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Crash Landing on Iduna by Arthur Tofte

PART I STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

CHAPTER ONE

We were in trouble... deep trouble... the kind that every spacefarer dreaded.

There was a sudden, heart-stopping change in the rhythm of our flight. Instead of the smooth swish of our landing jets, there was now alternate silence and a roaring violence of jet-rocketry running wild.

There was no pattern to it. The ship itself seemed to falter and slip, to twist and tumble. Over and over we were going on a wild, uncontrolled mad ride.

Up to that moment everything had gone along perfectly. After months of search, we had found this uncharted, apparently uninhabited planet out near the edge of the galaxy. We had orbited it several times. After making the usual tests for night and day temperatures, atmosphere quality, harmful ray shielding, water supply, vegetation, and all other life-sustaining factors, father had decided that this was it. This was to be *our planet!*

Father even gave it a name as soon as he made the decision to land. He said we would call it Iduna, our mother's name. He said in old Norse

mythology, Iduna was the 'keeper of the golden apples of youth.' That, he declared, was what we needed on our new planet-home—to find the golden apples of eternal youth.

But now—I shuddered to think what was happening...

I could picture my father, Lars Evenson, ship designer and astronaut, in the front control section wrestling with the retro-jet levers. After switching over from our interstellar power plant to the landing jets, something had gone wrong, very wrong. And I could envision my mother sitting next to him giving all the assistance she could in operating emergency controls.

I glanced around at my three siblings. All were well harnessed in their pods. Ingo, a year younger than my own twenty years, smiled back at me to show she was not afraid. Even Bretta and Sven, five and four years old, were trying their best not to show the terror they had every right to feel.

"Peder," Inga called out to me, "what's happening?"

From our main cabin in the center of the ship, we had no way to see what was going on in the control room. All we knew was that the craft was gyrating wildly. My only possible answer to Inga's question was a half-hearted smile of reassurance.

The yacht was of latest design, loaded with safety devices. Our father was an experienced pilot.

I had no way of knowing what had caused the trouble. A malfunction of the retro-jets at the moment they were put into operation to slow our descent? That was the most likely explanation.

Then—for what seemed like an eternity—the ship plunged and twisted, obviously completely out of control. Intuitively I braced myself for the inevitable crash.

When it came, my first thought was that father had really pulled it off successfully. We came to a bone-shaking stop that all but snapped the heavy braces that held us in our pod-cradles. But we still lived!

Quickly I released my fastenings. Then Inga's. Together we gathered up Sven and Bretta. They were wide-eyed with wonder, but unhurt.

I tried the bulkhead door leading to the control section where our parents were. It was jammed. I strode across the somewhat tilted flooring to the panel door leading to our supply section and power plant at the rear. With Inga's help I managed to get it open. I started to step forward. Instead I jumped back. Inga came up and stood behind me, peering over my shoulder.

Where the supply section had been, there was nothing! The whole rear part of the ship had been sheared off. And with it went our power source and practically all of our supplies.

Due to the slight tilt of the ship, the panel door was not far above the ground. At least it was a way out.

I knew I had to get around to the control section quickly. The front of the ship had taken the brunt of the blow upon landing. Our parents might need help.

I turned to Inga. "Stay here with the children. I'll try to get around to the front and see if father and mother are safe."

I peered out of the narrow bulkhead doorway. Only a short distance away to my right a vast body of water stretched to the horizon. We must have been above this sea during these last few minutes of our descent. Apparently father had struggled and fought in every way he could to get the ship to land on something other than water. If so, however, the rear section was undoubtedly lost to us—somehow broken off and dropped during that mad crash landing.

I looked down. The area where the ship had plowed into a landing was a wet-muck swamp. Strange-looking plants with waving tendrils grew in patches to the height of a tall man. It was impossible to see how firm the footing was.

"Here goes," I cried out to Inga as I lowered myself to the spongy surface. A muddy, black substance oozed up over my ankles. I took a step and sank even deeper.

I quickly discovered that where the plants grew thickest the ground provided somewhat firmer footing. Accustomed to the pavements of Earth, in all my life I had never had to walk on anything like this.

Slowly I made my way around the body of the torn ship to the front control section. Even though I had feared to find disaster, it was a shock to see what really had happened. The whole control section of our craft had been crushed and mangled into a tangled, twisted mass.

Shaking inwardly with dread at what I would find, I climbed up into the jumble of beams and girders and metal strips. I worked frantically, almost blindly, to pull away obstructing barriers. Somewhere in that heap of twisted pieces of the ship's frame were my mother and father.

It was my mother I found first. She was lying on her side, her body at an unnatural angle. I tried to move her. With horror I saw that a steel bar had pierced her upper body. I felt for a pulse. I put my face close to her lips. She was not breathing. I could see then that the rod had gone into her heart. She had probably died instantly in the crash.

I heard a groan. Turning away from my mother's still body, I pulled at the debris that blocked further passage. I found my father lying in a pool of blood a short distance beyond.

Struggling with a girder that had fallen across him, I finally wrenched it away. I leaned over my father's body. The only sign that he was still alive was a faint groan. His head was red-stained. At least he was not dead.

He needed a bandage! What could I use? I ripped a strip of my tunic and wound it around his head, although I could see that the bleeding had stopped. That I hoped was a good sign. But how to get him out of the wrecked section? I would need Inga's help.

I crawled back the way I had come. Dejectedly I headed back around the ship to where the others were waiting for me. I wondered how I was going to be able to tell Inga and the two youngsters that their mother was dead and their father badly hurt.

Half way to the panel door at the rear, I heard a snorting sound behind me. I looked back.

There, running toward me at full speed, was a huge creature that must have weighed at least two metric tons. It was bristling with four long, pointed tusks, two above and two below its huge mouth. And it was coming faster than I could run in the soggy ground.

Leaping from clump to clump across the sponge-like swamp, I stumbled as best I could around the side of the ship and jumped to pull myself into the open panel doorway.

Inga was standing just inside, Sven and Bretta at each side of her.

"Get back in!" I yelled at her as I pushed my way past her.

At that instant I felt a violent thump. The ship shook with the force of the impact.

"What happened?" Inga cried out.

Still out of breath, I could only stand there beside her and hold tightly to the partly closed door.

"I was chased by some kind of wild beast," I was finally able to gasp out.

"Did you find anything... in the control section?"

I shook my head in despair. "Mother is gone. No hope. The whole front of the ship is wrecked. She died in the crash."

"Father?"

"I think he is alive. He has a head injury and is unconscious. That's why I came back. I need your help to get him here where we can tend to him."

Inga, I could see, was truly bewildered. Violent death was practically unheard of on Earth. It was obvious she hardly knew how to react to the news that her mother was dead. It was something for which all of us were completely unprepared.

Bretta and Sven looked up at the two of us as though unable to understand the situation at all. Grief and fear and anger in the past several generations had been all but wiped out of human feelings. In the closely packed conditions back on Earth, there was no place for strong emotions of any kind.

I thought to myself, were our more emotional ancestors better or poorer equipped to face the reality of death?

I knew I felt something very close to emotion. Sight of my mother's

dead body... my father's blood-stained head... and just now the close escape from the tusked beast, had unnerved me more than I wanted to admit even to myself. It was a new sensation for me. I couldn't quite understand it.

I glanced at Inga and the two children. It was hard to tell how they were reacting. All their lives, it had been drilled into them to resist any emotional feelings.

I listened at the door. After the first violent thump, there had been no further sound from the animal. I opened the panel door and looked out.

The huge creature was pushing its tusks into a piece of the ship that had ripped off. It used its tusks, which were fully a meter long, to worry and lift the heavy metal plate as though it were a living victim.

I carefully closed the door. I faced Inga. "I need your help to get father out of the control room. But we'll have to wait until that beast goes away."

For the first time in my life I was ready to acknowledge I was facing a crisis my Earth training had utterly failed to help me handle—frustration and fear... yes, and grief.

CHAPTER TWO

With the door opened only slightly, I kept close watch on the beast outside. When I saw it move off finally, I motioned to Inga to follow me. After admonishing the two young ones to stay back from the door, she slid down next to me on the swampy surface.

I held her hand as I led the way to where we could clamber up into the wrecked control section. In spite of her normal stolidness, Inga, I could see, was shaken by what she saw—the whole front end of the ship crushed in and mangled.

First I took her to our mother's body. As with me, it was the first dead person she had ever seen.

For only a moment did we stare down at our mother's lifeless form. Then, quickly we made our way to where our father still lay. He was breathing shallowly, but was still alive.

"How are we going to move him?" Inga asked.

I shook my head. "All I can think of is to see if we can get the bulkhead door open from this side."

Motioning for my sister to stay with our father, I crawled through the wreckage to the door that linked the main cabin with the control room. A beam had fallen across it and had wedged it shut. I put my shoulder to it. The length of metal fell with a clang. The door then opened easily.

It took us half an hour to move our unconscious father the ten or twelve steps to the inner cabin. Then, we carefully placed him in his sleeping pod.

Inga removed the crude bandage I had applied earlier, washed off the worst of the dried blood, painted the long gash in his head with a disinfectant, and put on a clean bandage.

Then, with the two youngsters greatly subdued next to us, we stood back and wondered what to do next.

Only a few hours before, Lars, our father, and Iduna, our mother, had stood with us in this same cabin. They had faced us in eagerness over the landfall we were soon to make. Their eyes had shone with happiness at achieving their goal—of finding a place for the Evenson family to grow up away from the conditions our father said were unnatural and inhuman on Earth.

I remembered what father had said—"What we are doing, my children, is for your good. We shall be facing new perils and new hardships unlike anything you have ever experienced.

"If there had been the opportunity, I would have liked to give you some kind of training to prepare you for making our own life here. All I can say is that in my own voyages to other planets, I have learned a great deal about how to survive. After we land, I'll begin to teach you in the best possible school—nature's own laboratory.

"I promise you this—you will *live*, really live. It will be a harder life. But it will make real men and women out of you—not the apathetic, spiritless, almost mindless people now being developed on Earth. That is what I am taking you away from. Your mother and I believe in what we are doing. We want you to believe in it too."

At this point mother had spoken up—"I am especially proud that your father wants to call this new planet-home after me. But I want to remind you that Iduna was also the name of the goddess who was the keeper of the golden apples of youth. Whatever happens on our new home, that should be our goal—to live in joy with each other. If we can do this, we will truly have eaten of the golden apples."

Then, just before they went back to the control room for the last final landing maneuvers, they had kissed us in an unusual outward show of affection. I recalled the glow of pleasure on their faces as they buckled us into our harnesses and then left us to direct the space yacht on its final descent to a landing... a landing that was to be so tragic.

Recalling this final scene with our parents, I couldn't help but wonder how the crash landing was going to affect us all.

It was little four-year old, tow-headed Sven who shook me out of my feeling of despair. He had come up and taken my hand. "I'm hungry," he said.

I looked over at Inga and managed a wan smile. "I guess there isn't much we can do for father now. Sven is right. Whatever else happens, we must eat and keep up our strength. It's time we looked around to see what we have left of our supplies."

Objects had been strewn all over the cabin. But as far as I could see, there was minimum damage to the structure of this middle section. Father had designed the ship well.

I was familiar with every part of the living quarters of our ship. After all, we had spent most of our time here in the long months of our travel. I knew, without looking, what each built-in cabinet contained. And it worried me.

We would find the things we had been using in our day-in and day-out living. A change or two of clothing. A few toys and games for the young ones. Taped books for Inga and me. Our bedding. Such eating utensils as we used every day. A small number of food packages. A supply of water that might last us a day or two. But what else?

I groaned at the thought of what we had lost when the rear supply section had broken off and fallen into the sea. With it went our supply of

prepared foods, enough to last the Evenson family for two years or more. Lost too were the tools and seeds we would need to start growing our own food. Gone was a small solar power plant. And all our extra clothes, even boots of various sizes to fit Sven and Bretta as they grew up.

"All we have are enough food packages to last about two weeks," I told Inga after we had collected what items we could find. "Our tank with the recycled water will be empty in two days, three days at the most if we are careful. It needs power to operate."

"Then what?" she asked.

Instead of answering, I broke open a food package and divided it between Bretta and Sven. As soon as they had eaten, they permitted Inga to put them back into their sleeping pods. Within minutes they were asleep.

I picked up two of the small store of food packages and handed one to my sister. As we sat on the wall bench, we munched away at the bland food which had been our diet all our lives on Earth. The best part, I always felt, was that the sections that were supposed to be warm were always warm, heated by a built-in chemical device. And the sections that were to be cool, were always cool.

Inga had a sturdy, well-formed body, stronger than most girls'. I think father's custom of giving us children a daily exercise program had been planned by him to strengthen us for the trip... even long before he had told us anything about the project.

She looked up at me pensively.

"What are we going to do about father? And what are we to do when our food and water run out?"

I shook my head without replying. She knew I had no answer. She knew I had lived the same kind of sheltered life she had... the very regimented, highly controlled lives on Earth that had prompted our father to undertake this voyage.

As a space explorer, he had made a fortune discovering habitable planets in other solar systems. He had seen many examples of how the natives of some of these planets lived freer, fuller lives than the people on

our over-crowded, over-governed Earth. With frequent exposure to life on other worlds, he had acquired a different concept of what human living should be. Too, he had not had the same curb on his emotional feelings that had made so many Earth people spiritless.

He had told us many times that he didn't want us to grow up like robots. And that, he said, is what Earth people were becoming—robots who were gradually but surely losing their will to break the chains of conformity the authorities put on them.

I remember being mildly surprised to hear him say that human beings were not meant to spend all their lives as mere numbers in a computer-run world. He said it was wrong for us to have to eat the same chemically-created foods every day, drink recycled water, be propagandized by pre-digested government holograph programs, get the same standard education. Mostly he said he was against the way human emotions were being deliberately and systematically wiped out of the race. He always said it was healthy to express one's feelings. To suppress them, he said, could lead to madness.

True, there were no wars any more. There were no civil disturbances. There was no crime. Disease had been done away with. There was no longer such a thing as poverty. These were what the authorities always claimed to be the errors of the past. Father agreed to that. What he disagreed with was the way people were forced to live aimless, purposeless, empty lives.

Father always insisted that people needed to have their emotions stirred up once in awhile. Be proud. Get angry. Become frightened. He had often stated he believed eventually half of the people of the world would become insane from emotion-repression. He said he didn't want his children to grow up in a world of neurotic madness. It was, I honestly believe, the real reason he had for taking us on this search for a new planet-home.

Inga reached over and touched my arm to get me out of my reverie.

"We should start making plans," she said plaintively.

I walked over and quietly opened the panel door. I looked out. The animal that had attacked me was nowhere in sight.

"I've got to take a chance," I said. "I've got to scout around to the land side of the ship and see where we are located. I can't see much from here."

"What if the beast is still there?"

"I'll stay close to the door." But before I jumped down to the swampy muck, I took another look around. I had an idea. I glanced up.

The panel doorway had buckled slightly at the top, leaving a narrow girder exposed. It was a way to climb to the upper surface of the ship.

Carefully I pulled myself up. Then I wormed my way along the curved body of the craft to where the front section had been pushed in.

Looking down at it from above, the sight was even more frightening. The fact that the middle section had not met the same fate was a tribute to my father's skill as a designer... and possibly his self-sacrificing skill in landing the ship.

I stood up and peered around at what was for me my first real look at our new home.

Behind the ship was an unbroken expanse of ocean, blue-gray and calm at the moment. The yacht had barely escaped landing in the water. What had saved the cabin section was that we had plunked down in the middle of a relatively soft swamp. Keeping the swamp from draining into the sea was a rock ridge just above the beach. It served as a natural dam. There was a shallow waterfall between the swamp and the beach.

A fair-sized river entered the swamp about half a kilometer in from the dam. It came down from a line of rugged mountains in the distance. A few white clouds hovered over the distant range.

On the right side of the river, facing inland, the land was fairly open, somewhat dry looking, with small groves of tree-like growths scattered over its grass-covered expanse. Even from the distance I could see a few grazing animals of several types and sizes.

On the left side of the river, a dark and thick forest came up close to the stream.

My father had insisted that Inga and I read special tapes brought with

us, apart from our regular school text-tapes, on botany and zoology, all relating to plants and animals. Of course these tapes only covered what had been prevalent on Earth centuries ago when there had been an abundance of wild life. Would it be anything like that on this planet? Would the old tapes be of any value to us on Iduna?

Even though the plant life might be different and the animals have other than Earth-type characteristics, I could not help but think to myself that this was probably how Earth must have looked thousands of years ago. The history tapes said that in the distant past there had been vast reaches of open lands and virgin forests, pure streams and lakes, and animals of many varieties running free and wild.

All I had ever known, of course, was the congestion of the city where we lived. This trip in my father's space yacht was, in fact, the first time any of us, except for him, had ever been out of our immediate home area.

Looking over this primitive land, I could see why father had wanted to take us to a place better than nature-ruined Earth. But now with our mother dead, and our father in critical condition, possibly even dying, I wondered if this really was a better place for us. Would we even be able to survive?

After all, we were absolutely without any experience in taking care of ourselves. Back on Earth everything was mechanized. We ate the same packaged artificial food everybody else ate. It came to us with all our other needs automatically. We lived completely regulated lives. In our small apartment we had everything we needed, except freedom of action. Our schooling came to us over the holograph viewing system. We had few contacts with others. As the population increased and living conditions became even more crowded, people were inclined to stay quietly in their own quarters. It was better that way.

Only about one in twenty adults had assigned work tasks. These assignments were greatly coveted by those bored with doing nothing. The work load for those who had jobs was usually limited to a maximum of about ten hours a week. Most of the tasks covered routine maintenance of computer-controlled machines. It was machinery that had been designed and built more than two centuries before to take all the drudgery out of labor.

Even in building father's yacht, he had no difficulty getting all the help

he needed. Men were glad to be a part of the project and to be active.

As I looked around at the new world surrounding me, I realized again how poorly prepared I was for the struggle ahead. Well, if a challenge was what my father wanted us to have, we certainly had it now.

I looked down at the jumbled mass of twisted ship parts at my feet. Somehow I would have to find a way to remove my mother's body and bury it. But how? I had no tools.

Then something occurred to me.

I ought to try to find the neurogun I knew my father kept in the control room. Although war and crime were nonexistent on Earth, these nonlethal, nerve-affecting weapons were mostly used to control people who went insane and became violent.

Although my father had never permitted me to fire it, I knew how to use it. Right now I believed I would feel safer with it, even though I doubted it could stop a beast as large as the one I had seen.

Slowly I made my way down through the maze of twisted wreckage. It took me an hour before I found the weapon. Fortunately it was undamaged. Also it had a fresh charge in the chamber and in the box with it were a dozen extra charges.

With the gun in my pocket I felt better. Then, pulling and prying, I was finally able to carry my mother's frail body out onto the ground. Using a sharp piece of metal, I dug a grave in the firmest soil I could find, just big enough and deep enough to hold her.

I was still tamping down on the soft ground, my eyes filled with unshed tears, when I heard a savage grunt from behind me.

I turned with a start. There, not fifteen paces away, pawing the muck, was the huge beast that had pursued me earlier. This time, however, it was between me and the safety of the panel door.

CHAPTER THREE

I was all but paralyzed with terror, my limbs refusing to move. For a

long moment, the beast and I stared at each other.

Its four deadly tusks protruded from a head that was covered on the top with a carapace of thick armor plate. Short thick legs ended in broad pads that made possible passage through the swamp. In addition, it had two long tentacle-like arms that it apparently used for pulling up vegetation and thrusting into its mouth. Even now, as it glared at me, the arms, fully two meters long, were searching out morsels of food in the paludal vegetation.

The animal's eyes seemed to glow with malevolence. I could see it was getting ready to charge.

What chance did I have to evade the huge beast? I knew I could never reach the wreckage in time. I could just barely see the panel door at the other end of the ship, but it was much too far away.

The neurogun? Could it stop a creature of this size?

I pulled the gun from my pocket. My thumb found the control. I pushed it all the way down to maximum charge.

With a snort of disdain, the beast lowered its head so that the thick layer of bone plate on top faced me.

The gun, I knew, was merely a nerve stunner. It was never meant to kill. On light charge, it stopped a man's ability to control his nervous system and sent him helpless to his knees for several minutes. At medium charge, it rendered him unconscious for two or three hours. At maximum charge, it knocked him out for up to a day, and sometimes even resulted in permanent damage.

But how would it affect a creature as big as this?

At that instant the beast charged. I sensed, intuitively out of the warrior instinct of some ancient ancestor, that firing at the protective armor plate on top of its head would be useless. Instead I fell to the muck on my back and fired up at the under side of the animal's now-exposed throat.

I had time for two quick charges. Then I heard Inga scream. After that everything went black for me.

Oddly enough I still seemed to be conscious. The stunner was still in my hand. I could feel my legs moving in the slime beneath me. I could even turn my head a bit although I felt I was being smothered.

Then I realized what had happened. I had really stunned the tusked beast. It had fallen on top of me. I had merely sunk down into the wet muck under its tremendous weight.

Clawing and digging with my hands, I managed to get my head free of the huge body that covered me. A few minutes later I pulled myself clear.

Crawling on my hands and knees away from the animal, I looked back. It was twitching and moving its legs in mild convulsions. But it was definitely not completely knocked out or dead.

I remembered that at the time of the charge, I had heard Inga scream. Half in a daze I glanced around for her.

"We're back here," she called to me from the open panel door of the ship. I sighed with relief. With effort I made my way toward her until I was below the door and could climb up beside her. The two young ones were cowering next to her. The eyes of all three were wide with excitement. I thought to myself—how quickly the emotions come back when we are faced with perils such as this.

"We saw it all from here," Inga said as she threw her arms around me. The two small ones clung to my legs.

I held up the neurogun. "It worked this time, but I really don't think it can be counted on against a beast this big."

Inga looked worried. "Is this what we are to expect in our new life on this planet?"

To get their minds off the close escape I had just had, I glanced over at the pod where father was lying. I motioned in his direction questioningly.

"He still sleeps," Inga said. "I have removed his tunic and examined him. He has many bruises but no broken bones as far as I could find. I wish mother were here. She would know what to do. The worst damage was to his head. Thankfully the wound has stopped bleeding."

I went back to the doorway and looked out. Although the door was at the back of the cabin section, it was possible to see up along the side of the ship.

For an hour I watched the two-ton beast twist and turn as it lay in the swamp. Finally it gave a big shudder, shook itself, struggled to its feet and ambled off slowly. For the first few steps it was quite wobbly. Then it seemed to revive and loped off out of sight around the front of the ship.

"That, Inga," I said, "should be a warning to us. We know now that it is highly dangerous for us to leave the cabin. And we know that the stunner has only questionable value against these animals. I used the maximum charge on it twice and I was below the brute's throat where it was probably more vulnerable."

"We can't stay here forever," Inga replied.

Well did I know the need for leaving the ship. With food packages enough for only fourteen days or so, and our water supply already almost gone, Inga was right. We had no choice—sooner or later we would have to leave the comparative safety of the ship.

"Our first need is water," I said.

I gave Bretta a hug and patted Sven on his head. Then I picked up a plastic bag we used for collecting soiled clothing. I turned at the open panel doorway. Inga was staring at me with startled expression.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to get some water," I said gently. "I'll be careful. There is a river only half a kilometer away. You stay here with the children. I'll see what I can do to get this bag full of water. It would carry us over another day. Then we can plan on what to do next. We can't move father the way he is."

