake. I swear I forgot."

"Let's go back now, Les."

Teal licked his lips. He looked at the slim girl, standing, her knuckles pressed against her face, staring at him. His eyes went back to Vanderguerre.

"I'm coming of my own free will, Jake," he said. "I ran—but I came back. Tell them that."

Fourteen

"Not . . . much time . . ." Vanderguerre whispered as he lay slack in the chair. "Enough . . . for one more . . . try. Out here . . . the MTE can't do it . . . alone. We . . . have to help."

Teal nodded. "I know. I couldn't put it in words, but I know."

"Solar orbit," Vanderguerre whispered. "One microsecond after jump."

"Jake—it just hit me! The jump will kill you!"

"Prepare for jump," Vanderguerre's voice was barely audible. "Jump!"

Their hands went out; levers slammed home. Mighty forces gripped the Universe, twisted it inside out.

Fifteen

". . . that the module is now in primary position, and in G condition," the faint voice of Colonel Sudston crackled from the screen.

Teal looked across at Vanderguerre. The body lay at peace, the features smiling faintly.

Teal depressed the XMIT button. "MTE to Mission Control," he said. "Jump completed. And I have the tragic honor to report the death of Lieutenant Colonel Jacob Vanderguerre in the line of duty . . ."

Sixteen

. . . He knew, before he turned, that she would be standing there, smiling as he had remembered her, down through the years.

"Van—is anything wrong?" Mirla asked.

"Nothing," Vanderguerre said. "Nothing in this Universe."