"But the animal? What if it comes back?"

"I can only hope I stunned it enough so that it stays away for awhile. This might be the best time to go out— while it is still somewhat groggy."

Cautiously I lowered myself to the soft bog. I looked around. As far as I

could see the animal I had stunned was nowhere in sight.

Crouching over to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, with only my head bobbing up at times over the top level of the fronds, I jumped from clump to clump. At times I missed and sank up to my knees in the soft mud.

The closer I came to where the river entered the swamp, the more difficult it became for me to find solid places to walk on. I realized I would have to veer off to the left and approach the river from the high land on the forest side. This took more time than I had counted on. Every once in a while I would straighten up and peer around. So far I had seen nothing of the beast.

The vegetation in the swamp, however, was becoming thicker as I approached firmer ground. Instead of soft, thin tendrils that I could push aside with my hands, the bushes now had thick tough branches. Many of them had thorns that tore at my hands when I tried to pass by. My big worry was how to keep the water bag from being punctured.

Finally I reached high ground where the forest began. Here, I knew, I would be vulnerable to any animal coming out at me from the woods.

With increasing tension I made my way to the river above the point where it tumbled over some rocks into the swamp. Standing on the bank, looking down at it, I was amazed how clear the water was. I even thought I saw some silvery fish flash by.

I knew what fish were. I had learned about them from our science tapes. Once, I remembered reading, the streams and lakes and oceans of Earth were full of many kinds of fish. People had eaten them.

Eaten them! I took a longer look at the stream. If the human system had once been able to obtain sustenance from fish, Inga and the children and I ought to find it possible to eat them and live.

Also, seeing fish in the water, meant to me that it was probably pure enough for us to drink without treating it. The reason fish could no longer live in Earth's waterways was because they were polluted. This clean, sparkling river was obviously unpolluted.

I lowered the bag into the water. It filled quickly. I was just raising it

out when I suddenly stopped!

There, below me in the river was a murky figure moving slowly toward me. It was at least two meters long, thick and heavy of body. Movement came with short jerky motions of its stubby tail. I could see several short legs on each side of its knobby body. But what filled me with revulsion was the look of malevolent evil in its two slitted eyes as it glared up at me.

For only a second we stared at each other. It was almost as if it were gauging my potential as an enemy. Then, with a sudden swish of its tail, it turned and was gone.

I backed up on the river bank and tossed the bag of water over my shoulder. I headed back.

Was this whole planet to be filled with fearsome beasts, both on land and in the water?

I shuddered as I retraced my way slowly and laboriously to the ship. And yet I felt the first, faint glow of satisfaction that we had made a start toward survival. I had found water. There were fish in the river. There was hope now... if only father would recover...

CHAPTER FOUR

The next morning we awoke to find father sitting up. He was glassy-eyed, but awake.

When we tried to talk with him, he merely mumbled wordless sounds in reply. There seemed to be no recognition in his expression when he turned his gaze on us.

Inga gave him a cup of water and one of the food packages. He drank the water eagerly. But he seemed utterly baffled by the food package. Inga finally had to open it for him and help feed him. As soon as he had finished, he slid back into his pod and was instantly asleep again.

"At least he has eaten something," I said to Inga by way of encouragement.

My next thought was to try to figure out a way to catch the fish I had

seen in the river. When we were preparing for the voyage, father had said something about taking fishhooks. Finding them no longer available in our fishless world on Earth, he had actually made up several himself. Of course they were lost with the rest of our supplies. Somehow I would have to devise another way to catch the swiftly darting silvery fish.

After looking over what was available in the cabin, I took one of the bed covers and, with two metal bars, formed a crude net.

Then, after cautioning Inga and the children to stay within the shelter of the cabin, I made my way slowly and carefully back to the river. I kept a sharp eye out for the animal that had attacked me the previous day.

I lowered the net into the water. When one of the silvery fish darted over it, I jerked the whole unit up. Inside of half an hour I had five of the slippery things, each about a third of a meter long.

The large, evil-looking water animal had not reappeared. Nor, thankfully, had I seen any more of the tusked beast.

On the other bank of the river, however, small herds of graceful animals could be seen grazing. Sometimes they came down to the water to drink. They would look across at me. Then, their curiosity satisfied, they would bound away. There were three or four different species—all, however, with four long legs. Twice I saw smaller animals at a distance.

After assuring myself that it was as good a time as any for cleaning off the muck I had accumulated from the swamp, I quickly removed my clothes. Keeping an eye on the woods for possible reappearance of the land animal and close watch on the stream for the water monster, I dipped my filthy clothing into the stream and tried to rub out the worst of the mud. Then I stood, knee deep in the water, and splashed myself.

I was relieved that nothing had happened while I was bathing. I put my wet clothes back on and picked up my catch of five fish. The trip back to the ship was made without incident. I had already learned how to make the passage easier—which clumps to use, which bushes to avoid, where the firmer ground was.

Climbing back into the cabin, I went immediately to stare down at my still sleeping father. Seeing him motionless, I turned my attention to the fish I had brought back with me. I placed them in a line on our pull-out

table. Sven and Bretta showed childish curiosity. Inga backed away and turned her head.

"I won't eat them," she said. "Anyway you have to cook them, don't you?"

I suspected that catching the fish would continue to be fairly easy. Cooking them was something else. In our home life on Earth packaged meals came with built-in heating and cooling elements. In all my life I had never seen anyone cook anything. I knew it required heat, but I had never even seen a fire. In our apartment we had had no need for fire—the kind of fire that flames up and burns. On the ship, our heating and cooling units were electronic and flameless.

I studied the five limp fish. How indeed could I cook them? I had no way even to start a fire.

"I won't eat them," Inga said again. "But I think I can help you find a way to cook them."

"How?"

"While you were gone, the children and I went scrounging through the control room wreckage."

"That's dangerous," I exclaimed.

"We were careful. Anyway, we found father's tool kit. The box was crushed but most of the things inside were still unbroken. Here it is."

She handed me the bent box. Inside there was a multipurpose tool that could be used as a hammer, a chisel, a pry, or a screwdriver. Next to it was a dur-alloy knife with a long blade. Beside this was a sharp-edged hatchet with detachable handle. Coiled up in a case was a spring-controlled metal tape measure. I recognized a small round item as a compass. Other items included a roll of fine wire, a pair of shears strong enough to cut the wire, a rough file, a wrench, a pair of pliers, a package of adhesive tape, a drilling tool with several sizes of drill points, and several other items I was unable to identify. At the bottom of the box was a small square object. I picked it up.

"That's what I think you'll find you need to start a fire for cooking,"

Inga said with a smile.

"What is it?"

"Just flip up the top and see what happens."

I let my thumb push open the top. Instantly a tiny flame sprang out.

"Fire!" I exclaimed in surprise.

"I thought you'd like that."

I glanced over at the children. I could see they didn't understand my excitement at being able to produce fire. Also I could see them still eyeing the fish hungrily.

"Tomorrow," I said, "I'm going to try to start a fire outside and see what kind of cooking we can do. Right now I'm not going to wait. I've read that our ancestors often ate raw fish. Sven and Bretta and I are going to try it, aren't we, kids?"

They nodded agreement.

I picked up the knife from father's kit. I started to cut one of the fish in half sideways. I saw at once that the bony structure was very complex and a lengthwise cut would be more practical.

I cut along the back of the spine and found I could pull most of the bone skeleton out in one piece. I picked out the few remaining small bones. A darker middle section seemed unappetizing so I put it aside. I could feel that the skin was hard, almost metallic. I scraped it away. Then I lifted a slice of the white meat to my mouth.

I took a small bite. The taste was oddly different than I was used to from our bland food packages. The meat was rubbery and tough. I almost spit it out. I tried to keep from making a grimace of distaste. Somehow I would have to persuade the others to try it.

"Not too bad," I said with a forced smile. "Of course, after our Earth food, this is... well, different. We may even get to like it."

I cut up two more of the fish and handed the slices to Sven and Bretta. Both made faces at biting into them. But they finished what I had given

them.

"Come on, Inga," I pleaded. "You've got to try it some time. You can't let yourself starve to death."

"I can't do it," she replied with a vigorous shake of her head. "It's a dead creature. I won't eat dead meat."

I laughed. "Until the last couple of hundred years or so, the human race lived largely on eating dead meat. You certainly wouldn't want to eat live meat."

"I don't want to eat any kind of meat," she said vehemently!

I nodded. "I know that's how you feel now. When you get hungry enough I think you'll eat it. In the meantime I have a plan."

I waved my hand to encompass the still intact cabin we were in. "Until father recovers, or until we can move him, we are going to have to stay here. We know now that the water in the river is safe to drink. I can catch fish. And, as I said, tomorrow I'm going to try to build a fire to cook the fish."

"Here in the cabin?"

"No. I wouldn't risk it here. I'll form a small, fenced-in area directly below the door and build a fire there."

"You mean a fence of mud?"

"No. I think we can get enough loose pieces of metal from the wreckage up front to erect a quite formidable barrier."

"Strong enough to hold back that beast with the long tusks? I doubt it."

"You may be right, Inga. But it will give us a place where we can build a fire and keep it going. There may be, possibly are, other smaller animals that a barricade would keep out. Once we start a fire, I expect we'll have to keep it going. I have no idea how many more times I can use father's flame-maker."

Seeing her father stir, Inga went over to check on him. When she returned, her brow was still furrowed with doubt.

"What good is a fire if we have no food to cook. You say you can get more fish. But can you keep up the risk of going out there every day to catch them?"

I smiled with what I hoped was an expression of confidence. "That's where the second part of my plan comes in. Tomorrow we'll erect the fenced-in area for the fire and cut down some of the bushes to burn. Then, the day after tomorrow, we'll put Sven and Bretta on top of the ship as high as we can get them.

We'll tie them to one of the fins so they won't fall off. They will be our eyes. They will watch in all directions and bang on the metal hull if they see anything that looks threatening. That will give us a chance to hurry back here in case of danger."

"Us?" Inga raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"Yes," I replied. "You and I are going hunting. I need you along."

"Hunting what?"

"Those small, long-legged animals on the other side of the river."

"And how do you propose to kill them?"

It was a good question. I had racked my brain trying to remember what kind of weapons our primitive ancestors had used. The only possible idea I could think of was to make a sharp-pointed spear out of one of the long lightweight metal rods I had seen in the wreckage.

I went through the bulkhead door to the wrecked control room and a moment later came back with the pole I had in mind. "I'll make a spear out of this," I said, not quite sure how I would be able to use it even if I succeeded in attaching a sharp point.

Inga looked at the rod skeptically. "I'll help you hunt if you want. But I won't eat any of the meat."

"Suit yourself. But as I said before, I think you'll change your mind when you get hungry enough. We have only a few more than fifty food meals left. Good sense tells me we should save them for an emergency."

I knew how she felt. But I also knew that she would have to learn how to adapt to the new life. I felt no concern for Sven and Bretta. They were young and had been trained all their lives to do what they were told to do.

I went over to the door and looked out. The tusked beast was not in sight. I turned back to the others.

"After I caught the fish," I said, "I washed my clothes in the river and bathed. The water is cold. But it is a fine feeling to be clean again. Sven, how would you like to come with me and have a bath?"

His eyes lighted up with delight at the thought of going out. The long months on the voyage, the crash, and now the new dangers from wild beasts had been hard on him and Bretta, just as it had been on Inga and me.

"Do you dare?" Inga cried in alarm.

"This may be the best time. The beast hasn't shown itself so far today. Maybe it is still feeling the effects of the two full charges of the stunner. I'll take it with me. And, if I can find a point for it, I'll also take this spear."

I glanced back at Sven. "We'll be careful, won't we, fella?"

He nodded and was already at the door waiting to be lifted down. Cautiously we moved through the rank growth of the swamp to the place on the river bank where I had washed my clothes and bathed. So far everything had gone well.

Holding the stunner in my right hand and the long pole in my left, I stood watch as little Sven stripped off his garments. With a cry of sheer animal joy he started to throw himself into the shallow water next to the bank. With a shriek he lurched back.

"It's cold," he cried as he looked up at me for sympathy. Seeing there wasn't anything I could do about it, he plumped himself down into the water and began rubbing his body all over. In a moment or two, he had leaped up on the bank next to me. I held out the toweling material we had brought with us.

Never once had I let up in my watchfulness. Although the beast had not appeared, I felt intensely relieved when we had worked ourselves back

through the swamp to the ship.

There I lifted Sven up. Inga handed Bretta down to me.

The trip with my younger sister was a duplicate of what had happened with Sven. Possibly she was a little less affected by the coldness of the water. And there was no question that she was a lot more reluctant to end her bath.

When I handed Bretta up to Inga, I said, "Now you!"

"Do you think I should leave father alone? The children wouldn't know what to do if he got up."

"Is he asleep now?"

"Yes. He hasn't moved since you left."

"I think you can safely leave him. A bath will do you good. A half hour at most—that's all it will take."

I could see she was not happy about it. But she climbed down and we set off through the swamp vegetation. By now I had a regular path to take which made the trip to the river easier and faster.

At the river's edge I peered all around. "It seems safe enough," I said. "I'll keep close watch of the woods especially."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Inga removing her garments. So white her skin, so graceful her body as she strode, with obvious forced determination, into the cold water.

I could hear her splashing. Full of apprehension, I kept my eyes fixed on the forest edge.

An instant later I heard a scream. I turned. Inga was floundering in the water, further out than I had gone earlier. Racing toward her was the water creature, its jaws opened wide as it drove its stubby body straight for her.

I leaped into the water, yelling to Inga to come back to shore. With frustrating slowness I forced my way to her side. I gave her a rough shove toward the river bank and had just enough time to raise my makeshift

spear.

The water beast was almost upon me. In the last possible second I hurled the metal rod straight into its open mouth. The jaws immediately clamped shut on the tubing. As fast as I could I backed up, until I was out of the water and on the bank. Inga was sitting higher up, her face ashen. Her body shaking in terror.

I looked back at the water beast. It was thrashing about in a frenzy of effort to get rid of the metal rod I had apparently succeeded in hurling deep into its throat.

"We're safe now," I said to Inga as I handed her her clothes. I looked at the forest. Thankfully the land beast had not appeared during the time of our struggle in the water.

Inga was silent as we made our way back to the ship. Before we quite reached it, she stopped and faced me.

"Peder," she said, "that was a terrifying experience. But it taught me something. I see now that we all must learn to face whatever dangers there are in this new world of ours. When that terrible creature came at me, I lost control of myself. I don't think it will happen again."

I took her arm. "I was frightened too the first time I saw it."

"It isn't a matter of feeling free of fear," she said. "I'll probably always be afraid of creatures like that. But what I know I must do, whatever happens, is to keep my head."

She paused. "And yes, Peder, tomorrow I'll help you to go hunting. And I'll try my best to eat some of the meat."

CHAPTER FIVE

I was the first to awaken the next morning. It was disheartening to look down at my father as he slept in his pod. Except for that one time yesterday, he had not been up. He twitched now and then as though with sudden, sharp little pains. Otherwise his condition was not much different than when Inga and I had dragged him into the cabin from the wrecked front section.

How empty it felt not to have him looking after us. He was the strong one in the family, the one who led us in his gentle yet firm way to what he believed to be the right course. As one of Earth's most prominent astroengineers, he was the inventor and designer of the more advanced devices that made interstellar space travel possible.

There was another thing about Lars Evenson. In a time when general practice of religious worship was in a decline, he had tried to keep his family, as he said, 'in tune with the infinite.' He often said that anyone who had traversed the great spaces between the stars could not help but feel there was something greater than man, a force that had created and directed it all.

And now he lay helpless. It was hard for me to realize that we might lose him, as we had lost our mother. She had been the one to keep us together as a loving family while he was away. But it was his knowledge, his training, his strength that we had relied on to give us a good start on our new planet-home... and help us develop a new and better life.

I recalled those last words of his as he gathered us together just before we began our landing manoeuvres. How hopeful he had been, how full of promise for a rich, full life for all of us.

Inga and the two children were still asleep. It was early. No need to wake them yet.

I went over to the panel door and slid it open. Looking out over the ocean that lay like a carpet before me as far as I could see, its surface a glistening sheen of bluish-silver, I wondered what was going to become of us.

Was I going to be able to solve the many problems that faced us? At twenty, I was of average size although I certainly was physically stronger than most youths of my age. I could thank my father's exercise program for that. Too, I felt I had a better all 'round fund of knowledge about more subjects than the typical young man brought up under Earth's standardized educational system. Here, too, I had to thank my father's insistence on our studying the many science tapes he was forever bringing home. Added to that, I realized now, was the religious faith he and mother tried to instill in us. Without that, I wondered if I would be able to have the courage to go on.

I thought of my siblings—

Inga had had many of the same advantages I had. She had studied the same tapes and was about as well acquainted with practical matters as I was. Of average height for a girl, she was more sturdily built. No weakling certainly. A pretty girl if one could accept her rather robust figure as a sign of womanly health and vigor. I had wondered a bit about her willingness to come with us. After all, it might mean she would lose her opportunity to find a mate and have children. I know both mother and father had talked to her about it. She would make a good mother. Perhaps having Sven and Bretta to help take care of was enough for her. I had no doubts about Inga. Whatever happened, she would be at my side, ready to do what had to be done. The episode with the water beast the day before was probably the last time she would ever falter.

Sven? A sober, eager-minded boy. At four, tutored by our parents, he was easily the equal of most six or seven year olds. Too, his husky little body showed early signs of excellent growth and muscular development. If we survived and found a way to live on our planet of Iduna, I felt Sven would prove to be a lad upon whom we could always depend.

Bretta? What can one say about a five-year old girl? Like Sven, she was eager-minded. But with a difference. Somehow she was more inquisitive, more curious, more inclined to get into troubles. She didn't exactly resent discipline. No Earth-trained child did that. But she often found a way to do things differently. Sometimes what she did irked us. More often she merely amused us with her antics. But she was a loving child, devoted to her smaller brother. And even at five, she showed evidence of the beautiful, fair-haired woman she would some day become.

I sighed as I turned back to see if any of the others had awakened.

Inga was dressing the two children. She turned to me. "Any sign of the monster?"

I shook my head. This was the day we had to start organizing ourselves more systematically if we were to survive. With an extremely limited number of food packages left, and five of us to share them, I estimated that we would have used them up in about twelve days. Two weeks if we stretched them out.

I approached my father in his pod. I shook his arm. He opened his eyes.

They seemed lifeless. The blow on his head must have been more damaging to his brain than we had realized. He closed his eyes and went back into his coma. I turned away sadly.

That morning Inga and I pulled out all the loose pieces of metal we could find in the ship's wreckage. As it turned out, we were able to salvage only a few usable pieces—not nearly enough to build a stockade of any size. Certainly there were not enough to offer protection against a charge by the huge beast that had been terrorizing us. The most useful of the pieces I was able to dig out were three additional lightweight metal rods of the same type I had used on the water creature the day before. I found small pointed pieces of metal and made them into what I thought made rather effective spears. After all, the neurogun had just so many charges left, and we might have to depend on the spears.

While Inga and I were digging for the metal strips, I had the children stationed at both ends of the ship's mangled carcass to keep an eye out for trouble. Because we had not yet arranged a method to hold them safely on top of the ship, I left them on dry spots on the ground level. Since she was the older, I put Bretta at the front end. Sven was at the back, much closer to where we were working.

Inga and I were busy pulling at a rather large strip when I heard Sven cry out. He was pointing to where Bretta had been placed. She was not there!

I dropped the beam I was struggling with and sprinted to where she had been stationed. She was nowhere in sight. I climbed up on a pile of the wreckage and peered around. The long, waving tendrils of the swamp vegetation gave no clue to where the girl had wandered.

I motioned to Inga. "Take Sven back to the ship. I'll look for Bretta."

Before jumping down from my perch I took another quick look around. Then I called out Bretta's name as loud as I could. I thought I heard a faint response. It came from ahead of me, toward the forest side. The little five-year old must have wandered that way. She could have sunken deeply into the soft mire.

Then, my heart missed a beat as I saw the dread land beast come out from among the trees and amble slowly into the swamp. It was headed for the ship.

If I was to save Bretta, I would have to find her quickly and get us both back into the safety of the ship's cabin. Although I had the neurogun with me, I had little faith I could be as lucky with it a second time.

"Bretta! Bretta!" I called again and again as I leaped from clump to clump.

At one stop I caught a quick glimpse of the feared animal. It had covered at least half the distance toward the ship. I would have to reach Bretta soon or it would be too late.

Then I heard a weak voice ahead. I plunged heedlessly toward where I thought she was. I found her half submerged in the muck and swamp water. The tentacles of the plants next to her had caught and held her tightly.

Using my father's knife, I slashed away at the strands that held her. In a moment she was in my arms.

But now I could see that the beast from the forest was almost as close to the ship as we were, although I did not think it had spotted us yet. Crouching low and holding Bretta under one arm, I tried to work my way back around the other side of the ship, using it as a shield to keep the animal from seeing us.

Then I heard a snort of rage. I knew it had sighted us. There was no longer any advantage in trying to stay hidden. With Bretta clinging tightly to me, I ran as fast as I could in the soft underfooting toward the ship. Handicapped by the extra weight of my little sister, I saw with horror that I was not going to be able to reach the panel door in time.

The lumbering beast came barreling down on us just as I reached the wrecked front end of the ship. Disregarding possible hurt to her, I tossed Bretta high up onto the only smooth surface I could see on the massed pile of twisted metal. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the raging beast almost upon me.

One of the great tusks grazed my leg as I twisted frantically to avoid the charge. In the next instant before it could turn, I was clambering furiously up over the wreckage.

I picked up Bretta and continued to climb to the top of the wrecked

section. Bretta had bruises on her arms and legs and was badly shaken, but seemed otherwise unhurt.

I looked down at the angry beast below. It was making futile efforts to climb up after us. The whole section shook with the impact of its attempts.

Cradling Bretta in my arms, I waited until the animal, having spent its rage, wandered off deeper into the swamp to feed. Then I climbed back through the control room and into the cabin where Inga and Sven were waiting anxiously for us.

CHAPTER SIX

I was so shaken by our close call with the big land beast that, at first, I didn't notice Inga's state of excitement.

"He's awake and sitting up," she said, pointing to where father was sitting on the wall bench. He was holding his head in his hands.

I hurried over to him. "Are you all right?"

He looked up and shook his head. I couldn't tell if the shake of his head was in reply to my question or merely a simple reflex motion.

I turned to Inga.

"He hasn't said anything," she murmured. "He drank some water and ate a bit of food. But he still seems to be in a stupor. He doesn't know us at all."

I took my father by the arm and forced him to stand. Then, still using all my strength, I led him around the cabin several times. Somehow we had to get him active again.

When he began to stumble, I took him back to his pod. He slipped into it and was almost immediately asleep.

"Inga," I said when we had finally calmed down a bit and Bretta's bruises had been tended, "we've got to move out of here. I thought we could continue on here until we knew more of how to cope with conditions on Iduna. But the swamp is too dangerous for the youngsters and for us

too. We would always be living in fear of the beast."

"At least this is a shelter," Inga said. "And how about father?"

"Getting him back on his feet is our first big task. The mere fact I could walk him around a bit here is a good sign. We'll do it as often as we can. When he can walk by himself, even if he is still in a mental daze, we'll plan to leave."

I strode over to the panel door and looked out. I pointed across the river to the more open spaces.

"I have noticed that the tusked animals so far have not crossed the river. Perhaps it is a barrier to them. I would like to hope so. Over there are animals that appear to be gentle and harmless. I'd like to go that way when we leave here. At least we would have meat to eat."

Inga's expression was one of puzzlement. "You have said that our ancestors, practically lived on eating dead meat. When did people start eating only the prepared foods? And why, if meat is so good, did they stop eating it?"

I smiled. "I guess that once there were more animals than people. So the people ate the animals, even raising them to eat. When there became many more people and less room for animals, I suppose that's when food packages started. And for efficiency."

"What has efficiency to do with it?"

"It's something I remember from one of the science tapes. I guess the raising of animals for food is very wasteful. Only a small portion of the food the animal eats is transformed into edible meat. And the meat itself is not a very efficient way for humans to get their food. The prepared packages we have been getting on Earth are scientifically made to give maximum nutritive values. At least that's what I have always been told."

Inga's expression changed to one of doubt. "I never have known what went into the food meals."

I thought for a moment. "I don't believe I ever knew either. I do know the packages were always made up in computer-controlled factories using artificially created materials. The factories were set up generations ago

and have not been changed."

"I know I promised to try," Inga said with a frown, "but the mere thought of eating dead meat revolts me."

"Then we have another reason for leaving here," I said. "We've got to go over there to the other side of the river and see if we can find trees with fruit, bushes with berries, and ground roots that can be eaten. Perhaps what the animals are grazing on, the grasses and cereals, can be prepared so that we can eat them too. Humans used to. I honestly believe it is our only hope."

Inga smiled. "Until father recovers, you are the head of the family. If you think it best for us to go, well go."

I picked up little Bretta. "You'd like to get away from this swamp, wouldn't you? And from that big animal?"

She nodded.

I turned to Sven. "We could learn to be hunters, eh boy?" His eyes shone with excitement.

I looked at Inga and the two children and felt a rising surge of pride. Even though we were just youngsters on a strange planet with no experience in fending for ourselves, I felt a new sense of confidence that we would make out. Across the river there was food enough and water enough for our needs. Now that we had overcome the first few obstacles to our self-preservation, I felt sure there was good hope for us.

Our biggest problem now was father... and getting him strong... and alert... again...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Late that morning after making sure it was safe to go out again, I dropped down into the bog next to the ship. Using the hatchet from father's tool kit, I cut a bundle of thick branches from nearby bushes. I brought them over to the spot where Inga and I had started to build a stockade. I piled them up in a heap.

When I went back to the cabin for my makeshift fish net, I found Inga leading father around the small space. He seemed to be steadier on his feet. But there still was no recognition in his eyes. I smiled my appreciation to Inga for what she was doing.

"I'm going after water and more fish," I said as I picked up the net and the now empty water bag. I hurried out before she could object.

With the tusked animal out of sight, I skimmed across the swamp at a record speed. At the stream I placed the net and waited for the first fish to come. None came. After waiting in vain for half an hour, I decided that possibly too much activity at that place had scared them away. Although I knew it increased the danger, I moved further upstream. I had to get some fish if I was to experiment with cooking.

After walking on the bank of the river for half a kilometer, I tried again with my net. This time I had almost instant success. Within a few minutes I had over a dozen of the glistening silvery fish.

Still no sign of the land beast. Nor of the water creature.

The river made a sharp turn just above where I had stopped to get the fish. I decided that it might be well to know what it looked like in that direction.

I put down my net, with the fish, and the water bag, and strode the few steps to the turn. At first all I noticed was that the river did come from the high mountains in the distance.

I was standing on the high bank, looking off toward the far away peaks. Only when I heard a commotion in the water below me did I look down.

There, almost at my feet, was the water beast that had attacked Inga. It was thrashing about weakly. Out of its huge mouth stuck the metal rod I had thrown into its maw.

What sent shivers of fear run down my spine was to see a dozen or more of the creatures in a half circle around the writhing water animal. They were waiting for it to die so they could feed on it!

I backed away and hurried to where I had left the net. The river, I realized, was just as full of danger as the swamp.

Thankful that the land animal had not appeared, I quickly filled the water bag. Then I sped back to the ship. Inga was in the open doorway. She was smiling happily at my return. She called down to me—"He seems much better today, physically anyway."

I grinned back at her. At last things were beginning to break right for us.

Now to cook the fish I had just caught...

Should I cook them first and then skin them and pull out the bones? Or should I skin them first? I had enough fish so I felt it was safe to try both methods.

First I had to start the fire. I had built up, with mud and stones, a kind of a hollow spot to hold the fire. I filled this with branches. Then I pulled out father's flame-maker.

Inga and the children were watching from the panel doorway just above me. When the tiny flame sprang up, I held it to the pile of branches. Nothing happened.

Were they too wet? Even if dry, were they of the right kind to burn?

Having gone this far, I was determined not to fail now. I remembered that father had some astral navigation charts made of old-fashioned paper. As charts they were useless to us now. As paper they might serve to get the fire started.

Entering the wrecked control section, I searched until I found them. There were at least a score of them, rolled up into a tight bundle. I removed one and brought it to the pile of branches. I applied the flame to one edge of the chart. It caught immediately. In a minute or two the fire had spread to the whole heap. As soon as I saw that the fire was well started, I impaled one of the fish on the steel rod and thrust it directly into the brightest of the flames.

The fish sizzled and seemed to catch fire. Even as I watched, it shrank and shriveled. Smoke rose from the fire. Some of it got into my eyes and I had to turn my head away.

When the metal rod grew too hot to hold, I pulled it out of the fire. I

looked down at the fish. It was obvious I had much to learn about the art of 'cooking.' A more unappetizing object I had never seen.

I stood and looked at the fire for a few minutes more. Then I had another idea. I built up the walls around the fire still higher. Across this I placed a piece of sheet metal. On this I placed six of the remaining fish. These I had decided to skin and debone first.

I watched as the slender strips of fish-meat gradually browned. They didn't burn. I took the rod and flipped the pieces over. If they were to be thoroughly cooked, I reasoned, they should be browned on all sides. In the very center of the metal sheet where it was hottest, the pieces were beginning to blacken. Quickly I slid all the pieces off and onto one of the paper charts.

I looked up. Inga and the children had been watching me all through my experiment. When I climbed up to show them the 'cooked' fish, they gathered around me to take a closer look.

"All right, Sven, you're a brave one. Would you like to be the first to try a piece?"

Without hesitation my younger brother picked up one of the well-browned slices and started to nibble at it. I picked up another and quickly followed his example. Actually it tasted rather good. Unlike the raw fish, it was not rubbery or tough. It tasted somewhat of smoke, but I had half expected that. It had a flavor quite different than the bland items in our food packages.

I looked at Sven and grinned. He grinned back. "Good," he said with his mouth full.

"All right, girls," I said. "Your turn now. Bretta, here's a nice slice, not too brown. You'll like it."

I peered over at Inga. Her face had turned even paler than usual.

"You promised," I reminded her.

Reluctantly she picked up one of the smaller slices. For a moment she stared at it in disgust. Then, with eyes closed and a woeful expression on her face, she took a small morsel into her mouth. She stopped, looked back

at me with horror, and ran to the open doorway where she choked and gagged for several minutes.

When it was over, she came back. With chin up and a determined look, she picked up another of the slices and began eating. Several times she paused, her eyes measuring the distance to the doorway, then continued what must have been for her a dismal task.

Sven and Bretta obviously enjoyed the new food I had obtained for them. I knew it was no time to ask Inga's opinion, but I felt she too would undoubtedly come around to accepting it eventually.

I sighed in relief. In a small way at least, it solved our food problem. The river would supply all the fish we would need. And water too.

Now our biggest problem was getting father back on his feet. Unless we could get him fit to walk unaided, there was no chance of our leaving our cabin haven.

Even as I was putting the remaining slices of cooked fish onto the wall table, I looked over at him. Without my noticing it, he had sat up. I strode over to him.

"Father," I said, "do you understand me? Come, lean on my arm. I want to walk you around the cabin again. It's to build up your strength."

There was no response from his expressionless face.

At that instant Bretta came over with one of the fish slices and offered it to him. He looked down at it. I almost thought he knew it was food being offered to him. But his gaze moved aimlessly away.

Breaking off a piece of the fish, I tried to push it between his lips. They opened and he ate. Sven ran over with another big slice and he ate that too. Inga held out a cup of water for him.

When he would have sunk back into his sleeping pod, I kept him up. Together, Inga and I got him standing. Then, one on each side, we walked him around the small space for almost a quarter hour. At the end he was faltering badly, but at least I could see new color in his cheeks. After we had taken him to our chemical toilet and then back into his pod, Inga and I looked at each other.

"It seems so hopeless now," I said. "But I honestly think he's greatly improved. Perhaps in a few days he'll be strong enough for us to start out. We can't wait much longer." I added with a grin, "That chemical toilet isn't going to be usable much longer without power to recharge it."

"Yes, Peder. I've been thinking about that too." She shook her head in doubt. "If only he were his old self. With him this way, the future looks so uncertain."

"All I can say, my dear brave Inga, is that we are all doing the best we can. It's obvious father is better. Who knows—one of these days he may snap right out of it."

"Yes," she sighed, "but nothing will ever bring our mother back."

I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes... tears in Inga's normally tearless eyes.

"There is something I think we should do," I said. "Something we should do as soon as Sven and Bretta are asleep."

She nodded. "Yes, Peder. I've been thinking of that too. Our mother's grave—we should mark it."

An hour later, just at the last of daylight, Inga and I stood beside the metal cross we had fashioned and placed over where she was buried. We joined hands and together sang softly a hymn we knew she had always loved... a hymn of hope and love and faith.

It was all we could do for her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the days that followed, I kept our bellies full of cooked fish. And together Inga and I got father on his feet as often and for as long as possible.

It was obvious that he was growing stronger. One day after a week or more of daily exercise I told Inga we ought to attempt to take him outside. He seemed to understand what we were trying to do and actually helped in lowering himself to the ground.

At first he seemed a bit baffled by the oozy underfooting. With the two of us at each side of him we directed him over the firmest of the short paths we had made near the ship. With no beast in sight, we felt free to keep him out for several turns around the craft.

It was heartening to see him gaining confidence with every step. However, looking into his eyes, I saw no spark of recognition, no sign that he knew where he was or who we were and what was happening.

When we got back up into the cabin, I drew Inga back outside for a discussion. "The time has come when we have to make definite plans about leaving. Another few days like today and father will be able to keep up with us."

"I'm worried about leaving," Inga looked forlorn. "So far we've had fine weather. The cabin is rain-proof. What happens if we are out there in the open and a storm comes up?"

"That's one of the reasons we should leave. If a storm should come, we could be truly marooned here. I would expect the river to fill the swamp and make it difficult, even impossible, to get out. And there's another thing.

We've been able to save only about twenty food packages. I had hoped to keep them for a real emergency. We can't live on fish alone. We've delayed long enough going across the river to where our real food supply lies. We've got to go to it. It won't come to us."

"Do you really think father is strong enough to keep up on a trek through a land full of we-don't-know-what dangers?"

"He'll gain strength as we go."

For a long moment my sister looked downcast. Then she raised her face and smiled. "Of course you are right. Tell me what we should do."

I put my arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug. "I know this isn't how our parents planned it for us. Now it's up to us to take over and see it through." I paused and looked back toward the forest. "One thing I can assure you—we won't go that way."

I glanced over at my makeshift oven. "For the next two or three days I

think we should assemble everything we want to take with us. That sheet of metal for example. We'll need it for cooking. Of course you realize we'll be limited by what we can carry. We can't expect Sven and Bretta to carry much. And father— well, we'll see how it works out."

In the next three days fortunately we saw no sign of the beast that had harassed us so much earlier. It gave us a chance to catch our daily quota of fish even though I had to go further and further upstream. I saw nothing more of the water creatures and assumed that the one I had wounded was eaten by the others.

Each day too, Inga and I took father on longer and longer walks. Except that he had to be led, he now seemed physically up to anything the rest of us could tackle.

I had suggested that we put all the things we wanted to take in the center of the cabin floor. Almost immediately it was apparent to all of us that we would have to do a great job of elimination. First I talked the children out of taking their games and toys. Perhaps we would be able to come back for them later. I agreed that we would each wear an extra layer of clothing and carry extra shoes. We used bedding as bags to carry the supplies we finally decided upon.

I insisted on taking the three long metal rods in spite of their being awkward to handle. Remembrance of how one such bar had saved Inga from the water monster was enough to make me want to keep them by me, especially now that I had attached sharp points.

From the twisted control room, I was able to pry off half a dozen dome-shaped steel covers, flat on the bottom. They could serve as cooking pots or as dishes.

On that last day in the cabin, I made sure we had plenty of cooked fish to take with us. I even broke open one of the food packages and distributed pieces of it to each of us. Strangely enough its blandness had already become distasteful.

I had hoped we would all get a good night's sleep before we started our expedition the next day. Father and the children slept well. But Inga and I talked softly through a large part of the night. We were afraid of what the morrow would bring. We were leaving the familiar comfort of the cabin and going into a completely uncertain life across the river.

I tried reassuring Inga. I said if it didn't work out, we could always return.

"No, Peder," she said. "We mustn't make this break with the idea we can come back. You've pretty well convinced me we could not survive here indefinitely. And that is what we must aim for—a place where we can live always. We may be here on this planet the rest of our lives."

She paused and touched my arm. "If only mother were here."

It was an emotional moment and we were not accustomed to expressing emotions. Nothing in our upbringing on Earth had prepared us for this. Finally we said good night to each other and slipped off into a fitful sleep.

In the morning we gathered around the pile of metal scraps I had put on top of mother's grave. We had brought father out and he stood with us and the children. Inga sang a hymn. It was our farewell to our mother. In a way, too, it was to be our farewell to our whole former way of life.

With each of us carrying our packs as they had been prearranged, I made sure the cabin was tightly closed off to intruders. Then I led my little group down toward the sea. I had scouted in that direction and had found that where the swamp drained into the ocean, there was a natural stone ridge which acted as a low dam. I had even tried it and found we could use the ridge as a way to ford the slowly moving water.

At no point on the ridge was the water very deep. The greatest danger was from slipping on the wet rocks. First I carried Bretta and Sven across. Then I led father over. And lastly Inga came, holding my hand.

When we reached dry land on the other side of the river, I pointed off to the right toward the mountain range.

"That is the direction we are going. I want to get away from the big forest monsters. So far I haven't seen one on this side of the river. Although it would seem to me they could go through the swamp or even cross where we did. We must stay alert."

For several hours we trudged over the fairly open grasslands, stopping frequently to rest. There were occasional clumps of bushes and small trees. And always there were the deer-like animals grazing peacefully. They

would move slowly out of our way as we approached, but seemed not to be alarmed at our presence.

About midday we came to a small rivulet. It was sparkling clear. Possibly it was a feeder stream for the larger river. It seemed to be a good location to rest.

I assembled the cloth net I had used before and stretched it out in a section of the rivulet that seemed deepest. I thought it best to save the cooked fish in case we left the area where they were available. Sven stood next to me and watched. In only a few minutes I had five squirming fish.

Nearby we found several bushes with dead branches. Sven and I gathered up as much as we could carry and went back, with the newly caught fish, to where we had left the others.

I made sure the branches were well placed and the metal sheet firmly fixed on top of two parallel stones. Then I used a piece of one of father's navigation charts to start the fire with his flame-maker. In minutes the fire was going full blast.

When the fish were properly brown, I handed them out. Father and Sven and Bretta eagerly ate what I gave them. Inga still showed signs of reluctance although I noticed she ate all of the pieces I had given her.

I turned to Sven to ask him to go with me to get one of the water bags refilled. I looked up, my eyes widening in horror—

There, facing us, about fifty paces away was another of the huge tusked monsters. My first reaction was one of disappointment that we had not escaped them by crossing the river. It was the barest of fleeting thoughts, for I could see by the way it was pawing the ground it was getting ready to charge us.

I yelled to Inga to take father and the children and hurry across the rivulet. I glanced around, wondering where they could run to. We were at least a hundred meters from the closest grove of trees. All they could do was hurry as fast as they could and try to climb into the upper branches.

If I were to stop the beast, or even delay it to give them more time, I had to do it here and by myself. I felt that the neurogun would not help me this time.

In backing up I felt the heat of the fire on my legs. I looked down at the flames.

Fire! Somewhere I had read that primitive people often used fire to protect themselves from wild animals.

Even while the huge beast was charging, I scooped up some of the burning branches on the flat strip of metal. Then, when the monster was almost upon me, with one sweeping motion I tossed the blazing wood full at its head. I threw myself sideways as it thundered past.

Rolling over and getting on my knees, I looked up. The creature was snorting and bellowing with rage. The embers had evidently hit it in the eyes.

For a few minutes it ran in crazy circles. Then, in another frenzy of activity it headed away. I watched. At the first grove of trees, it veered directly into a tree trunk. What I had done apparently was to blind it with the fire.

With new respect I looked at the few flickering remains of our burning branches. Fire, it seemed, was not only good for cooking and warmth, it also made a formidable weapon of defense.

Somehow, I realized, I would have to keep the fire going. It became suddenly a most important factor in our struggle for survival.

The tusked animal had departed from sight. I felt we were reasonably safe again. I called to the children to gather more dead branches. Soon we had the fire going strong again. The next problem would be how to keep it alive while we traveled.

I glanced over at the others. I could see that the half day's journey had tired them. That and the excitement of the tusked beast's charge.

We could stay where we were for the rest of the day and that night. We wouldn't have to build a new fire. And, peering across the rivulet, I saw a group of the grazing animals. With the departure of the two-ton animal, they appeared to have lost their fear. Now was as good a time as any to find out if their meat was edible. It was something I had long wanted to find out.

They were about a meter and a half tall. Their bodies were slender, and their legs were long and thin. I knew from having watched them, they were capable of skimming across the ground at an amazingly rapid speed. They had a dainty way about them. Each time they drank from the rivulet, they raised their heads and peered around. They did not seem to be alarmed at our being near them.

I knew that I would have to do it sooner or later. I even became a little sick at the thought. Killing fish was bad enough. But to take the life of one of these harmless creatures seemed almost more than I could force myself to do.

Without telling the others what I planned, I strolled down to the water's edge. I pulled out the neurogun. If our survival depended on getting meat, I would have to become an animal killer. It was not a pleasant thought.

CHAPTER NINE

It seemed impossible that the drinking animals did not see or hear me as I moved slowly toward the small herd. Yet they kept sipping the water and only casually looking in my direction.

At a distance of about thirty paces I stopped. I set my stunner at maximum charge. I felt I needed the most force I could get out of the gun, not so much for great impact but for the distance. The neurogun was really meant only as a short range weapon.

I took careful aim. I fired. The herd froze, and then, as of one accord, bounded off toward the shelter of a grove of trees. All but one of them.

I was shaking with remorse as I hurried over and looked down at the beautiful body of the fallen creature. The beam had not killed it. I pulled out my knife and quickly cut its throat. For the second time in my life I had killed. First the fish. Now this poor, gentle beast. But somehow this was different.

I had a strong sense of revulsion and shame for what I had done. And yet, too, there was a bit of pride that I had overcome my scruples in the name of necessity.

I picked up the frail body and threw it over my shoulder. I tried to

convince myself of the lightness of my act. After all I had merely done what millions of my ancestors on Earth must have done, and for the same reason—to eat to live!

I walked back to where the others stood waiting for me.

"I won't eat any of it," Inga said defiantly.

"You will," I said. "You must. You owe it to father and Sven and Bretta to be a good example for them. Meat is the best food we have available to us."

"Can't we find other things to eat?"

I nodded. "I intended to try to find out which things are edible. I promise you this. In the meantime I am going to try to cook the flesh of this animal. When it is cooked, we may be able to take some with us."

I smiled reassuringly at my sister. "You can help by taking the children off a ways. I would just as soon they did not see me cut into the animal. Father can stay here with me."

Inga nodded and took the children up the stream just out of sight past some low bushes. When they were out of range, I took out my knife and eyed the carcass. I had no real idea how or where to begin. All I could do was experiment.

First I stripped off the short-haired hide and tossed it aside. Then I cut strips of the animal's flesh and placed them on the flat metal sheet. When I had cut off what I figured was about half of the edible portions, I had more than enough to cover the sheet. I then placed the metal sheet over the wood fire that was still blazing brightly.

Inga and the children returned and watched me as I tended the fire and kept turning the various strips of meat. Several times I sent the young ones off for more branches. I could see that the cooking was very uneven. Some parts burst into flames which I had to poke out with one of the metal rods. Other parts became brown and shriveled up. Still other parts stayed red and bloody.

One thing I noticed—a delightful mouth-watering aroma arose. Both of the youngsters kept asking when the meat would be ready to eat. Even

though they had had the fish at noon, this new type of food made them eager to try it.

Finally I figured I had done about all the cooking on my primitive stove I would be able to do. I removed the most browned strips to the metal dishes we had brought.

The few pieces of red meat, I left on the sheet over the fire for further browning.

In a few minutes the meat was cooled enough and I cut one of the pieces into mouth-size strips. Sven as usual was the first to try it. He looked up at me and smiled.

"Good!" he said as he smacked his lips.

After handing Bretta a small piece and my father a more generous slice, I turned to Inga. "Don't let your little brother shame you. Please try it."

She shook her head. "I tried the fish. That was bad enough. But to eat the flesh of one of those gentle creatures, that's too much to ask of me."

I looked at her sternly. "You should at least try it. See, I'll eat a piece myself."

I cut off a strip and put it in my mouth. It was totally unlike the fish or the bland, flavorless material in our prepared food packages. It was savory and good.

"Now will you try it?"

"I'll try it, but I won't like it."

I handed her a small slice. She looked at it, then tentatively bit off one edge and started to chew it. Suddenly she stopped, looked at me with a horrified expression, jumped to her feet and ran toward the stream.

In a few minutes she was back, pale and sick-looking just as she had been after her first taste of fish. Bravely she held out her hand for another piece.

For some time she chewed on the meat. This time it stayed down. She smiled weakly at me.

With only half of the animal cooked, I kept the fire going and before dark had cooked the remaining half.

We stayed at that spot all night. We all combined in collecting a huge pile of tree branches. I felt the fire was the best protection we could have. All through the night I kept feeding it wood. Unfortunately, before dawn, I dozed off and the fire died out. When I awoke and found the embers barely warm, my spirits sank. Of course I still had the flame-maker. But I had no idea how long the fuel in it would last.

That day we hiked along, taking our time. We stopped at many clumps of bushes and shrubs. Some had little berries. Some of the trees had nuts. Most merely had big broad leaves.

Whenever I thought the items looked edible, I put a few samples in a bag I had brought along. "Don't eat any of them now," I warned. "We'll take them on with us. When we can, we'll try them one by one. If we try them now, we won't know which are good for us and which are not."

We had with us the strips of meat I had cooked the day before. Also we had several containers with enough drinking water to last us possibly two days.

I had earlier found that father's compass always pointed toward the distant range of mountains. It was in that direction we were headed.

All through the day I kept close watch on how well father was standing up under the ordeal. I need not have worried. As I led the group, he was always close at my heels, followed by the two youngsters and Inga. Actually I found my biggest concern was for Sven and Bretta. About every hour I called a fifteen minute halt so they could rest.

Several times during the day we passed more herds of animals. Some were like the one I had killed the day before. Some appeared to be quite a bit larger with a long single horn in the middle of their heads, as I fancied unicorns were supposed to have looked. Still others were short-legged and round of body. None seemed to be dangerous or to be alarmed by our presence.

On one stretch we moved for a quarter hour through a field of waving grass that had a tiny kernel in a pod at the end of the stalks. Recalling what I had learned in my science studies, I believed it could be something

like the wheat, rye, oats or barley grains that had once been so common on Earth. One thing was evident—the animals seemed to be thriving on eating these growths in spite of the general feeling of it being a dry area.

I asked the kids to gather up at least a pocketful of the yellow kernels. They too should be tested later for their possible food value.

At midday we rested under the shade of a wide-spreading tree with big, flat leaves. I had noticed as we came closer to the mountains that there were more and bigger trees than lower down on the grasslands.

I realized, too, that the mountains we were approaching were higher and even more formidable than I had imagined from a distance. The top third of what I could see consisted entirely of rock formations with no vegetation whatever.

Although we had been going steadily uphill all through the day, by mid-afternoon we had climbed only high enough to be at the edge of the rocky upper portion of the mountains. What I had been aiming at was a deep cleft in the otherwise formidable barrier of peaks, some of them snow covered.

At first sight, the way ahead looked all but impassable —with crags, crevices, and fallen boulders. I insisted on a long rest before we tackled this new obstacle.

Half way up to the cleft, the kids began to complain that the climbing was too hard for them. And it was hard. Sometimes the boulders were bigger than they were. Loose rocks slipped under their feet. Bretta started to cry. Father, I could see, was managing very well by himself. Inga and I did all we could to help the two young ones over the worst places.

We were almost to the level of the pass when tragedy suddenly struck. In trying to help Sven over a rough spot, Inga fell. She let out a cry of pain and surprise as her feet doubled under her.

I jumped to her side. She lay, sprawled out, a grimace of anguish on her face.

"It's my ankle," she muttered. "I don't think I can stand on it."

After I had put her in a sitting position and had placed father and the

two children safely on each side of her, I looked around. I was surprised to see how close we were to the top of the gap in the mountain range. More than that, only a short distance away was a rocky shelf with an overhang that made it almost a cave. It could serve as a temporary, overnight shelter.

With Inga leaning on me and hopping on one foot, we worked our way to the safety of the ledge. There, I removed her boot and examined her ankle. It did not seem to be broken. More likely it was a bad sprain. She would have to rest. There was no more progress to be made that day.

What to do in the meantime?

For the moment I had done all I could for Inga. Sven and Bretta were already curled up together in the corner of the hollow space we had chosen. Father was sitting next to Inga staring at nothing in particular.

I asked Inga if I could leave her for a few minutes. She said it would be all right.

What I wanted to do more than anything else was to climb the last few steps to the top of the gap. I just had to know what was on the other side. Our lives could well depend on what lay beyond...

PART II

ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS

CHAPTER TEN

When I reached the top of the break through the mountain chain, I looked back anxiously to where Inga and father sat wearily on the rock ledge. I waved to them and Inga waved back.

From my vantage point I could see far over the plains we had just crossed. The land looked even more dry and barren than it had when we were on it. The groves of trees, I could see now, were really very sparse. The stretches of grasslands covered most of the area.

I could see the river as it snaked its way down from the hills and mountains to my right. I could even see the glistening metal of the ship's hull—a mere pinpoint of reflected light in the distance. Beyond the ship where it rested in the swamp was the forest.

Here, however, was a surprise. From our low position in the bog, the forest had appeared to stretch on indefinitely and be all but impenetrable. Now I could see that the 'forest' was actually just a rather narrow green belt that wended its way to the horizon. Beyond this thin forest was more prairie land, even drier and more barren than the land we had crossed. It was much too far to see if any of the large land animals were there.

The sea, back of our wrecked ship, stretched off to the horizon. It did not, however, come any closer to the mountains.

Although everything in me cried out to turn and look at what was on the other side of the mountain range, I held back. Apprehension filled me. What if there were just more mountains, higher, rockier, more formidable?

I almost dreaded to look. When I did finally turn, I stared in amazement—

There, far to the left and to the right was another vast sea, some twenty or more kilometers away. Under the light of Iduna's bright sun, the water glistened and shone with lambent beauty.

What really rilled me with delight was the dense vegetation that covered the space between the water's edge up to the more open grassland at the foothills of the mountains. A continuous brown sand beach stretched as far as I could see in both directions.

Most important, too, was the amount of wild life. Within sight of where I stood, I saw several bands of the long-legged animals grazing in the open areas between the mountains and the jungle-like growth lower down.

Here was everything we needed—water, heavy vegetation, and animals for meat.

Gazing over the scene, I felt new and unfamiliar emotions welling up in me—awe for the utter splendor of what I was seeing and a deep kind of pride for having come this far on our road to survival.

There was something almost overpowering about seeing how majestic nature could be. Back on Earth I had never seen a forest, or a mountain, or an ocean. Small, self-contained family apartments, I could now see, were a poor substitute for the almost limitless expanse of green foliage and blue sky and silvery water that now lay before me.

Although mother and father had held close to their 'old religion,' as growing youngsters we had never really felt it. At their insistence, we had listened to what they said about it, learned some of the tenets of their beliefs, even tried to understand what it all meant.

But, along with most other children of our crowded world, it was hard for us to visualize a deity, or even the need to worship anything beyond the automatic dispensers that brought us our food packages, or sent us holographic entertainment, or educated us with government-controlled study tapes.

Now, looking out over this primeval world below and beyond, I was filled with a new kind of emotion. I tried to analyze it. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before and yet there was a ring of familiarity to it. Then I remembered—it was what my father said he felt when he discovered a new untouched planet. Coming back from his exploration trips, he would try to tell Inga and me of what he experienced, the ineffable sense of glory in seeing what his 'God' had created.

Now, I was feeling what he must have felt. It was, as he always said, a powerful gathering up of all one's senses in wonder and awe of the miracle of life.

So taken away had I been by my feelings, I had not noticed that a wind had sprung up. It pulled at my tunic-cloak. Looking around, I realized I was in a very exposed position, standing there in the pass.

A drop of rain fell on my cheek. It was the first rain I had seen so far on Iduna. I looked up. Black, thunder-rumbling clouds were rolling up over the mountains around me. Like a curtain, in mere seconds they blotted out the beautiful view I had been gazing at. A lightning bolt crackled and hit not far away. The rain had started to come down in a veritable torrent.

Although it had seemed only a short distance from the ledge when I had climbed it earlier, now the return was quite a different matter. The rocks were slippery. One slip and I could break a leg.

Everything was changed. I could not even see where the rock ledge was on which I had left the others. I called out. Immediately I knew it would be impossible for Inga to hear me or for me to hear her. The rain was like a massive waterfall. Already water was rushing down between the rocks, tearing at my legs. I found it hard to stay upright.

I remembered that there had been many dropoffs, easy enough to avoid in full daylight. But what if in my blindness now, I went a step too far?

There was no chance for me to hold the exposed position I was in with the pelting driving rain pulling at me. Groping ahead, step by step, I floundered on. I grabbed hold of any rock formation that offered an edge for my wet hands. It was that or being sluiced down the mountain side.

Then I heard a faint, distant cry. It was Inga calling my name. But from what direction did her call come?

I loosened my grip on the boulder I was holding and slid a step or two downward. This was all it took. I was actually that close to the rock ledge. Inga reached out and helped me to slide the last step or two.

"Are you all right?" she yelled into my ear.

I nodded weakly, and tried to rub the water out of my eyes. Seeing how completely drenched I was, Inga put her arms around me, holding me close and trying to give me the benefit of her dry body heat.

Then—suddenly—the storm stopped. One minute it was a raging tempest, making it impossible to speak to each other. The next minute it was dead quiet, almost eerie.

Inga released me. She was smiling broadly and pointing to my father. He was sitting at the back of the ledge with Bretta on his lap and Sven next to him. He was smiling.

"Yes," Inga whispered to me, "he's back with us now. He knows us. Perhaps it was the lightning bolt so close that shocked him into an awareness of us."

I jumped to my feet and went over to him. He looked up at me, his expression no longer blank.

"Where are we, Peder?" he asked. It was the first time I had heard him speak since the crash landing. Then he looked around questioningly. "Where is Iduna? Where is your mother? What has happened?"

I shook my head in despair and anguish. "There is so much to tell, father. First I think we should eat. The children must be hungry. I know I am. And you, father, have eaten very little in the past few weeks."

"The past few weeks?" His expression was one of bewilderment.

I looked over at Inga. She nodded. It would be cruel to hold back in telling him.

"Father," I said, "the ship crashed. Mother was killed. You were badly hurt. You've been out of your mind ever since. But we are all right now. We have gone through the worst of our troubles. We have survived. And now that you are with us again, everything is going to be fine."

His eyes grew misty. "You say your mother was killed? How did she die?"

"When the ship landed, the whole front control section caved in. She died instantly. You were saved by a heavy metal beam that fell across you. The four of us were unhurt."

"But this cave?" He waved his hand around. "Is this where we are living?"

"No, father. We just came here this afternoon. We're staying here only tonight and then going on tomorrow if Inga's ankle is better."

"Going on where?"

I smiled. "Going on to that paradise your Bible speaks of. Anyway from what I saw of it before the storm broke, it looks like a paradise to me."

Hobbling over to me, Inga interrupted by handing each of us a strip of the cooked meat we had brought with us from the kill of the day before.

I glanced down at my sister's ankle. "It's better, much better," she said.

As we sat chewing on the meat strips, Inga and I avoided saying more to our father. Time enough later for him to get the details of how we had

come through since the crash.

Now, I felt, he ought to have a few moments in silence to think of his lost mate, before he took up on the morrow the job of leading us to new family life in the land beyond the mountains.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning broke sunny and warm. We were all somewhat stiff from our climb of the day before and from sleeping on the hard stone ledge.

After we had eaten a bit more of the meat, I took father up to the top of the ridge-gap. I wanted him to see what our world was like. "Our world!" More and more I was thinking of it as something that really belonged to us.

Father didn't say anything as I pointed out the spot where the ship had been wrecked, or even when I turned him around to look at what I had called our 'new paradise.' He didn't say anything but I could tell he was deeply affected.

On the way to get the others, he said he felt physically strong enough to continue the journey if Inga could make it. When we reached the stone ledge, we both examined her wrenched ankle. I could see that the swelling had gone down.

"It still hurts," she said. "But I'm sure I can walk on it if I don't strain it again."

The first hour was rough going. Sven and Bretta had to be helped over some of the worst places. Father and I shared the task of easing Inga from one ledge to the next. By mid-morning we had reached the lower edge of the rocky area and were ready to cross the open grassland to the forest. On closer look it gave little resemblance to the woods we had seen near the ship. Where they had grown in small groves with wide expanses of grassland between, what we could see here was what father immediately called a 'rain forest.'

"The mountains," he said, "act as a barrier to rain clouds coming in from the sea. They drop most of their moisture on this side. That's why

beyond the mountain range are mostly prairies and savannahs with relatively small islands of trees."

The change from the rocky mountain slope to the grassland was rather sharply drawn. There were trees on this grass covered area, but they were well separated.

Crossing the open area took less than an hour. As we approached the forest edge, father suddenly stopped. He motioned for us to halt. I looked at him questioningly.

He shook his head in doubt. "I don't feel any special sense of danger, and yet that rain forest frightens me."

"What is it, father?" Inga asked.

"Just a feeling, my dear, a feeling that is hard to describe. It's a feeling that we are being watched. As I said, I don't feel any sharp sense of danger. That's a sense I suppose I have developed in "my exploration trips to strange planets. It has saved my life on more than one occasion. Yet, I do feel something."

He looked hard at the wall of trees, now about a hundred paces away. "I don't see anything that should frighten me. But I certainly feel something. It might be safer to go back."

"Back up to the pass?" I looked over at Inga, slumped over on the ground. "I don't think we could get my sister back up there. It was difficult enough coming down. And anyway, father, we have used up the last of our water."

Father kept staring at the forest. "If I only had my neurogun, I'd be willing to try to go on."

I smiled as I pulled the gun out of my kilt pocket and handed it to him. "I forgot I had it. Here, you take it. And here is the box of extra charges."

Father looked at the gun and back at me. "This type of weapon is something I had hoped we would never have to use on our new planet. Mankind has had too much of guns."

I spoke up. "I used it to kill one of the grazing animals. That was the

meat we had for breakfast."

He smiled. "There are other ways to catch and kill meat animals." He looked over at me with sharp, shrewd eyes, so unlike the dim, lustreless expression that had been his since the crash. "It seems to me you kids have done very well in solving your survival problems. How did you learn to cook the meat? And how did you build a fire?"

I showed him the flame-maker.

"Oh, yes," he said. "That's a real relic of the past. It's called a lighter. It was used a long time ago by people who smoked a dry weed called tobacco. When people began living in ever closer contact with each other, such smoking was outlawed. I bought that flame-making device on my last trip to a planet where there was plenty of unpolluted air and where people still smoked."

I thought it might be a good time while we were resting to show him the items we had brought—the three metal spears, the knife, the hatchet, even the compass.

He smiled at the last item. "I doubt if you find it works here in Iduna as it does on Earth. There, it always points north. Here, I suspect it will point toward the closest magnetic iron deposit. While we were orbiting before the landing, the instruments showed the planet had many areas rich with magnetic iron. It was one reason I was so willing to land here. Some day, it could be a source of great wealth to us."

I nodded toward the forest. "Tell me, father, what caused you to feel that there might be danger to us there?"

"Nothing definite, Peder. As I said, my sensitivity to danger is like a sixth sense. I can't explain it. Sometimes it plays me false and nothing happens. I hope that's the way it is here."

I picked up my bundle and part of Inga's. Father took up the rest of her load and his own. Sven and Bretta, tired beyond words, merely groaned as they lifted their smaller loads.

The forest, at least at this upper edge, was not quite as dense as it looked to us from above. There was even a kind of eerie feeling as we moved silently between the trees which seemed to soar far overhead, with

a thick canopy of leaves as much as twenty or thirty meters above us. The going was not easy and yet not impossible. The undergrowth was mostly sprawling fern-like plants. The long, trailing vines that hung from the lower branches of the trees did not hinder us, although we had continually to push them back away from our faces.

So far we had seen no animals since we had left the meadows above the forest. Occasionally we heard the faint thump of animal hooves as some creature ran from our approach.

Several times we came upon what looked like animal trails. As long as they went down toward the sea we would follow them. When they branched off, we would again plunge into the woods which had steadily become more dense. Water was our first need. Even if the sea was salty, we ought to be able to find a mountain stream entering it, by going along the open beach.

We made progress very slowly. Inga's ankle had swelled up again, and she hobbled painfully but bravely along with us. It seemed we stopped and rested more than we walked.

Actually it was mid-afternoon when we suddenly caught sight of the sea through the lower edge of the forest. We hurried the last few steps.

Again father held up his hand in warning. "Before we burst out into the open, I'd like to scout around a bit. Peder, you stay here with the others. I'll not go far."

In a few minutes he was back, a furrow on his forehead.

"I see only a fine sand beach and a few animals drinking the sea water which means it is not salty." He hesitated. "And yet I still have a strong feeling that something is not right."

He glanced around as I waited for his next words.

"I can't tell you what it is, Peder. My feeling right now is that we are being watched. I didn't see anything that looks dangerous. There's just that strange sense that there are eyes—many, many eyes—peering at us."

I looked around. I didn't have father's sense of danger. In my earlier contacts with the tusked beast and also the water creature, I had had no

premonition. There had been no sixth-sense warning such as father was experiencing.

He peered around nervously. "I think we should stay close together. First we'll all go down to the water's edge. I know how thirsty you all are. If the animals are drinking it, I feel fairly sure it's safe for us too."

He went on—"Then I think we should make plans for the night. This small open glade, I suppose, is as good as any for us to stay in."

We had all dumped our bundles on the ground while he had been out scouting. He looked at them pensively. "I guess it's safe enough to leave the packs here while we get a drink. It will only be a few minutes. Walking through the sand with them could be very tiring. We're tired enough as it is."

After all the foreboding words father had used, we left the shelter of the trees for the open sand beach with considerable apprehension. As he had said, there were a number of the deer-like animals further down the beach drinking. Otherwise the shoreline was deserted.

Father drank first and told us he thought the water was safe. The whole time elapsed was probably less than ten minutes. That's what made what followed so mysterious—

Coming back to our pack loads, we found them all open, the contents spread out as though for inspection. Not a creature was in sight. And yet there were our things—completely uncovered.

A quick check showed nothing missing. What really shook us was that in those few minutes while we were at the water's edge, our belongings had been pawed over by creatures unknown.

"You were right, father," I said. "Apparently we *are* being watched. What should we do?"

"Nothing. Somehow I get the feeling it's the work of mischievous monkeys or monkey-like animals. It's hard to tell. So far we haven't had any sight of such creatures. If that is the type they are, we'll have to keep a sharp watch to see that nothing is stolen. On the other hand, monkey-like creatures usually don't present much of a threat. That is, of course, if that is what they are."

"Could they be a kind of sub-human?" Inga asked.

"Yes, my dear," father replied. "And from what I have seen of sub-humans on some of the planets I have visited, they could be very unwelcome. The nearer they come to the Earth-type human level, the more dangerous they are."

"Dangerous?" I asked.

"Very often. You just never know what they are thinking. That's if they really have rational thoughts at all."

There was a grimness to his expression that I had rarely seen there.

"Peder," he said, "I suggest you take the two young ones and look for all the dry branches and pieces of wood you can find close by. Don't go more than a step or two into the jungle growth. The three of you must stay together. And take one of your spears."

With a worried look, he peered around at the dark forest that all but surrounded us. "We'll stay here tonight. It's too late to start looking for any better place. We'll simply have to depend upon keeping a good fire going all night."

"I'm hungry," Bretta piped up.

Inga took her little sister in her arms. "We are all hungry and tired, my dear. Help Peder and Sven get some wood. Then we'll eat."

Father motioned to me. "Off with you, Peder. Let's get that fire started before it gets dark."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Father and I took turns all through the night to replenish the wood on the fire. We heard nothing. We saw nothing.

Some time before dawn Inga woke up and said she'd take over. I stumbled over to the blanket she had just left and was instantly asleep.

The next I knew, Inga was shaking my shoulder. I started to jump up. She held me back, with a finger at my lips to keep me quiet.

"Listen!" she whispered to me.

Still half asleep I could hear nothing strange or different. At the most it was possibly the sigh of a breeze in the trees. Then I realized that it couldn't be a wind sound. There was a kind of pattern to it.

"It started a few minutes ago," she murmured. "It was very soft at first. It's like a lot of people humming."

Now fully awake, I strained my ears to hear. It was true. It did sound like a lot of people humming very softly. And it was all around us. No matter which way I turned my head, the humming seemed to be coming from all directions.

I glanced at the fire. It was blazing well. Inga had not let it die down.

"Wait here," I said quietly to my sister. I picked up one of the metal spears I had put next to me and strode over to the fire. The humming stopped. I realized at once that I had done a foolish thing. I had made myself visible. At the same time being next to the fire I could not see anything in the blackness that surrounded us.

I pretended to poke around in the fire and then went back to my blanket. Sitting there, with Inga close at my side, we waited in silence.

After a few minutes the humming began again, low at first and then stronger. After a time I found myself almost able to follow its strange pattern. I wasn't sure there was a central melodic theme. Nor could I distinguish any particular rhythm. But it was a kind of music—soft and calming and strangely pleasant.

I realized then that the sky had become markedly brighter. Looking between the few trees toward the sea, I saw the upper edge of Iduna's white sun just coming into view. As it climbed, so did the strange music that we had been hearing. Where before it had been almost formless, now the beat was strong and forceful. And the volume rose too until just as the sun made its final leap into the sky, it became almost a cacophony of sound.

Then, as though on signal, it all stopped. In its place, from all around us, came a series of whistle-like clicks. It was almost as if the singers were giving signals to each other. Then all was silent.

I jumped up and ran over to wake father. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. Inga and I tried to explain what we had heard.

He shook his head. "At least we came through the night. Music, you say? Let's take a positive view. Whoever or whatever these creatures are, it doesn't seem they mean us harm."

"Perhaps they are looking us over first," I said. "From the sound of the humming, I would say there were a large number of them."

"And you saw nothing?"

"Nothing, father. The fire made it difficult for us to make out objects in the darkness around us."

After Sven and Bretta had been awakened, and we had breakfasted, father had us pack up our things.

"Our first task today," he announced, "is to find a safe shelter."

Trudging along with him in the lead, we found that walking through sand was almost as tiring as climbing rocks. It took us until midday to cover ten or twelve kilometers. About this time, father pointed out a strange rock formation another hour's trek ahead of us.

"We'll rest now. And then we'll go that far and rest again," he said.

Three times we had waded through small rivulets that came tumbling down through the jungle growth from the mountains and emptied into the sea. Now, as we neared the huge rocks that blocked any further passage on the beach, we were faced with having to cross a fourth stream. This one, however, was deeper and wider.

Father pulled off his shoes and outer garments and said he wanted to test the water's depth. Slowly he walked out until he was neck deep. By this time he was nearly at the middle. He kept on going and was soon climbing again. He returned to us.

"I think Peder and possibly Inga can walk over. I know you can't swim, but I can. I'll walk Peder over first. He can carry his pack and hold it over his head. I'll be right next to him to steady him."

As father had said, none of the Evenson children had ever learned to swim. No one on Earth ever dared swim in the polluted rivers or lakes, or even the oceans. I knew that father had learned to swim during his visits to other worlds.

I was just about as tall as my father, and I felt reasonably confident that I could at least walk over as he had done. After removing my boots and outer clothing, I picked up my pack and let father lead me out into the stream.

It was not as easy as I had imagined. The movement of the water, while not as wild as the shallower streams we had waded earlier, still pulled at my body. At the halfway mark the water was lapping at my mouth. My arms ached from holding my pack high overhead.

Father, who had apparently noticed I was weakening, reached over and took my pack from me. Then he led me quickly up the far bank.

I looked at him with concern. "Inga' is not quite as tall as I am," I said. "She'll need help."

Without answering me, he strode back into the water. First he carried Bretta across on his shoulders. She squealed a bit at sight of the water swirling around them. But after father had put her down next to me, she was all smiles. Sven was next. Then he had Inga get up on his back so that her head was higher than his. They quickly made it across.

Since my pack was the only one brought over, father started to go back for the others. I put my hand on his arm. "You've done it all, father. I'm rested now. I know I can do it. Let me bring over the packs."

I could see he was relieved.

It was then, as I made the trips over and back, that I began to feel I was truly proving myself. I had a long way to go before I attained all the skills my father had. But as I dropped the last of the loads on the river bank where the others were resting, I felt I had made another step forward in my training to meet the problems and hazards of this new primitive life.

Father pointed at the rock formations in front of us. "Looks like a lava flow." He looked off toward a mountain peak fifteen or more kilometers inland. "And that is the culprit. What I hope is that we can find where the

lava, in boiling down toward the sea, has left hollows. What I'm looking for—at least temporarily—is a cave big enough for us to stay in."

We had climbed up part way on the huge mass of twisted, convoluted, solidified lava rock. Father went off to explore. The rest of us were glad to rest.

After about an hour father came back, his face beaming. Without saying anything, he had us climb down to the river bank again. Then he led us up the rather narrow stretch of land between the river and the lava ridge.

"This was originally a river bed," he explained.

"When the mountain exploded, the lava simply took the groove provided by the river bed and moved on down to the sea. Later the river reformed beside it.

He stopped and pointed. "And there in that mass of rock I have found just the place for us."

He led us around a short bend in the river to a small open space. Climbing up from that, eight or ten meters above the level of the ground, we saw where the lava flow had somehow been shunted aside by a natural rock formation. The lava had gone over and around it, leaving a large hollow space reached by a narrow opening.

Father looked at it with pride. "It's ideal," he said. "We can easily block up the opening and be as safe here as if we ourselves had built it for our protection. Rain can't reach us. We are well above the ground level. We have water at our doorstep. And all around us are animals that can give us unlimited meat supply. Also, I recognize the similarity of some of the fruits I have seen on the trees to those that used to thrive on Earth. In some of the open areas up near the mountains are fields of what I must assume are edible grains. I am no botanist, but I'm sure now that we will have food aplenty."

"Speaking of food," Inga spoke up, "we have none of the meat left. Unless you count the dozen food packages, and Peder has been insisting that we save them for an emergency."

"I agree with Peder," father said. "We might well need them in a true

emergency. Right now, I suggest that Inga and the young ones start to clear out the cave. Peder and I will go out looking for game. From the great numbers we have seen, it shouldn't take long."

He turned to me. "Peder, take one of your spears. The less we use the neurogun, the better I'll like it. Sooner or later we may have to resort entirely to your spears and such other weapons as we can devise ourselves."

Following father down the rough side of the lava flow, I was almost at the bottom when I saw him hold up his hand. He pointed.

There, at our feet, was a small deer-like creature. Its four feet had been lashed together with vines. It was struggling violently. We jumped down beside it. Both father and I peered around. There was nothing to be seen.

Father looked down at the poor creature, his expression one of amazed surprise. "Peder, what do you make of this?"

I smiled nervously. "It looks to me as if somebody likes us and knows what we need."

"Yes," father added. "On the other hand, it may be merely to fatten us up for the kill."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the days and weeks that followed, many strange, unexplainable things happened to us.

At least once a week a trussed-up, living animal was placed on the open space before our cave. Baskets, made of vines, were left filled with grain of several types. Even fish, quite different from the silvery ones we had originally found in the river near our space ship, were deposited for us.

Never once did we see the donors. But we often heard them. Their singing always came either just before dawn, or after the sun had set behind the range of mountains back of us.

We began to call them the 'Singing People.' It was a pleasant song they sang. And it just wasn't one song. It seemed that for all their sameness, the

songs were always different.

Father was as mystified as the rest of us. It was like nothing he had ever experienced on the various planets he had visited. After each 'concert,' he would shake his head and express his fears. "They seem to be friendly. But I don't like it. I wish we could see what they look like."

In the meantime, with practically all the food we needed coming so freely to us, we were able to devote time to other things. Father and I hacked out a series of steps leading up to our cave. We built a stone fireplace for cooking at the base of the steps. We lined the walls and the floor of the cave with the fronds of ferns that stayed fresh and green for a week or more before we had to replace them.

Father taught Inga how to prepare and cook the many items we now had to eat. He even found a hollow stone which he converted into a receptacle for grinding the grain. He helped her make a rough kind of bread. He showed her how to boil certain of the roots he found in the forest. These we learned were very tasty when cooked and mashed.

There were other things we found too. One was a berry patch in the jungle not far from us. And several groves of fruit trees.

Almost the first thing we discovered about our cave was that, by moving a pile of rocks that had fallen in the channel at the rear, we had a clear path to the other side of the old lava flow. This gave us both a front and a back entrance. Father said he liked that. "You never know when you might be attacked on one side and have to escape in the opposite direction."

Another advantage of this 'rear exit,' was that we didn't have to cross the deep stream in front of our cave to reach the beach. The children especially liked to scramble through the narrow tunnel and, after bursting out into the open, run like the little animals they were, to the water's edge.

We had been in the cave about a month when something strange happened on one of these beach forays. Sven was dashing off down the beach, his long blond hair waving around his head, his body almost as brown as the sand. Bretta was in the water, splashing around at near neck depth. I was standing in the shade of a tree possibly fifty paces back from the water watching the two youngsters.

Suddenly my heart almost stopped beating. Out in the water, headed directly for Bretta, was a boiling turbulence as some sea creature came rushing toward her.

As always I had my spear with me. But, at the rate the sea beast was coming in, I knew I could never reach Bretta in time to save her.

Yelling at the top of my voice, I tried to get her to come back to shore. Startled at my cry, she merely stood motionless, not knowing what I wanted of her.

Then, a weird thing happened. A sleek brown body suddenly appeared next to the little girl, lifted her up and carried her gently to where the water was only ankle deep. Then the creature turned and went like a flash to intercept the oncoming sea monster.

It all happened so quickly I received only the faintest of impressions of what the creature looked like that had saved my little sister. After I had grabbed her up and rushed her to shore, I looked seaward. There was still a wild, thrashing around as the two sea creatures fought their underwater battle. After only a minute or two more of it, I could see the wake of the sea beast headed at rapid speed for deeper water. There was no sign of the creature that had come to Bretta's rescue. Had it been killed? Or had it merely moved away after driving off its adversary?

Bretta was not crying. In fact she seemed hardly to realize what had happened.

"It was a 'good fish' that saved me," she said as I held her close.

"What kind of fish was it?"

"All soft and furry. I like it."

I put her down and again stared at the now unruffled sea. Had I finally seen one of our 'Singing People?' I didn't know. And yet I had a feeling that the creature that had saved Bretta was one of them. But a fish? That couldn't be. We had heard them singing where there was no water present.

Sven had come running up. "What happened?" he cried.

I looked down at his bright, intelligent face. "Have you ever seen a brown, furry creature in the water?"

"Lots of times," he said. "They are always there."

I shook my head in wonder. "And you never told us?"

"Sure I did, Peder. I told you I saw big fish."

I thought back. It was true. I remember Sven saying he had seen fish in the water. I had paid little attention to it. After all, I knew the sea had many fish in it. And frankly I had never thought of the 'Singing People' as fish.

When we got back to the cave, we told the whole story to father and Inga. We tried to get Bretta to tell what she had seen. But, at five, she simply did not have the words to describe the sea creature that had lifted her so gently and carried her to the safer, shallower water.

I, myself, felt ashamed that in the excitement of yelling to her to come back in, I had almost totally failed to see what the creature looked like. All I could say was that it was brown and seemed to have a furry skin and it had arm-like appendages that were capable of lifting Bretta. Also, I added, it certainly did not look like a fish.

It was agreed that from then on, I would stand guard at the very water's edge when the children were bathing. Too, father stated that he was starting the next day to teach us all to swim.

In the days that followed, we found that swimming was a lot of fun. Bretta and Sven took to it easily. I was a little slower in getting courage to go out beyond my depth. The one that really surprised us was Inga. Soon, I could see, she would excel us all, even father. Her smooth, white, sturdy body moved through the water as though it were her natural environment.

Although we kept a sharp eye peeled for our brown, furry friends, we could never see them. Sven and Bretta kept saying they saw them often. But it was always when they were a bit away from us. Usually too they didn't tell us until later.

The weather had stayed mild. We had three or four violent rainstorms with sharp, frightening flashes of lightning and tremendous crashes of

thunder. We merely stayed close to our cave and felt snug and safe.

One day father called me aside. "Have you noticed anything about the weather lately?"

"Yes, father. I was going to mention it. It's been getting colder."

"That's right, Peder. And I think we have to prepare for it. The winter season is probably not too long or too severe. But our cave is not heated. And the few blankets we brought with us won't be enough if it gets really cold."

I caught his meaning. "You think then we should go back to the ship and get more blankets and warmer clothes?"

He nodded. "The only thing that worries me is leaving Inga and the children alone for the five or six days it will take to go there and back."

"Have we any choice?" I asked.

"We'll leave them enough cooked food for a week. And tell them to stay close to the cave. They should be safe enough there."

"Safe enough?" I mumbled to myself as I turned away. "What is safe enough on this primitive planet?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After a day preparing supplies for those we were leaving in the cave, and for our trek across the mountains, we set out early in the morning.

By later afternoon of that day we had reached the ledge where we had sought shelter on our first crossing. It was here that father's mind had returned to him. It was here too that I had felt we had reached the turning point in our struggle for survival.

In the last light of the day, father and I stood at the top of the pass where we could look out over the rain forest and the sea in one direction. In the other were the wide savannahs and the scattered groves of smaller trees.

Looking out over the scene, again I felt a rising sense of pride and well

being. This was *our* world. We had met and faced danger after danger, and so far had won out.

Father pointed out to me that in our descent toward the ship, it would be all new to him. "To think that you four youngsters, with no training in survival techniques, were able to manage as well as you did— it makes me very proud of you."

That night we huddled together on the ledge. Father admitted that we had not used our best judgment by stopping there. "Here we are high in the mountains. It's colder. And we are exposed to the wind. On the return trip, we must plan to reach here at midday."

It was too dark for us to try to make our way down the rubble of rocks that covered the side of the mountain. There was no fuel available for a fire. We simply huddled together and tried to keep each other warm.

In the morning we were more tired than we had been the evening before. Silently we ate some of the food we had brought with us. As soon as the sun was high enough for us to trace a safe path down, we set out, hopeful that the exercise would get us warm again.

By midday we had covered more than half the distance to the site of the space ship. We stopped to rest and have a quick lunch. By late afternoon we were approaching the river that separated us from the swamp. Father was surprised when I told him how we had crossed over the natural rock dam. Even now, with just the two of us, we found it a challenge.

"Before we go any further," I cautioned, "I think we should scout around to see if one of those land monsters is in the swamp feeding. The neurogun saved me once. I don't want to risk it again."

Keeping low we moved through the long tendrils of the swamp plants. Every once in awhile I lifted my head to peer around. Apparently none of the tusked beasts was there.

Coming up toward the front of the ship, father stopped and stared. "And I lived through that!" Then he shook his head. "But your mother didn't."

I pointed at the pile of debris we had heaped up over where I had buried her. "That is her grave," I said.

I went on ahead, leaving him for a moment next to the burial spot.

I heard a shout. He was running toward me. Then I saw it—one of the huge two-ton tusked monsters was charging him. In our stopping to stare at the ship and the brief hesitation at mother's grave, we had somehow missed seeing the huge beast, probably largely hidden in the tall vegetation.

I could see that my father would never be able to reach the rear panel door in time. I yelled for him to climb up the wreckage at the front. He must have heard me, for he veered to his right and gave a mighty leap up the twisted metallic side.

I was close enough to the panel door to jump and pull myself up. I had to drop my spear. The open doorway was more important.

Open doorway! I remembered that I had secured the door, backed up by sheets of metal when we left. Now it was open!

I peered around the dim interior. I could see nothing menacing in view. And yet something had pulled my barrier aside and opened the door.

I looked out below. The monster had raced up, stomped on my fallen spear a few times, and then in frustration and rage had run wildly back into the swamp toward its forest home.

I jumped down to the ground, picked up my spear, and went around to the front. Father was crouched at the uppermost part of the wreckage. I climbed up next to him.

"So that was the beast you spoke of?" he remarked grimly. "I have seen bigger animals on some of the planets I've visited. But I don't think I have ever seen a more vicious, evil-tempered beast than this." He turned to me. "Is it safe to go down now?"

I smiled. "We don't need to. By working our way through the wreckage in the control room, we can go through the door to the cabin."

"As easy as that?"

"But we must be careful," I added. "When we left here, I had tightly closed the cabin door. It's open now. Something opened it. And whatever

it is may still be in there. Not any of the big animals. They couldn't get up and through that doorway. I just think we should be careful."

Father pulled out the neurogun and motioned for me to lead the way.

At the bulkhead door connecting the control room with the cabin, we paused. Slowly I opened it. I yelled loudly, hoping whatever was there would be frightened into showing itself.

Suddenly out of the corner of my eye I saw a swiftly darting figure. Before I could even cry out to father, it was through the outer panel doorway and gone. We rushed over and looked out. Nothing could be seen although I thought I saw motion in the tall plants in the swamp.

"Well," I said with a forced laugh, "whatever it was acts more frightened of us than we are of it. Or maybe that's not right. I admit I'm frightened."

"Did you get a good look at it?" father asked.

"Not a good look. In the dimness all I could see that it was about our size. It was upright. One more thing —it looked a little like the water creature that rescued Bretta."

"I suppose that's a good possibility. But I thought then you called it a kind of fish. Fish don't stand upright. And they usually don't leave the water."

"Don't ask me to explain it. All I know is that I saw something dash across the cabin and leap out of the doorway to the ground below. It certainly didn't act like a fish."

Father looked around at the cabin. "I suppose the first thing we should do is make sure no more of the creatures are still here. Also what damage they might have done, if any."

We spent the last remaining light of the day checking over the cabin. Things had been disturbed. But we could find no damage. Nor, as far as I could recall of what we had left in the cabin, was anything missing.

After refastening the door to outside and bolting the door to the control section, we felt reasonably safe for the night. Exhausted from the long

walk, and tired from having little sleep the night before, we piled blankets below and above us and slept in our old sleeping pods.

During the night I lay half awake. Whether it was a dream or not, I thought I heard the faint sound of the Singing People. Only it wasn't pleasant. It was harsh and somehow threatening. Whether I really heard it or not, I didn't stay awake very long to find out.

In the morning, we went through all the things we thought we could use. We put on an extra set of our clothing and made up packs of needed items for Inga and the children. I had hoped we could take several pieces of sheet metal, but found they would be too awkward to carry. Just the bulkiness of the clothing and the extra blankets was about all we could manage.

It was mid-morning by the time we had finished packing. Father said he wanted a few minutes alone at mother's grave. He asked if I would stand watch for him.

Perched on the wrecked front section of the ship, I kept my eyes peeled for anything that might be moving out of the forest or in the swamp. I saw no sign of the monsters. Nor of the brown, furry creature that had so quickly left the cabin. A real mystery—that!

After our long sleep in our old familiar pods, both father and I felt a new sense of elation over obtaining what we had come for. We both felt sure that with these extra supplies, the Evenson family would be able to challenge whatever icy blasts the planet would offer.

Traversing the natural rock dam away from the ship, I pointed out the ocean next to us. "Somewhere out there is our supply section. As you must have realized, it fell off when the ship was gyrating so wildly during the crash landing."

"That was the most horrifying moment of my life," father murmured. "All I could think of was how to reach land. I knew that if we landed in the water, we had no chance at all."

"I wonder, father, if this body of water joins up with the sea across the mountains?"

Father slipped his pack down on the ground and strode to the water's

edge. He reached down and cupped some of the water in his hands. He sipped at it.

"This is strange. This tastes salty. The water in the other sea is completely without a salt taste. From that I would say the two bodies of water are not linked together. Possibly what we have here is a true ocean, old enough to have become salty through the ages. What we might have beyond the mountains is a newer fresh water lake. It's hard to tell. Anyway it answers one question I've been asking myself—our need for salt. If this sea is salty, then there is salt somewhere on the planet. We need salt. Sooner or later, we'll either have to find a salt deposit. Or we'll have to come back here and get the salt out of the water."

"Can we do that?"

"It's not easy, Peder. We'll have to build a settling pond and let the sun evaporate the water, leaving salt remains. It is a long tedious process and ends up with a very poor grade of salt. I hope we don't have to do it."

As we strode along, father and I kept our eyes open for any possible dangers. All we saw, however, were herds of the shy, deer-like creatures that moved away from us as we approached.

By late afternoon we could see that we had nearly reached the rock-filled foothills of the mountains. We had no wish to spend another night on the wind-swept ledge at the top of the pass. With all the bedding and clothing we were carrying, we had no fear that we would be too cool.

"How about a fire tonight?" I asked.

Father looked around. "We're in a well-sheltered spot here. So far we haven't seen anything very dangerous. We should be safe enough without a fire."

"I'd feel better having one," I said, a little ashamed of my temerity.

He peered at me. "You are right, of course, Peder. After all that you've been through, apparently you have learned your lesson well. We'll have a fire. And we'll take three hour turns. I'll take the first."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

During the night I awoke. Something brought me out of sound sleep. I looked over at the dying fire. Next to it was my father slumped over asleep. I got slowly to my feet.

I put more pieces of wood on the fire. It blazed up immediately so that I had a better look at my father.

But he wasn't asleep! He was dead!

Or so it seemed. He lay, sprawled at an awkward angle, just beyond the fire. I rushed over to him and lifted his head. Below was a small pool of blood. He stirred in my arms and groaned. At least he was alive.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me. For a moment I thought he was in a coma like the one before. But his expression cleared, and he mumbled half-coherently—"What happened?"

"You're hurt," I said to him. "Lie still. I'll wash off the wound and see what I can do."

A few minutes later I had cleaned the place where he had been struck. Blood was still oozing out slowly. I tore off a strip from a piece of cloth in my pack and wrapped it around his head. It was all I could do.

For the rest of the night I sat next to him, the neurogun in my left hand, the spear in my right. The only time I left him was to get more wood for the fire.

It was like a death watch. As I kept peering around at every sound, fancied or real, I wondered if father would be alive when morning came. It was a long night. After almost losing father in the crash landing and then getting him back, it seemed ironic if we should lose him now.

At first, when he was in his coma, we four youngsters had struggled through, more by good luck than anything else. Later, when he was recovered, we realized how much we needed his knowledge and experience. It had certainly taken a great weight off my shoulders. I dreaded to think of what it would mean to us if he left us again. I now knew how desperately we needed him.

Then, just before dawn, came the singing...

It was not a pleasant sound. There was anger in it. And an only half-suppressed feeling of hatred. I could sense it. And it sent shivers of fear down my back. Someone or something had attacked father. It had to be the "Singing People." But why had they changed? What had we done to make them hate us now?

They had seemed so friendly. One of them had saved Bretta from the sea monster. They had left food for us. Never once had they shown any sign that they were either afraid of us or that they disliked us.

When daylight came, I had a chance to examine father's wound. It was obvious that he had been hit on the head with a heavy stone lying next to him. The bandage was blood-soaked, but the seepage had stopped.

While I was trying to pull him back a bit further from the fire, he opened his eyes. He tried to sit up.

"It's better if you lie still," I said. "You've been hit on the head."

"How bad is it?"

"We'll know in a day or two. Right now the bleeding has stopped."

"A day or two!" he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. "We have to get back. Inga and the youngsters will be worried."

"I'm more worried about you. Tell me, father, do you remember what happened?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. I remember I had just got up to get some more wood for the fire. After that — nothing. Did you see anything, Peder?"

"I didn't see anything. But I must have heard something because I did wake up rather suddenly. This morning, however, just before dawn, the singing began. But it was different than before. It seemed... well, almost evil."

Father struggled to his knees. But the effort was too much for him. He sank back.

"Again, my son, the problem becomes yours. I'm sorry."

"Well get out of this all right," I said, realizing how filled with despair he must be. "Right now we've got to give you time to get back some of your strength. Then, we have to decide whether to go back to the ship or to try the mountain pass. Going back would be the easiest."

"But the children—they will be frantic."

"The first task, father, is to get you back on your feet. I have great faith in Inga. She'll manage."

"But if the Singing People have turned against us, she and the youngsters could be in great danger."

"That's true, father. We've got to hope that they will be safe until we get back. And for us to get back, you have to be on your feet again."

Father looked up at me. "Why don't you leave me here, Peder? Then you can hurry over the mountain ridge and get to the children."

"Leave you? I'll not do it." I shook my head vigorously. "Right now I'm going to give you something to eat and some water. Then I want you to rest."

He had shown me earlier how to use chunks of meat, mixed with some of the grain seeds we had gathered along the way, to make a thick, nourishing stew. I had to find some boulders to hold the metal pot. By the time the stew was ready, he was almost asleep again.

After eating, he did drift off into a deep sleep.

All day I watched over him. There was enough usable wood for our fire in the grove so that I was always in sight of him. I admit I was disheartened and worried.

For one thing I dreaded the night ahead. The Singing People, so far, had only made their presence known in darkness. Would I be alert enough to stand watch by myself for the entire night?

In mid-afternoon, father sat up. He groaned a bit, but he did seem better.

"Listen, son. You'd better get some sleep. How good I'll be tonight is a

question. I'm awake enough now to keep watch until dark at least.

I heated the rest of the stew and we ate part of that. I was glad to curl up under the extra blankets and go to sleep.

It was dark when I awoke with a start.

"It's all right, Peder," father's voice came out of the shadows to reassure me. "Nothing's happened. I feel a lot better. Maybe tomorrow I'll be strong enough to try the mountain pass. That stew has real punch in it." The struggle to keep awake during the night was sometimes almost more than I could handle. Finding myself drifting off, I would jump up, swing my arms, take a drink of cold water, and even run around the fire a few times.

As dawn approached, I became more and more tense. If the Singing People were to strike again, I figured it would probably be then. Several times I thought I saw brown, furry creatures leaping around just beyond reach of the light from the fire. I was never sure. It was all so weird, so eerie, so unreal.

Although I never was quite sure I saw anything in the flickering firelight, there was no doubt that I heard singing in that hour or so before daybreak.

I listened, partly in fear and partly in awe. It was beautiful and yet horrifying at the same time. Was this the language of the Singing People? Did they communicate with each other in this strange musical manner?

Father had often told me of the many unusual way primitive beings on the far-flung planets of our galactic system talked to each other. Some had highly complicated languages, far more advanced than any Earthly method of speech. Some used telepathy. Some used a kind of sound code, thumping out their symbols with stamping feet or taps on the body. Most of the more primitive ones started out with grunts or squeals, and only developed over thousands of generations, as the human race had done, into using more sophisticated word symbols.

But singing? I couldn't remember that he had ever told us of any race using song as a method of conversational communication.

Then, suddenly, as before, the singing stopped. Immediately the air was filled with shrill little whistling sounds.

Could it be, I thought, that the singing was merely entertainment or just for the joy of singing... and that the 'talking' was this unearthly whistling at the end?

At first light, all sounds stopped. I got up to put some more wood on the fire, relieved that nothing disastrous had happened during the night. I glanced over at father. His eyes were open and he was smiling, a bit weakly perhaps, but smiling nevertheless.

"Were you awake during the singing?" I asked him.

"Yes, and for the whistling too."

"What do you make of it? Is it the way they have of talking with each other?"

"Very likely. They probably have a quite different set of vocal chords than we have. Animals have many ways of 'talking.' Dogs bark. Birds chirp. Snakes hiss. Lions roar. Cats purr. Even whales and porpoises, I understand, made a kind of whistle somewhat like we just heard. At least that's what the history tapes tell us how Earth animals expressed themselves before they became extinct."

"Did they have to become extinct, father?"

"That's a good question, Peder. But I guess when Earth's population reached a point where there was no more room for animals, they had to go."

"I should have liked to hear a lion roar," I sighed.

Father laughed. "From stories told about those olden times, some of the animals were very dangerous. Like your tusked beast that lives in the swamp near our ship. I don't believe we'll find any lions on this planet. But from what I've seen so far—and heard—I suspect we have plenty of wild life to contend with, my boy."

I checked the bandage on his head. The bleeding had stopped completely.

"My head is still throbbing," he said in reply to my question how he felt. "But I want to move on today. I'm sure I can."

Again I heated the stew and we gulped down all that was left.

"Which will it be?" I asked, "—back to the ship or up the mountain? It's up to you, father. You know how much strength you have."

"If we take it slow and easy, I'd rather try for the pass. The quicker we get to the children, the better I'll feel about it."

As we started out, my first task was to convince him to leave most of his pack in a tree near where we had spent the night. Unencumbered, he had a much better chance of being able to make the rough climb. He didn't offer much objection to my suggestion.

We went slowly, stopping every four or five minutes to give him a chance to rest. I helped him all I could. I could see the strain was telling on him. What would have taken me possibly three hours to do alone, took us nearly three times that length of time. We both were exhausted when we reached our twice-used ledge near the pass.

He said he was too tired to eat anything. At any rate he offered no objection when I made up a bed for him in the ledge shelter using all the material I had carried back from the ship. He went right to sleep.

It was still only mid-afternoon. After estimating the time until nightfall, I decided I had just enough left of daylight to rush down to where we had left father's pack and bring it back up. Going down would take perhaps an hour. Coming back I might have a little darkness at the end. Tired as I was, I felt it was worth the risk. We needed those items.

After assuring myself that father was comfortable and warmly covered, I set off in a made scramble down the mountain side. Fortunately I had a pretty good idea of the best course to take.

At the bottom I jogged toward the grove where we had spent the night, hoping I had not misjudged the length of time it would take for my return. Even though I now had taken that rocky course three times, I knew it would be treacherous in the dark. And too going back up I would have father's pack to slow me down.

Before entering the grove I glanced around. I felt of the neurogun in my pocket. I didn't expect trouble, but the gun gave me a feeling of safety.

Coming to the tree where I had cached father's pack, I stopped in surprise. Nothing was there! The pack was gone!

I ran around the grove. No, this was the right tree. I had marked it well in my mind.

But the pack was gone! There were still more blankets back on the ship. But getting them, I realized, was more of a problem than we had originally bargained for.

Someone or something had taken the pack. The Singing People? If so, it was another mark against them. More than that, it showed even more clearly their new malevolence toward us humans.

I started back to the ledge with heavy heart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was completely dark when I reached the ledge where I had left father. For the last half hour I had had to feel my way. But reach the ledge I did, tired and discouraged.

As I crawled the last few steps, I even had a horrible sinking feeling that I would find father missing or dead... that with all the troubles we had been having, it would not be too surprising.

But he was there. He must have heard me coming, for he called out. Scrambling in next to him, I told him the bad news. I said that we'd have to go on to our cave now, but that later, after he felt up to it, we could make another trip to the ship.

"No need," he replied. "You and I, Peder, are going to do something that even the most ignorant savages did for themselves to keep warm. From now on, we are going to keep the hides of animals we kill. I think I know how to treat them so they will be usable as clothing. Back on the ship I found several steel needles and a ball of extra strong thread. You and Inga and I will simply make our own clothing. Yes, and our bed covers too. Even hangings to cover the entrances to our cave."

"You mean, father, that we can use animal bides as clothing?"

"I'm ashamed I didn't think of it before. A subhuman primitive would have thought of it. All of which shows that a so-called civilized person isn't as smart as he thinks he is. Right now I think we should get a good night's sleep."

"How about my standing watch?" I asked.

"No, my boy, you've been on that mountain climb twice today. I don't really believe there's much danger for us up here. Except from the cold. I suggest we sleep together, using all the bedding material you brought from the ship. If there is to be danger, it will come just before dawn. At least that seems to be the pattern. I'll try to wake up and keep watch just before it gets light."

"What if you don't wake up?"

"I used to be able to set a kind of mental alarm in my head to wake up at a certain time. Perhaps I can do it again."

I was too tired to argue. Gratefully I curled up next to him. The next I knew he was shaking my shoulder gently with a hand over my mouth. Even half asleep as I was I could hear the singing—as weirdly haunting as ever, with its odd unmelodic melody and its no-beat rhythm.

"They are just outside," father whispered to me.

Slowly, trying to make as little noise as possible, I groped around for my spear. Pointing it out in front of me, I moved cautiously along the narrow ledge. The singing seemed to be coming more from below me than above. The air was absolutely still. Since Iduna had no moon satellites, there was no night light to see anything. I swung my metal rod in a wide sweep hoping to clear the ledge of the creatures if any had come that far. From the sound of the singing that came to me, I sensed that they were not that close.

Suddenly the singing stopped and the whistling began.

I heard a rattle of stones. The next instant, a fist-sized rock hit me on the shoulder. Protected by the double thickness of clothing, I was not hurt.

I dodged back under the protection of the overhanging ledge. Listening, I could hear the whistling, punctuated by the landing of a veritable

bombardment of stones. Shielded by the roof over the ledge and the rock formations at the sides, none of the rocks reached us except for a few that rolled in harmlessly. In a few minutes it was over and all was silent.

"Daybreak is not far off," father said. "I think we should stay back as far as we can in this shelter until light comes."

We sat, huddled together, tense and as ready as we could be for an attack if it came.

"What I can't understand," father said when it was light enough for us to start packing up our belongings, "is what they hope to accomplish by these rather futile attacks. It almost looks as if they are more anxious to scare us away than actually harm us."

"I don't know about that," I replied. "If one of those rocks had hit me in the head, I'd be harmed, badly harmed. And that blow you got—it could have killed you. It merely seems to me they really want to do us harm but are inept at it. Or possibly they realize we are strange to them and are being cautious."

My mind was in a turmoil of concern as I assisted father up to the top of the pass. I looked back but could see nothing of our attackers. Either the creatures had made very rapid time getting down to the bottom of the mountains, or they were still hiding behind the many huge boulders that covered the area.

The trip down was easier for father although I could see he was far from normal. Several times I insisted that we stop for a rest.

All we had to eat were a few pieces of fruit and a handful of berries we found in the jungle when we reached it. Toward midday, father refused to stop for a rest.

"It's not much further," he said. "I'm very worried about the safety of the children. There is no reason now to save my strength. Let's keep on."

I could see there was no use arguing with him. I too felt a growing concern. It may have been my weariness, or it may have been some arcane part of my human heritage, some atavistic sixth sense that made me agree with him to speed ahead as fast as we could and as tired as we were.

It was late afternoon when we reached the river in front of our cave. I called out. There was no response. Actually anyone in the cave was unlikely to hear such a call.

Father and I removed our clothes to get through the neck-deep water. After I had helped him over, I went back for my pack and our clothes. Dressing as fast as we could, we hurried to the entrance to the cave.

Still no sign of Inga and the children.

We climbed the rock steps, we had made and plunged into the rock hollow that had become our home. The place was empty!

Father and I looked at each other in despair. I motioned toward the narrow channel that led through the lava flow to the other side.

With dread, we made our way along the tunnel-like passageway. Our worst fears were being realized!

Just before we turned the last twist in the channel, I called out—"Inga, are you there!"

At once came the answer—"You're back. Oh, you're back!"

We hurried forward. There, just inside the back narrow entrance to the cave were Inga and Sven. Inga was holding one of my spears.

With a sob she threw herself into her father's arms. "Oh, father, they got her!"

"Bretta?" I cried out in horror. "You mean that Bretta is gone?"

This was the most hysterical I had ever seen my sister. She was sobbing on father's shoulder, unable to say a word.

I peered down at my little brother. "Tell me, Sven, what happened?"

He shook his head, his eyes wide with concern. "I don't know, Peder. Bretta is gone. We don't know where she is."

A few minutes later, after we had returned to the main part of the cave, Inga told us what she knew.

During the afternoon, she and Bretta and Sven had gone out to refill the water bags in the stream. Sven was helping her lower the bags into the water. Bretta was not more than a dozen steps away on the edge of the river. She said she heard Bretta cry out. She turned just in time to see the five-year old youngster moving down the surface of the water as though carried by some underwater creature. In seconds the girl was out of sight around the bend in the river.

Although she and Sven ran as fast as they could, they never caught sight of her after that.

At this point in the story, she seemed to notice for the first time the bandage around father's head.

"You're hurt!" she cried.

"Yes, Inga," he said with a deeply concerned look on his face. "It seems the Singing People—if that's the right name to give them—have turned against us. We had nothing but trouble on our trip. And now this— Bretta gone!"

"Isn't she coming back?" Sven spoke up.

"We hope so, son," father said sadly. "We certainly hope so."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

That winter was a desolate and unhappy period for what was left of the Evenson family. With mother dead in the crash, and Bretta stolen from us, there were now only the four of us. Sven, especially, was heartbroken at not having his sister to play with.

Although Father and I searched up and down the river, and as far as we could in a half day's march each way on the beach, we found no trace of our youngest member. Whatever had happened to her remained a mystery.

We simply could not believe that she had accidentally fallen into the water and drowned. She had become too good a swimmer for that. Too, Inga and Sven both insisted that she seemed to be carried along the *surface* of the water. They used the word 'carried' every time they

described it. The only explanation we could come up with was that some underwater creature had taken her from us. Possibly, in fact most probably, one of the Singing People.

Oddly enough, at least once a week, we still found one of the deer-like animals trussed up in front of our cave entrance. Also, when the cooler weather brought an end to our supply of fruits and berries, we kept finding baskets of grain and roots obviously laid out for our use.

All this was very mystifying. If the Singing People had turned on us, why did they keep doing these good deeds?

One thing we got started on quickly. Father took all the animal skins we had previously discarded and brought them to the cave. He admitted he knew very little about treating the hides to preserve them. He said he expected they would rot away when warm weather returned.

After he had done what treating he could, the next problem was to clean them and make them reasonably pliable. However, after we had cut and sewn them into garments, there was no doubt about how warm they kept us.

Two other items father showed us how to make. Out of animal tallow, he was able to make oil for shallow lamps. These gave us a bit of light in the cave.

The other even more important development was his showing us how to make bows and arrows, and how to shoot the arrows to get game. The bows we made out of a special wood father had discovered in the forest.

Then, as the weather grew really cold, the mysterious gifts of animals and food stopped altogether. This made it even more necessary for us to get our own game.

After we had made a half dozen bows and possibly a hundred or more arrows, father had Inga and me practise shooting with the queer, primitive weapons. It wasn't long before I began to see their worth. I still carried my spear with me, but it was the bow I used most often.

The big weakness of our cave was that we had no way to heat it. A fire any place in its length would simply smoke us out. The tallow lamps were bad enough. To keep the worst of the cold out, we used the excess skins to

block the two entrances. With our fur-lined garments we were reasonably comfortable.

Twice during the winter we had a light covering of snow. Looking out on the desolate white scene, we could not help but think of Bretta and wonder if she were warm and safe... or even alive.

With little to do beside making arrows, and working on the animal hides to make them flexible, we would sit in the shelter of our cave in the dim lamp light and listen to father for hours telling of his adventures. What interested us most was when he talked about why he had wanted to leave Earth and take us on this voyage to an uncharted world.

"To me," he would say, "life on Earth had become unbearable. I had seen enough of what life could really be like in my trips to other planets. Some were at the stage where Earth was only a few centuries ago—with unpolluted air, unpolluted water, room to move about and enjoy the gift of nature's many bounties."

"Like we have here on Iduna?" Inga asked.

"Yes, my dear. Only when I brought you here, I had no idea we would be up against so many obstacles. Nature is that way. It can be a friend. Or it can be an enemy. To early Earth pioneers who came to the 'new world' of the western hemisphere in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they must have found something of the same kind of struggle for survival that we are experiencing."

"The history tapes tell that they won out in the end," I said. "Why can't we do the same?"

"We will, Peder. It will take time. Only I'm not so sure I want to 'win out' here on Iduna as they did on Earth."

"The pollution?"

"Yes, son. With victory in conquering nature, the human race found there were few forces left to hold down the growth of population. When a solution was found to end wars, when medical science discovered how to halt death-bringing diseases, when poverty was eliminated and crime truly abolished, the number of people all over the globe simply exploded. A shortage of food would have stopped the growth. The development of the

artificial food packages avoided that threat."

"You mean that with no shortage of food, there need be no shortage of babies?"

"That's right, Peder. The amazing thing about it was that what went into the food packages is chemically prepared in underground factories. These factories were set up over two centuries ago, using computers to control the operations. The raw materials come from the air, the soil, and especially out of the sea."

"Aren't they all polluted?"

"Chemically treated, the nutrients are free of their original taint. I suppose the supply is unlimited. Anyway, for more than two centuries humans all over Earth have had packaged food meals channeled into their homes freely and without effort. Clothing too has been provided as needed. As you'll remember, youngsters, you merely had to punch out a ticket with the specifications and within hours what you asked for was there."

"Yes, I remember," Inga said. "And they fit better than these smelly skin garments we are making for ourselves."

"But, Inga, can you imagine going through a winter in an unheated cave with only Earth clothing to keep you warm?"

"In our apartment the temperature was always the same," I added.

"That's right. That too was one of the many things I despised about life on Earth. Our primitive ancestors had to suffer extremes of cold and heat. Only the strong and tough survived. I guess I still have enough of my pioneer grandfather, twenty times removed, to feel I need the challenge of changing temperatures. In my trips to other worlds, I delighted in experiencing whatever climates they had to offer. Some were very hot. Others extremely cold."

"Is that the main reason you wanted to leave Earth, father?"

"No, son. There were a lot of reasons. After all the struggle we have had here on Iduna, you might even wish you were back on safe and sound Earth where everything is always the same. It's that sameness that frightened me. There was no incentive to climb out of the common mold."

People accepted the easy way. Free food. Free clothes. Free living quarters. Free temperature control. Free education. Free entertainment. To most people that seemed the perfect life, completely free of problems."

"You say 'most.' Did any of them refuse to accept that way of life?"

"Of course. At first, especially, there were many who resisted the so-called bountiful life. Some were able to be assigned minor maintenance tasks keeping the machines operating. Even a few hours of honest work a week helps to keep a restless person from going mad."

"What happened to those who were not given such tasks? Did they actually go mad?"

"Who knows? Usually they just disappeared. I would guess, Peder, that they suffered madness in one form or another. One thing I am sure of. Wherever they were sent—to hospitals or to their death—they were not allowed to have children. Thus, that type of madness was not being passed on to the next generation. At least the first great wave of insanity has lessened. But it definitely has not ended."

"I always thought," Inga said, "that your big fear was that the whole human race was headed for universal madness."

"I still think so. Maybe not the whole race. Possibly only half. But can you imagine what life would be like on a super-crowded planet with half the people sane and the other half insane? No, children, it's not the kind of world I wanted you to grow up in."

We had found a sheltered spot in the lava flow where we managed to keep a fire going day and night. Going after wood got us out into the open. After sitting in the dark cave, it was always with a sense of bodily freedom that I went along with father on those wood foraging trips. I began to see what he meant by the challenge of temperature changes. I liked the warmth of the fire. I also liked the stimulating bite of the cold air on my cheeks.

One evening, father brought up the subject of his early married life with mother.

"I fell in love with Iduna the first time I saw her. She wasn't like the meek, spiritless, apathetic girls I had seen up until then. At that time I

was just having my first success as a designer of warp-type engines for space travel. Although the sciences had fallen into a low state, there were a few men in the government who gave me backing. Most of them probably were like me—unhappy with the regimented life they had to live even as top executives, and willing to encourage space travel. I'm sure that some of them secretly hoped that they could follow me to the stars.

"As a reward for my services, I was allowed to design and build the ship we used to come here. Privately, the deal was that if I found an uninhabited but livable planet, I was to send back a code message. Some of those men wanted to escape from Earth just as much as I did. I can tell you this now because the sending equipment was destroyed in the crash."

"Then we are truly marooned here for all time?" Inga asked.

"It isn't the way I intended it to be. I certainly would not want to keep you children from fulfilling your duty as future parents yourselves."

"You used the word 'duty,' father."

"That's the way they look on it back on Earth. With the food problems solved, there were no brakes put on making babies."

"I wouldn't want to consider it a duty," Inga said. "I think I would like to have my own children some day. But if we are marooned here and never again see any other persons, I'm not going to let it crush my spirit. I can help bring up Sven. Right now he's my baby."

"I feel very much the same way, father," I said. "I have assumed that I would some day meet a girl I liked and we would mate and have children. But if it is not to be, it is not to be. I intend to make a good life here on Iduna."

"I'm proud of you both," father said. "And you, Sven, we haven't asked your opinion. What do you think about it?"

"About what, father?"

"About having babies."

In the cave's darkness there was a long moment of silence. Then his treble voice spoke up. "Babies cry a lot, don't they? I don't like crying

babies."

And that, I felt, settled that.

On the following night of pre-sleep talk, the discussion was continued with father talking about his growing concern over the meek acceptance by people on Earth of their forced way of life.

"One of the greatest losses," he said, "in this general willingness to accept a controlled existence is the decline in religious worship."

This, I knew, was a subject our parents felt strongly about but rarely discussed. They had started to teach Inga and me the principles of their religious beliefs. This was contrary to generally accepted family custom. There were no laws to prevent the teaching of a belief, nor the following of any religious tenets. It just wasn't done. There was no place in the way family lives were being conducted for a religious training. True, mother had often read passages from an old-fashioned book made of paper. She called it a Bible. She taught us a few hymns. She even had us repeat after her what she said were prayers before we went to sleep.

Looking back on it now, I can see how frustrating it must have been for her. There were no churches to attend, no groups of people interested in worshipping together. The hologram material that was piped into our tiny apartment, if it covered the subject at all, invariably made fun of religious worship as an offshoot of primitive superstition. By the time Inga and I had reached our teens, she could see how confused we were becoming and gradually gave up on it.

I reminded father of this. I told him—"Mother did her best to teach us about religion. I'm sorry now I didn't understand what she was trying to do. It was once a great force in directing human progress, wasn't it, father?"

"Yes, Peder. The history tapes have more or less avoided playing it up. But I can tell you truthfully that without religion, it is doubtful if mankind could have climbed up at the rate it did out of the stone age and later. It was religion that provided the spark that set fire to man's ambitions to be something more than a savage beast."

"Then religion is not just a lot of foolish superstitious nonsense, as we were always told?"

"No indeed, Peder. Of course a lot of evil things were done in the name of religion. But, by and large, for every step backward that the wrong types of religions had us take, we took two steps forward with the right types."

There was another long moment of silence while we sat and pondered over what we had been discussing.

Father began again. "The word 'religion' can have meaning to you if you think of it as being and doing good. There are evil forces in the universe. There are good forces. If you line up on the side of the good forces, you are practicing a form of religion."

"How can we recognize which are the good and which are the bad?" Inga asked.

We could hear our father chuckling. "That, my dear, is the real secret of it all. I think you know now. But having a strong belief in what you do when you believe it is right, can sustain you in even the most disheartening situations. Follow that principle and you are not likely to go wrong, or choose the wrong side. I fear that our future here on Iduna is going to be fraught many times with the need to have a strong belief."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

On the first warm day of spring, the four of us went down to the beach for a swim. After wearing the poorly treated animal skins all winter, we knew we smelled. Of course we had given ourselves light hand baths as often as possible. But they were no substitute for an all-over plunge into the sea, cold as it was.

We made a picnic out of it. By now father had made good swimmers of us all. Inga and Sven had taken to it like water animals. I too found great pleasure in sending my body coursing through the water.

Even in our joy at being out of the cave, and having the warm sun beat down on our naked bodies, we kept a strict kind of vigilance. Two of us would stand sentinel while the other two were swimming.

It was on one of those intervals when father and I were alone on the shore, watching Inga and Sven disporting in the shallows, that I recalled the time Bretta had been 'rescued' by one water creature from another

water creature.

"That was when the Singing People were friendly to us," father commented, his eyes fixed beyond the playing bathers.

"The point we seem to forget is that she was saved from one kind by another kind. I'll never forget that stubby water beast in the stream near the ship. It was attacking Inga. I hurled a metal rod down its throat."

Father nodded. "It could have been something like the crocodiles and alligators that once infested African rivers and the swamps of other southern lands. Terrible, reptilian animals. Actually this kind of open sea wasn't where they usually lived. What attacked Inga was probably a different kind of creature entirely."

For a few minutes we said nothing. But I knew where my thoughts were—on Bretta. As it turned out, apparently father too was thinking of her.

"Now that the worst of winter seems to be over, I think we should renew our search for your young sister."

"Have you any idea where to look?"

"No, Peder. That's what makes it so difficult. We've gone a half day's journey each way on the beach. We've gone back and forth in the jungle. We've climbed back up to the foothills of the mountains. Except for going further in each direction, have you any suggestions?"

"Only one," I said. "We have never followed the course of the river that flows in front of our cave."

"Of course we have, Peder. It empties into the sea only a short distance below us."

"No, father. I mean follow it up to its source. It must start high in those mountains back of us."

"It will be rugged going, my boy. And cold too. Some of the peaks seem to have snow all year. But if you are willing, I certainly am."

It was slightly past midday when we returned, tired but happy from our

morning swim, and dressed in our clean Earth clothes. Inga was the first to enter the narrow channel that was the back door to our cave. I heard her cry out.

Father and I, with Sven at our heels, plunged in, fear in our hearts.

We had left the barrier of skins hanging open while we were gone to let in the warm, clean outdoor air. There was enough light to see that the place was a shambles. Everything had been torn up and pulled aside. Our bedding was in a pile in the corner. What other possessions we had were strewn around as by some crazed animal.

Father and I rushed to the front entrance. In his hand was the neurogun. I gripped my spear tightly. We could see nothing unusual in the open space below.

When father said he would stand guard there, I went back to help Inga and Sven. I wanted especially to see if anything had been taken. And that was the strangest part of it all—there was nothing actually missing. Nor had there been any damage done to our things. All that apparently had happened was that the contents of our cave were thrown around. It was another mystery in a long series of mysteries.

After this incident, Father and I agreed that it probably would not be safe to leave Inga and Sven without our protection. The proposed trip up the stream, we decided, would have to be postponed.

What followed was a series of peculiar and mystifying happenings...

Our ever-burning cooking fire was extinguished one night by a thick covering of sand.

One day. I was picking berries in a swampy area about a kilometer from the cave when a rock came sailing by my head. Although I stood, spear in hand, for several minutes, I caught no sign of the mysterious rock thrower.

Another time, Sven and I were tracking one of the shy, deer-like creatures we used for meat. We were crawling up on it, our approach shielded by low bushes. I peered out just in time to see a water creature reach up and pull the animal down to the surface. It was like a brown, furry arm reaching up. The strangest part of it all was that the animal

seemed to float away out of sight *above* the water. It wasn't swimming. It wasn't floating. As in Bretta's case, it was being *carried* by some underwater creature.

I looked at Sven. He was staring wide-eyed where our game had disappeared. "That's how Bretta was taken," he said.

Although we went swimming every nice day, now we always left one of us in the cave on guard. It was not invaded again.

I suppose the most disheartening thing was realization that the Singing People were no longer friendly to us. During the early summer weeks, no live animals were left on our cave doorstep. Nor was grain or fruit put there for our eating. Now we had to obtain all our food ourselves.

Fortunately the land teemed with wild life. Vegetation was lush. All we needed was all around us for the taking. Frankly I was rather glad to have us be self-dependent again. Hunting was fun. Fishing too.

Father always insisted that the whole human race descended in less than a hundred generations from a total hunter-forager existence. He said, given the same need and the same conditions, this love of hunting and fishing would quickly revive. Man, he stated, had always been basically a hunter-forager. Only in the past thousand years or so had he not had to depend upon his own hunting skill to provide food for his family. The hunting instinct, he said, has not been lost.

One day when I set out to search for a supply of fresh fruit, I left my bow and arrows in the cave. In tree climbing they would only be in the way.

In one promising grove, I placed my spear at the base of a tree. Although the fruit on these trees was still somewhat green, father had assured me it would ripen after being picked.

For half an hour I climbed one tree after another, nearly filling the bag I had brought with me. When I had what I thought was enough, I searched out the tree where I had left my spear. It was gone!

There was no doubt about it—this was where I had left it and it was no longer there!

After the first rush of panic at losing my weapon, my next feeling was one of anger. I was even a little surprised at myself. I had felt other emotions since our crash landing—fear, sorrow, disappointment, pride in new achievements. This was the first time I had felt strong anger.

All the frustrations of the past several months— losing Bretta, having these annoying happenings, and now my spear stolen—made my cheeks flush with sudden and righteous rage.

I grabbed up a fallen tree branch and broke off the end to make a club out of it. Then I started to move around in a wide circle looking for whatever creature had taken my spear. I found nothing, of course. After an hour of running around, more or less wildly and without plan, I gave up the search.

Heading back to the cave, I gave serious thought to how events were developing for us here on Iduna. They weren't good. The worst of it was we didn't know who our antagonists were.

It was almost as if they were trying to drive us away without actually harming us. Yet, I thought, they had taken Bretta. That was harming us. Maybe Sven was next.

I had just returned to the cave and was starting to tell father about my experience in having my spear stolen when we heard a cry from in front... a human cry!

Since all four of us were together, we looked at each other in surprise. In a wild scramble we ran to the front entrance and looked down.

There, standing on the river bank, was Bretta!

Beside her was a brown, furry creature. It was about my height and stood erect. It had short, stubby legs ending in flat, web-shaped feet. Its torso was slender, even graceful, but longer than a human's. There were no nostrils in the long, pointed face, just two air holes. The mouth was rather wide and showed a row of long, sharp teeth. Its head was merely an extension of its upper body with the barest hint of shoulders. He had only the tiniest of ears. Projecting from where his shoulders should have been were two short arms, ending with huge hands equipped with long, fearsome-looking talons. The creature was smiling.

"Father!" Bretta called out to us as she turned and looked up at the being with her. "This is Kaloro. He's my friend. We have come to get your help!"

PART III

THE SINGING PEOPLE

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After we had recovered from the sudden and unexpected shock of seeing Bretta again, and we had hugged and kissed her, we turned finally to face her strange companion.

Bretta reached up and took his hand, more like a clawed flipper than what we would call a hand. "His name is Kaloro," she said. "He is one of what we used to call the Singing people. I can sing now too. They taught me."

'Who are 'they?' " Father asked.

Bretta smiled. "They call themselves the Thrulls. I had fun with them. You should see me swim now. They all swim, most of the time."

"What happened, Bretta, that day you were taken from us?" Father asked.

Bretta looked up at her companion and gave him a friendly, reassuring grin. We could see that she had grown in stature. Her body had filled out. Her cheeks were flushed with good health and excitement. There was an extra glow of joy in her expression.

"It was one of the Maloons who grabbed me when I was standing near the river. He is one of the bad ones. He took me far away. I was cold and hungry. I guess I even cried a little."

"How long were you held by the Maloons?"

"I don't know. A long time. Weeks, I guess."

"What happened then?"

Bretta glanced up again at the creature next to her. "Kaloro came and took me away. He's not one of the bad ones. He's one of the good ones."

"And you stayed with Kaloro and his people all winter?"

"Yes, they were too afraid of the Maloons to bring me back. Until now."

"Where do the Thrulls live?"

"I don't know."

"How many Thrulls are there?"

"Kaloro knows. Shall I ask him?"

"You can understand him when he talks?"

She nodded. "It's easy."

The next instant we were startled to hear a low humming sound come from Bretta's mouth. It was answered by her Thrull friend, with similar sounds ending in a series of sharp clicks.

"What did he say, Bretta?" Father asked.

"He told me how many Thrulls there were, but I don't know numbers. What he wants is for Peder to go back with us. That's why we came here."

"Why does he want that?"

For a moment she looked bewildered. She turned and faced the other. It was odd to hear her humming her message, concluding with the whistle-like sounds at the end. The creature answered her.

"Did he say why he wanted me?" I asked.

"Yes, Peder. They need your help. The Maloons are bad people from across the mountains. Kaloro says he doesn't know what his people will do if you don't help. You'll come back with us, won't you, Peder?"

"You mean you aren't going to stay here now that we have you back

with us?" Inga cried.

"I'd have to go with Peder to tell him what they are saying."

I shook my head. "But, Bretta, how can I help?"

"I don't know. I'll ask my friend."

Again she began her strange humming. The other answered.

"He says the Maloons are coming. He says he needs you to tell his people what to do."

"Who are the Maloons?" Father asked.

"He says they look like him. But they are bad people."

Father glanced over at me. "Probably two tribes of the same species—one peaceable, the other warlike. It happened many times on Earth. A group living in a rich, fertile area is invaded by others from a more hostile environment, brutalized by their struggle to survive. But I still can't see how we can help."

He smiled at Bretta. "You can't imagine how worried we have been since you disappeared. You mustn't leave us now that you are with us again."

"I must go back. And Peder must go with us. He must. They need him."

Father frowned slightly. "No. I can't let Peder leave without knowing more about why he is needed. What could he do?"

Bretta looked bewildered. I scooped her up in my arms, delighted to be able to hold her close again. I was amazed how she had gained both in height and weight. I glanced over at father. "All this explains why we thought the Singing People had turned on us."

"Yes, Peder. When I look back on it, I realize at first they only did good things for us. The troubles we had when you and I went back to the wrecked ship were undoubtedly caused by what Bretta calls the Maloons, the bad ones. Then the mischievous activities since then were also their work. It's probable that the Thrulls, as Bretta names her friends, are terrified by these brutal invaders. It is quite natural they would turn to

someone like us for help."

"I'd like to go," I said fervently. "After what they did for Bretta, I think we owe it to them."

Father turned to Bretta. "Tell your friend we will have to discuss this among ourselves." To Inga he said, "I suggest some food in honor of Bretta's safe return. A real feast if you can manage it."

It was an odd experience eating with the stranger. He didn't sit down as we did. Instead his whole body slid down into a half reclining position. I couldn't help but stare at him in the flickering light of the tallow lamps.

His facial features were not at all human. And yet it was easy to see the kind spirit that filled him. His wide mouth, without lips, nevertheless gave an impression of smiling. If one could avoid comparing his face with a human face, one could easily admit he had a natural beauty about him.

His body, too, covered completely with a soft, brown fur, was a pleasing sight. It was short-haired and shone almost like the fur of the deer-like creatures which abounded in the grassy areas. As I stared at him, I could feel his large brown eyes on all of us, questioning, trusting.

I could like this creature, I felt. Just as Bretta did. I had a surge of confidence in him, a desire to help him share his new dangers from the Maloons.

"What do you say, father?" I asked. "I would like very much to go back with him and Bretta. If we are to live peaceably on Iduna, we must take sides. One time when you talked to me about religion, you said there are evil forces and good forces in the universe. And if you take the side of the good forces, you are practicing a form of religion."

"Yes, I know, son. And I'm glad you noted and remembered what I said. But are you quite sure this friend of Bretta's represents the forces of good? Looking at him, I would tend to agree. Actually we have no real proof. It's not a sure thing."

"That's why I'd like to go, father. It's the only way we can find out. What I'm considering is what happens if what he says is true. What if the Maloons, the bad ones, drive out the Thralls, the good ones? Then where do we stand? The best time to act is at the start of any such action. If we

wait until the Thrulls are driven off or killed, we may be faced with a bigger conflict than we can handle. Remember there are only the three of us able to put much of a defense."

"Don't forget me," Sven spoke up.

"Of course we don't forget you, my brave young man," father said as he patted the lad's blond head. "In another couple of years you'll be a true warrior."

"Do I have to wait that long?" His voice showed his disappointment.

Father smiled down at the boy and then turned to me. "There are several things in the story Bretta's friend tells that disturb me. Mostly what he hasn't told us."

"That's right, father. We still don't know where his people live. Or how many of them there are. Or what kind of help they expect of us."

"Yes, Peder, and there's something else. I've been studying him. As I've mentioned to you, I have taken up the studies of biology and the other sciences related to the development of life, starting with the biological history of Earth before pollution killed off most of the animals."

He paused for another look at Kaloro. "This creature, I suspect, is in a transitional period in the development of his species, an amphibian—half-way between being a water animal and a land animal. Right now, he is neither completely one or the other."

He went on—

"Several centuries ago, on Earth, there was an abundance of air-breathing mammals which lived entirely in the sea—seals, whales and dolphins, for example. In fact, I seem to recall that experiments were conducted with dolphins that proved they had highly developed reasoning powers. Until they became extinct, delphinologists were trying to learn how to communicate with them. They knew they 'talked' with each other. And come to think of it, they made a kind of clicking whistle sound just as our Singing People do."

"If they are in a transitional stage, which way do you think they are headed—toward life in the sea... or life on land? Our friend here has been

out of the water now for some time. It would seem he is more a land animal than a creature of the sea."

Father shrugged his shoulders. "On Earth, according to theory, life started in the primeval swamps and only gradually left the sea to come to land. Some of the land creatures then went back into the sea—living in the water but breathing air. Our Singing People may be like that. Or conditions on this planet may have been different for the start and development of life. It is possible it started on land, and he and his people are gradually adapting themselves to spending more and steadily more of their lives in the water. His sleek body, the webbed feet, the claw-like hands, the streamlined head, with no shoulders—all indicate that clearly great progress has been made in that direction. I may be wrong. We'll probably never know. Noticeable changes usually take many generations."

"I like him, father. I trust him. He saved Bretta from the Maloons. I have a strong feeling that their enemies are also our enemies. I'd like to go back with him."

Father peered back at me. "I'll decide in the morning. This is something I'd like to sleep on."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Our visitor slept on top of a blanket in a corner near Bretta who wouldn't leave his side. In the morning he shared our meal. Except for meat, he ate about the same things we did. Or else he was polite enough not to spurn our offerings.

After we had eaten, we all went out to the open space in front of the cave. There, father motioned for us all to take seats on the rocks. As before Kaloro sprawled out full length under her.

"Bretta," father said, "I'm going to ask you to find out some things from your friend. He wants Peder to go with him. But before I can allow that, I need to know the answers to several questions. You understand that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Ask him where he lives."

After a singing exchange between the two, she said, "Over that way." She pointed back across the lava flow behind us.

"How far?"

Again the rather pleasant sounding exchange.

"About two days," she guessed.

Father looked at her questioningly. "Two days by land or water?"

Bretta seemed confused by Kaloro's answer to this question. "I think he says, either way."

In the questioning that followed, we really learned little. Bretta's knowledge of the singing language was meager. Just as it was of our own language. At five, she could express herself on common subjects. But when father's questions went into too technical detail, she became bewildered.

About all we could learn through Bretta's translation was that Kaloro's people lived one or two or three days distance away. They lived in a 'shining' place that was warm. There was a lot of water where they lived. They ate fish and fruit and grain. There were 'many' of them. She had children to play with. The language was not too hard to learn—certain sounds meant certain things.

Time after time, however, in her replies to father's questions, she came back to the urgency of Kaloro's plea that his people needed our help.

When he could think of no more questions to ask, father looked over at me. "We don't know much more than before. I am inclined, however, to think that you should go. I have a feeling that the Singing People are very timid. They have never developed weapons of any kind. Possibly their enemies from across the mountains may have none either."

"They may have one now," I said. "Remember **the** spear that was stolen from me yesterday when I was **out** looking for fruit? They have that now. It may give them ideas. They could easily make more out of wood."

"I doubt if they have ever seen bows and arrows," Inga said. "That's one weapon Peder could bring to Kaloro's people."

Father frowned. "I don't like it. That's where the human race started its long and tragic history toward self destruction. First stones and clubs. Then spears. Then bows and arrows. And swords. And all those other deadly devices that warlike men have since made to kill each other. I don't like it."

I shook my head. "This is a primitive world, father. I suppose what we are faced with here is the most primitive of problems—how best to survive when attacked. If Kaloro's enemies are able to wipe them out, simply because they are more warlike, we probably will meet the same fate. Inga and Bretta and Sven and you and I—we'll all die."

"It's a question of ethics," father insisted.

"It's also a question of taking sides, as you once said. I think it would be wrong for us not to help these people who have helped us. Remember they saved Bretta's life."

"You may be right, Peder. I leave it up to you. If you want to go, I won't stand in your way. And I'll let you decide too about the bows and arrows."

Bretta told Kaloro of our decision and from his mouth came a beautiful song. There was no need to translate it. He was thanking us.

All that day we organized what we should take with us. We had no idea how far it really was, so we took enough food for a week. Since the weather had turned warm enough, we left behind our fur clothes and resumed the durable garments we had brought from the ship. The biggest part of my load was a pack of two bows and half a hundred arrows, together with a spear.

Father wanted me to take the neurogun. I said he would need it to defend the cave. When he argued that I was the one 'going into battle,' and ought to have all the protection possible, I gave in.

Also I took the knife and the hatchet. This latter item had proved invaluable in chipping arrow heads out of the flint rocks we had found at the base of the mountains.

The next morning we started out. Kaloro was surprised that we had a rear exit to our cave that led in the direction we had to go. To reach our cave, he had gone far around.

I kissed Inga and Sven, and shook father's hand. Inga, especially, seemed reluctant to let Bretta go now that she had returned to us. Even she could see, of course, that I needed her knowledge of the language if I was to be able to help the Singing People.

Bretta had said it was an easy language to learn. Hearing Kaloro, I had my doubts about ever being able to distinguish one sound from another.

Before we passed out of sight of father and Inga and Sven, we turned and waved. A moment later we were on the beach and on our way.

We had gone only about half a kilometer or so when Kaloro spoke to Bretta. She in turn told me what he said.

"He wants to go by water. We can go by land," she said. "He'll stay close to shore."

"But why?"

"He likes it better in the water."

"But his load?" I asked. "He can't carry it in the water."

Bretta smiled. "Watch."

And sure enough, Kaloro slipped into the water, holding his pack over his head. Then, as I watched, he glided out into deeper water. There was no question about it—he was obviously happier in the sea than trudging along on the sand beach.

Bretta and I followed the shoreline. At times we rested. I was beginning to appreciate what one winter had done for Bretta—physically especially. At times Kaloro joined us and even walked for short distances with us on his short stubby legs.

Always to our left, though seemingly further and further back from the sea, was the mountain range. Many of the higher peaks still wore their caps of snow.

Often we saw small herds of game animals come down to drink. We saw no signs yet of the Singing People, either the Thrulls or the Maloons.

Frequently we had to cross mountain streams that bore sparkling clear

water. Some were shallow enough for us to wade through. Others were swift running and deep. At these, Kaloro would come to shore and easily carry our loads across. Bretta and I chose to swim these stretches.

On the second day I could tell by Kaloro's excited attitude that we must be nearing the 'shining' place, as Bretta called it. where he and his people lived. All through the day I kept feeling a growing sense of apprehension. It wasn't due to anything I saw, nor concern over meeting Kaloro's people. It was something else, something that pressed me and made me grab Bretta's hand more firmly.

By mid-afternoon, I felt so concerned that I asked Bretta to speak to her friend. I wanted to ask him some questions.

We went back from the open beach and sat in the shade of a huge tree.

"There is something oppressive in the air," I told Bretta before I realized she probably didn't understand what I meant.

I stood before Kaloro and made choking motions with my hands at my throat. He looked at my pantomime, questioning at first, and then with understanding.

He got back to his stubby feet and pulled me by the hand out into the open. He pointed off toward the mountains. I saw then what I hadn't noticed before. About twenty kilometers away was a black cone-shaped mountain. Some of the snow-covered mountains further back had little swirls of white, fluffy clouds clinging to their tops. This closer mountain had a cloud at its peak, too, but it was black.

Kaloro then made a peculiar sound. It wasn't exactly musical. More like a rumble.

Then I knew. The black mountain was an active volcano. In all man's efforts to conquer the natural powers on Earth, victory of volcanoes had never been won. They were deadly. And somehow that deadliness had brought to me a sense of oppression as I approached this one.

Primitive man on Earth must have felt this way when faced with the awesome powers of nature... powers before which he felt helpless. That's how I felt now.

Within the hour we had reached a break in the shoreline. It resembled the rock and lava formation back where we had our cave. Only this was much higher and a much more formidable barrier. It rose like a mammoth wall and I wondered how we were going to get around it. To cross this huge rock formation was unthinkable.

Kaloro kept straight on his path until we could go no further. Then he moved to the right along the barrier to the sea.

Here he stopped and had us put down our loads. He motioned for us to sit down. Then he picked up one of the loads, slid gracefully into the water and, carrying the load overhead, moved around toward the sea and out of sight. In a few minutes he was back. He picked up the second load and swam off with it. He returned the third time and took the last of our things.

Then he motioned for Bretta and me to follow him into the water. Although the two of us had become what I felt were good swimmers, we had nothing like the skill of Kaloro.

For several minutes we followed our guide's lead. When we had come around the point at the end of the rock barrier, he turned and led us toward an opening. It was not a very large opening but plenty wide enough and high enough for us to slip through.

For another minute or two we moved through pitch black water, feeling our way against a rock wall. Then we turned a corner, and there—before us—was a vast cavern. It was at least forty or fifty meters from side to side, and the height of a five-story building. The water inlet bisected it. But most amazing was the way the great empty place shone with an eerie light from far overhead. All I could figure was that the roof was made of some kind of crystal rock that let in the sunlight.

By this time we had climbed up on a ledge next to the water. All our packs were there. I turned to Bretta for an explanation.

"Is this where the Singing People live? Why are they not in sight?"

She smiled. "They are here, all around you in the water. They want to see you first before you see them."

I looked back to where Kaloro had been standing. He had disappeared.

We were alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I saw down on a rock near the edge of the water, my head in my hands. I wondered—had we been led into a trap? But no, Kaloro had seemed sincere in looking for my help. And Bretta acted as though she were completely unconcerned over being left here by ourselves.

I peered around. Never had I seen anything on Iduna more impressive than this great open cavern with the crystal ceiling. If indeed it was crystal. All I knew was that an eerie glow came through the roof of the large cave, and that even the walls shone with a kind of faint luminescence. It was not bright. And yet it had a shimmering sort of luminosity. Even the still water through which we had come reflected its strange, almost weird resplendence.

Looking around at its vastness, I wondered how nature could have created it. Possibly a volcanic explosion had formed a bubble of gas enclosed in this shell of quartz rock. The shell had crystalized, leaving the dome-shaped cavern.

"Where are the Thrulls?" I asked Bretta. "If this is where they live, where are they? You said they were in the water. I don't see any of them."

She took my hand. "Don't be afraid, Peder. I was scared the first time too. Shall I ask them to come out?"

"Can you?"

She turned and looked across the water. From her childish lips came a sweet, almost plaintive song. As if by magic heads bobbed up from all around us... hundreds of sleek brown heads... until it seemed they would occupy every bit of the water.

They all looked like Kaloro. Yet I could see they were of various sizes, even many smaller ones. Slowly, the closest ones swam past the two of us as we stood on the rock ledge. It was like some strange, silent dress parade, with all turning their heads in our direction, their eyes on us.

The pageant ended, again as if by magic, the heads slid down below the

surface of the dark water and disappeared. It was a strange, almost mystical, experience.

At that moment Kaloro climbed up next to us and picked up one of the packs. Twice more he made trips to carry away our bundles. Then he led us over a rough foot path across the cavern to an opening at the far end. The water channel here was narrow, not much more than wide enough for two swimmers to pass each other. A good place for defense, I thought to myself, remembering the purpose of my coming here.

Again in the water, Kaloro preceded us along a natural rock tunnel which grew steadily darker and then brighter. When we came out of the rock passageway, we again found ourselves in a breathtakingly beautiful cavern even larger than the other. This one, too, had a crystal roof, with an even more resplendent glow.

At once, however, I could see there was a great difference. This, obviously, was where the Singing People really lived. This was their home.

Bretta watched me with amusement as I looked around in wonder...

Although the cavern was a tremendously large open space, the various families had used rocks to establish boundaries for their separate living spaces. There were no shelters as such. After all, the air in the cavern undoubtedly was always warm. Nor did they need protection from rain or wind.

All around us as we entered was a kind of suspended animation. I estimated that there were fully three or four hundred of the Singing People here. There were males like Kaloro. There were grown females, some holding babies in their arms. And it seemed there were literally scores of young ones staring wide-eyed at us.

Just as I was curious about them, they were equally curious about me. Bretta, they seemed to acknowledge without question. In fact several of the youngsters came up timidly to touch her cheek and then slip back into the water.

She sang what I had to assume was a greeting message to the people. At once all stopped what they were doing. Then, as I had heard it months before, there came from them a kind of crooning song, formless and yet soothing, without a definite rhythm but never aimless. It was beautiful.

And somehow I knew what it meant—I was being accepted!

I was to learn that they lived entirely on raw foods— raw fish, grain mashed up, berries, nuts, roots and fruits. The land around the cavern was rich with all the things they needed to survive.

I began to see how it was possible for them to develop their particular culture without any need to develop weapons. Until now, except for a few sea and land animals, they had had no real enemies.

It was not going to be easy, I could see, to instill a fighting spirit into these completely peaceable people. Father was right. It was the greatest possible misfortune that they were now faced, for the first time, with the need to defend themselves.

As a member of the human race, I had no illusions about myself. I knew I carried all the ruthless, warlike characteristics that had made us the most deadly of all animals in the galaxy. All the nine or ten generations since war was outlawed were as nothing compared with the tens of thousands of generations that formed the genetic base for human savagery. In other words, in spite of my early childhood training at suppressing my emotions, I knew that when the need for fighting to survive occurred, I would fight. However peaceful and calm and emotionless my boyhood on Earth had been, my natural instinct now was to do what I had to do— even to kill.

But the Singing People were not that way. Looking at them here in their cathedral-like home, I could not imagine their fighting, even to save their own lives.

And yet—their counterparts from across the mountains had become warlike. It was a puzzling thing.

Kaloro had returned and helped us carry our packs to a choice spot which I could see had been cleared for us. A little later, after we had unpacked, several women came up with food offerings. Some carried strips of raw fish apparently a delicacy for them. Remembering my first taste of the rubbery stuff, I politely declined. And was surprised to see Bretta pick up a long strip and begin to eat it. The fruit and berries they brought, however, I liked. I found it easy to make a meal on them.

When we were finished, Kaloro returned with two other males.

Although all of the Singing People looked very much alike to me, already I was beginning to notice little differences. The fur of one of the males, I noticed, was turning gray. He was an older man, possibly one of their leaders. The other male was taller and heavier even than Kaloro, with a commanding air about him.

Bretta said the older man's name was Leebo, and the big one was called Morlo.

I bowed slightly to them and extended my right hand. When they did not respond, Bretta spoke to them. Their faces lighted up and instantly both pushed forward their right hands which were not really hands but long-taloned claws.

"Bretta," I said to my young sister, "I've got to get some information if I am to help them. Do you think you can talk to them and understand their answers?"

"I'll try."

I glanced at the three males. They seemed so guileless. Even Morlo, I felt, would not provide very strong leadership.

"Ask them where the Maloons are right now."

After a brief exchange of humming and clicking sounds, she said, "Most of them are still across the mountains." She paused. "I don't understand numbers very well, Peder. I think there are only a few near here."

A 'few!' How many were a few? If it were true there were limited numbers, this might well be the best time to face them. I turned back to Bretta. "Ask them if any of their people have been attacked by the Maloons?"

Bretta's answer, when it came, was inconclusive. "They don't know what the word 'attack' means."

"You probably mean there is no word for 'attack' in their language. Ask them if any of them have been hurt."

"Yes," Bretta reported. "Two of their young girls were stolen yesterday."

"Stolen? Haven't they done anything to try to get the girls back?"

Bretta looked puzzled. "Peder, they are afraid."

"Do they know where the Maloons have taken the girls?"

After another exchange, she looked up at me. "They were taken to the Maloon camp."

"Where is that?"

"In the mountains."

"How far away?"

Bretta shook her head as she tried to translate their answer. "I can't understand them when they say how far away it is."

"Ask them if they will guide me there."

As soon as she asked the question, I could see their answer myself. All three took on an expression of sheer terror.

With this I figured I had learned all I could for the moment. Both Bretta and I needed rest badly. I put my head down in my arms in the gesture of sleep. Kaloro immediately caught my meaning.

He stood up and uttered a few sharp clicking sounds.

At once all activity in the cavern stopped. Families gathered together in their allotted spaces and sprawled out in their typical reclining positions. Our three male visitors left us. Within minutes there was not a sound.

Bretta and I stretched out on the hard rock flooring and pulled our single cover across the both of us. Holding her sturdy body next to me, I couldn't help but wonder at the strange situation we were in. The huge cavern, now only dimly lighted by the fading glow from overhead. The sleeping figures all around. But most of all my mind dwelled on what I could possibly do to help these defenseless people.

Were they expecting me to drive off the invaders single-handed? It was beyond reason. And yet I knew I had some advantages—

For one thing, however warlike the invaders were, it was possible their 'fierceness' was born out of sheer desperation. Basically they might be as shy and timid as these people were.

Then, too, if it came down to actual bodily conflict, I had my bows and arrows. Even alone, with this kind of weapon I might be able to frighten them back to where they came from.

On the other hand, was it right to introduce them to the deadly power of the bow? The last thing I wanted to do was show them new ways to wage war. I knew father felt the same way.

Perhaps the next day would show me what course to take...

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bretta, stirring in my arms, awoke me. For a moment I was confused as to where I was. She spoke to me—

"Peder, wake up. Everybody else is awake. They won't make any noise until you get up."

I looked around. It was true. The entire population of the cavern was standing, motionless, all looking in our direction. As soon as I sat up, the place burst into activity.

"See, Peder, they didn't want to disturb your sleep."

I gave her a hug. "Yes, my sweet little sister. Only you aren't quite so little any more. I'm glad you woke me."

I rose to my feet. Kaloro and Leebo were standing nearby, obviously waiting for me to end my sleep. I grinned at them.

Turning to Bretta, I asked her to find out if they were ready to help me try to get back the two girls that had been kidnapped.

When she finished her conversation with them, she showed her confusion. "I'm not sure I understood what they said, Peder. But they did say they aren't ready just yet. I think they said they sent some of their young men out to look for where the Maloons were holding the girls. I'm not even sure of that, Peder. All I'm sure of is that they don't want to go

out now."

One look at their expressions showed me that Kaloro and Leebo were frightened. Perhaps it was true they had sent a scouting party out. It probably made sense that we would have to delay until they returned.

"Ask them when they expect the young men back."

Bretta's answer to me was that they didn't know.

I sighed. Well, if they weren't ready, I had no course than to wait until they were ready. In the meantime perhaps I could learn more about these unusual Singing People, the Thralls.

Resigned to having a delay in the search for the girls, I told Bretta to tell the two males that I wished to know more about their cavern home and how they lived.

"First we must wash," Bretta said. Smiling at the two males, she led me knowingly to a corner grotto. She seemed to be proud to be showing off her knowledge of the customs of the place.

Bubbling up from a crevice was a small stream of very warm water. This was for washing. One branch led off into a pool which was probably used for bathing. Another branch ran off into a side alcove which I saw at once was to be used for toilet purposes. These people were not as primitive as I had first thought.

When we returned to the place where we had spent the night, we found food waiting for us. The dish for Bretta contained several strips of raw fish. I noticed that they had remembered from the night before that I had not eaten mine. There was no fish on my dish.

When we were finished, Bretta said she would show me around. Kaloro and Leebo would go with us and answer any questions I had.

More than by anything else, I was struck by the complete and clearly sincere friendliness of these brown, furry, strangely dolphin-like people. As we walked among them, they stopped whatever they were doing and smiled at us. Several times youngsters impulsively ran out on their stubby little legs and hugged Bretta. I could see it was something she liked and was used to.

"These are my best friends," she said.

I could see now why she had been so willing to leave father and Inga and Sven to come back here. In a single winter season, this had become a kind of second home to her.

"Do the Singing People stay in here all day?" I asked.

"Oh, no, Peder. They are staying in today because you are here."

"Where would they be if I weren't here?"

"Out getting fish. Or picking fruit or berries. Mostly they just sleep here."

Actually I could see that activities in the cavern would be limited. They wore no clothing. The cavern was all the shelter from the elements they needed. The air was warm. Water flowed in abundance through the middle of their community. Sleeping, apparently, was a simple matter of lying down on mats woven of reeds. Eating only raw foods, they had no need for cooking fires.

It was an extremely simple, uncomplicated life they lived. Their only problem was to get enough food. With the lush jungle close by and the fields of wild grain not more than a day's walk away, they should never lack. And with the sea at their cavern entrance, there would always be a plentiful supply of fish. Yes, the fewness of their problems was probably what made the coming of the invaders so tragic to them.

I turned to Bretta. "Ask our guides if the people ever eat meat."

She shook her head without even passing on the question. "No, Peder, they never do."

I thought for a moment. "And yet they caught those deer-like creatures, just about once a week, and left them for us."

"They wanted to help us."

I shook my head in wonder. "Bretta, you realize they had to make a three or four day round trip journey to our cave to do those things for us. Ask them why they did it."

"I don't need to ask, Peder. They are good people. They help each other. They helped us."

I thought to myself—'good people' indeed. In some ways they were merely good and helpless...

The living spaces for the various families were really nothing more than marked-off areas. A wall of stones usually did the demarcation, sometimes only knee high, sometimes head high. Privacy didn't seem to be much of a factor.

I noticed a large number of women with nursing babies or small toddlers. These young ones seemed much more fish-like than their elders. The babies especially seemed to have only rudimentary legs and arms. I will admit, however, that they were beautiful in their way. And the mothers beamed with pride when I stopped and patted their infants.

I saw there was an unusual amount of activity in one corner of the huge cavern. Although there were youngsters running in and out, this area was apparently the gathering place of the older ones.

As we approached, I could hear their singing and sometimes the sharper clicks and squeaks of their strange talk. When we came up, however, the sounds stopped. All looked at us.

What an interesting way to handle their older people I thought. I recalled how back on Earth, older persons were left alone in their tiny apartment-cubicles until senility ended their lives. Here the old men and women were spending their days together. And I could see that a great many of the community's tasks were handled here—mats and baskets were woven, stone dishes pounded out, slender vines made into what looked like nets.

When I picked up one of the nets to examine it, Bretta said, "Kaloro says that's the kind of net they used to catch the animals they brought to us."

She then ran over and picked up a net with a much finer mesh. "This is the kind they use to catch fish."

That explained how they could get by without weapons. I had always wondered how they could deliver unharmed, living animals to our cave

door. And also how they were able to catch enough fish to feed the entire community without boats or fishing tackle.

In a corner cave, Kaloro proudly showed me where they stored such foods as could be kept without spoiling. It was an impressive sight to see the reed baskets filled to the top with roots and nuts and some long-lasting fruits. Since they had never learned the art of cooking, I felt they had done very well with what they had at hand.

After we had visited the store room, we went back to the spot where we had spent the night. I was struck at once by the emptiness of the cavern. As Bretta had said, the grown ups had all left to handle their daily foraging or fishing duties.

I could see that Bretta was anxious to join her young friends who were disporting noisily in the water.

"Go ahead, Bretta. I'll stay with Kaloro."

Before I could take a full breath, my once so-shy young sister had pulled off her clothes and had plunged into the stream with her friends. Their snorts and wheezes showed their joy at her joining them.

I smiled at Kaloro. He was holding two of the fishing nets. He motioned to the stream and toward the exit. Clearly he wanted to show me how they caught fish.

Without a qualm I slipped out of my clothes, leaving only my waist-belt to which my knife was attached. Kaloro, with his greatly superior swimming ability, had a natural defense in the water. Intuitively I felt the need of at least one of my weapons. I was a good swimmer, but it was not my natural medium as it was his.

Leebo stayed on the rock ledge as I followed Kaloro into the water. Bretta swam up to me. I told her I was going fishing. She kissed me and then did a flip-flop to join her playmates.

Kaloro and I moved through the outer cavern and finally on into the broad expanse of the sea. We swam leisurely for ten or fifteen minutes. When I showed my companion that I was tiring, he came up and I rested against him. Finally he held up one of the nets and made signs that I was to hold two of its points. He held the other two.

The net was a good twelve or fifteen meters long and about three meters wide. He dipped one of his corners down, indicating I was to do the same. Then, slowly, with the net bellying out between us, we swam slowly forward parallel to each other. Gradually we brought our ends together. Looking down at what we had caught, I was surprised to see scores of blue-gray fish squirming and tumbling over each other in the net prison.

With practiced skill, Kaloro used his taloned hands to scoop up the fish and put them into the second, smaller net he had brought. This one I saw was shaped like a bag with a narrow neck which he tied shut. Except that I had to rest every time we got a new catch, I felt I was really helping Kaloro.

Suddenly I saw him go tense. He handed me the bag of fish and the now empty net. Instantly he was racing away from me at boiling speed.

What had happened? Obviously something had alarmed him.

My best course, I figured, was to head back toward the cavern entrance. Looking landward, I was alarmed to see how far away it now was. Further than I'd like it to be, especially if what had alarmed Kaloro meant danger.

I tried to lift my head out of the water far enough to see where Kaloro had gone and what might be happening to him. I could see nothing.

Slowly I moved toward the cavern's entrance. I took frequent rests, floating on my back as father had shown me. The bag of fish, while weightless in the water, was nevertheless a drag on my progress.

Then, not fifty meters from me, I saw Kaloro racing in my direction. At the same time I saw coming at me with equal speed a huge sea monster. The frightening thing was that the sea beast was much closer.

I dropped the bag of fish and the net and pulled out my knife. Fast as Kaloro was coming, I could see that the sea monster would get to me ahead of him. Holding the knife in my right hand, with the blade pointed up, I fixed my gaze on the oncoming creature. It had happened too quickly for me to panic. I even knew in a strange intuitive flash, what I had to do.

When the beast was only a fraction of a heart beat away, I jerked my body into an upside down dive. Down I went under the charging beast.

At that instant I lunged upward. I felt the blade sink into the soft underbelly. As the creature moved on to where I had been a second before, I could feel the blade opening a slit half its length.

Pulling the knife free, I twisted sideways and struggled to the surface for air. As soon as I could clear my eyes, I looked around.

Kaloro, apparently not aware yet of the deep wound I had managed to inflict on the sea thing, was struggling with it, his talons tearing at the creature's head.

I moved over and touched him on the arm. He turned in surprise to look at me. I held up my knife and pointed to the red blood that was coloring the water around the now helplessly floundering monster.

Kaloro let out a series of sharp whistles and swam excitedly several times around the now barely moving beast.

Grabbing its tail, he motioned for me to help him drag it back toward the cavern's entrance. I don't know how I managed to stay afloat, but I did. I know I gave little or no help in the dragging of the half-ton creature to the entrance. There we were met by a dozen of the males who took over the hauling operation. Two of them even came to my aid and made sure I had no trouble maneuvering through the tunnel passageway.

Back at our allotted space, I sank down thoroughly exhausted. A moment later, Kaloro, as fresh and strong as ever, was standing next to me, his mouth wearing a broad smile.

He was whistling at me at top speed. Bretta had come up and was listening.

"What does he say, Bretta?"

"He talks so fast, I can't understand it all. He says something about you killing a devil fish. Anyway that's the word I think he means. It's never been done before."

"Tell him I'm sorry I lost his nets."

She spoke to Kaloro and then to me. "He says they have many nets. But never before a devil fish."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Kaloro, Leebo and Morlo shared our meal with us that evening. As we sat there, I decided to use the opportunity to get answers to some questions I had.

"Bretta," I said, "ask them if their young men have come back from their search for the enemy's camp."

"Yes," she replied, "they have come back."

"What did they find out? Where are the girls being kept?"

After Bretta had asked her questions, she turned to me. "They say the Maloon camp is about a day's journey away. Back into the mountains."

"Ask how many Maloons are in their camp?"

I knew by the way Kaloro held up one hand twice and two talons that it must mean five and five and two, or a total of twelve.

I spoke to Bretta. "Ask them why, if there are only twelve of them, they are afraid?"

Bretta listened for some time to their answer. Turning to me she wrinkled her forehead. "I don't know what to tell you, Peder. I wish you could speak to them yourself. All I know is that they are very afraid. The Maloons are..."

"Are what, Bretta?"

"They use a word I can't understand, Peder. In our language it might be 'crazy.' What does crazy mean?"

"It means that when someone does something wild and uncontrolled and unnatural, we say he is acting 'crazy.'"

"That must be it, Peder. The bad ones do 'crazy' things all the time. That's what Kaloro says."

I looked at the three males reclining next to me. I couldn't imagine them doing anything unnatural. And yet, those others, the Maloons, were

now being accused of doing 'crazy' things. If they were of the same species as this completely docile people, how could they have developed so differently? There simply had to be a reason.

The only solution, as I saw it, was to try to observe these invaders at close range. More than ever I was determined not to waste another day waiting for the timid Thrulls to get up enough courage to lead me to their enemy's camp.

Why had Kaloro come to get my help if, now that I was here and wanting to give aid, they showed reluctance to cooperate. It was beyond understanding.

"Bretta, tell Kaloro I intend to go to the Maloon's camp tomorrow. Ask him if he or one of the others will show me the way?"

After a moment, she came back with the answer. "They are afraid. Kaloro says he will go with you. But he won't go near the Maloons."

More and more I was appalled by how helpless the Thrulls were. They seemed to have no idea of self-preservation. To save them, it might depend entirely on me and what I could do for them. It even looked as if I might have to do it all myself.

Was it basic cowardice that held them back? I didn't think so. I remembered how Kaloro had raced to save me from the sea beast. That was certainly not the act of a coward.

What was it then? Fear of violence from others of their own kind? That almost had to be it. Certainly they lived together in perfect amity in the huge cavern. I told Bretta to advise Kaloro to be ready to leave with me in the morning.

After we had all finished eating, with all the denizens of the community sharing in the meat of the sea beast I had killed, the singing started.

I lay back, my arms and legs weary from the long swim and the fight with the huge water monster. The faintest of light was still coming through the vaguely translucent ceiling. And all around me was the sound of their singing.

As always it was a haunting, emotion-filled sound, now sweet and low,

now rising in intensity with greater feeling. Feeling of what? A paeon of joy to be alive? A thanks for the gift of their brotherhood? A prayer for a safe and happy future?

It was all these things...

For more than an hour, until the last bit of light overhead had flickered out, the singing continued its beautiful course. Somehow or other, I got the impression it was their religion. Or at least it was their way to express their religious feelings—the hopes and dreams and loves that make up what is best in life.

I slept well that night—possibly because I knew that the morrow would bring action. I had a mission... and I was anxious to be on with it.

In the morning, after breakfast, but before Kaloro and I were to start out, I debated for some time with myself about what to take with me. So far I had not unpacked my two bows and the supply of arrows. I still felt reluctant to disclose this new weapon until I had to.

I finally decided I would take only the neurogun and an extra charge. These items I could easily conceal in a pocket of the kilt I would wear. The kilt and my tunic I rolled into a bundle to hold overhead while Kaloro and I swam out through the cavern's water exit.

Before I left Bretta I told her I expected to be back within two days. I tried to make it sound like an ordinary hunting expedition although I knew she was aware of where I was going.

"Aren't you going to take your bows and arrows?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, my dear, not this time." Then I had a new thought. What if the worst happened and I didn't come back?

"Bretta, if I'm not back in four days, give the bows and arrows to Leebo. Tell him he is to make as many more as possible. I only wish you knew how to use them to show the Thrulls. They will have to experiment. It may be the only way they can defend themselves if the Maloons come down in great numbers. It could mean life or death for all of them."

She held tightly to me. "Must you go?"

I kissed her. "Remember, dear, do not open up the bundle for four days. I promise you I'll try to be back well before then."

Kaloro was waiting for me in the water. I tossed my bundle of clothes to him. He was much better able to hold it up out of the water than I was. Once outside, I put on my short kilt and the over-tunic. Kaloro, of course, was well protected by his natural fur.

The morning's sky was dull and gray even though Iduna's sun seemed to be shining as clearly as ever. A kind of haze filled the sky. I looked at Kaloro questioningly and pointed upward.

Apparently he had not noticed the murky condition of the air. He stopped in his tracks. A look of fear came to his narrow, almost fish-like face. At once he turned his gaze toward the mountain I had seen on the day I had arrived here. On that day there had been a comparatively small black cloud hovering over the peak. Now it was giving out tiny billows of smoke. They seemed to be coming in puffs, almost as if it were the breathing of a giant creature.

From Kaloro's expression, I could see he was frightened. Possibly this was a long-standing fear of the Singing People—to be caught out in the open when the mountain poured out its smoke and ashes. As much as I had ever read of such phenomena, it was clear to me that this was an active volcano.

To go on or go back?

As long as the mountain merely gave out smoke, I could see no great or immediate danger. I had read that on Earth volcanoes erupted at rare intervals, often giving days or weeks of warning before becoming truly dangerous.

I started to go on. Glancing back I could see that Kaloro was following with great reluctance.

The smoke in the air never became worse. Nor did the mountain stop its breathing. The puffs, as far as I could time them, came regularly. They did not seem to be coming any faster than when we first saw them.

Toward later afternoon, Kaloro began to show new signs of terror. He made a few clicking sounds and then was silent. I had to assume he was

warning me that we were approaching the place where the Maloons had made their camp.

It was a rocky area, with the edge of the jungle off to our left a good kilometer away. Finally Kaloro stopped, his mouth compressed tightly and his claw-like hands shaking. He pointed to a rocky cliff still some distance ahead.

I knew he wouldn't understand my words, but I said them anyway. "It's all right, Kaloro. You don't need to go any further." I pointed to the jungle. "You go back there and wait for me." I pointed to myself and motioned that I intended to go on.

I turned to go. In an instant he had his arms about me. For a moment I thought he was trying to hold me back. Then I realized it was merely a gesture of his feelings for me, and his fears.

As I half stumbled away from him, strange emotions filled me. Back on Earth such feelings would not have been possible. But now as I looked at my friend, I felt a strong sense of brotherhood. It was a good feeling.

The Thrulls needed me. And this was what filled my thoughts as I left Kaloro and made my way slowly across the rock-strewn approach to the cliff, now only dimly visible in outline.

By now the air had become so smoke-filled that I felt reasonably safe from being seen. Somewhere up there in those rocky crags was a band of what the Thrulls called the Maloons, the bad ones. They were the same species, but completely different in behavior.

And, too, up there they held two of the Thrull girls.

Was my purpose to effect a rescue? Or was it merely to observe these raiders and learn, if I could, how to help the Thralls resist them?

The going became extremely rough. Boulders and loose gravel made it difficult to make easy progress.

Was it even sensible to be approaching the camp so late in the day? Should I wait until morning? But no— the thick haze acted as a good screen for me. Anyway, it would be more likely they would all be in their camp now at the end of the day. Deeper than this even, was my own sense

of urgency, my growing nervousness. I craved to have it over with and be back with Bretta and the kindly Singing People.

Suddenly I stopped. Ahead of me I heard a series of click-whistles. I was near the camp!

Making sure I was always back of some kind of cover, I made my way slowly from rock to rock, from boulder to boulder. When I could see I could go no further without entering an open area, I halted. I peered out cautiously.

There were about a dozen of the creatures gathered in a circle around what I had to assume were their two girl captives. The girls were lying on the rocky ground, back to back. Even through the vaporous mist, I could tell they were terrified.

And no wonder...

The brown furry Maloons were bowing, with little jerky motions, in the direction of the volcano cone only a kilometer or two distant. They were frightened. Their clicking, strident voices rose in a dismal song that ended in a staccato series of sharp whistles.

My immediate guess was that, in their primitive way, they were calling upon the god of the volcano not to harm them.

For several minutes I watched, having no idea what I could do to save the girls. Twelve against one! My neurogun would possibly stun three or even four or five before I was overpowered. The best I could think to do was stay hidden and wait for a possible break.

One of the Maloons, apparently their leader, stopped and stared down at the cowering girls. He looked back at the mountain and then at the girls again. If what he was thinking was what I thought he was, he was wondering if it might not be well to sacrifice the girls to the terrible mountain god.

He uttered a few sharp clicks and stood back as two of his followers pulled the girls to their feet. Then he reached around and picked up something from the ground. With horror I recognized it as the spear that had been taken from me back near our cave.

With his short arm, he held the spear awkwardly. First he pointed it at the mountain as though to draw the god's attention to what he planned to do. And what he planned to do, I could see, was to plunge the spear into the bodies of the two young girls.

With a sudden cry of rage, not able to hold myself back any longer, I leaped to my feet, determined to stop this terrible act.

Without thinking, without any plan of action at all, without even having sense enough to get the neurogun out into shooting position—I raced toward the male holding the spear...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The only good thing I managed to achieve in my foolish, reckless charge was to halt the thrust of the spear into the girls. The dozen Maloons stood for a moment, frozen in surprise.

Then, just as I reached the circle, I stumbled and fell headlong. This act, so clumsy and needless, brought me down at their feet.

Uttering their high-pitched whistling cries, the leader and his men quickly pounced on me. Although their arms were short, they were extremely strong. Struggle as hard as I could, I felt myself pushed in next to the girls in the center of the ring, my hands bound behind my back.

I looked up into the face of the leader. In features he was exactly like Kaloro or Morlo. Only the eyes were different, or at least the expression. There was a wildness there... a 'craziness.' His mouth was contorted. His body kept twitching. From glaring with fear at the volcano cone and glaring back at me, he was never still.

He picked up the spear he had dropped when I came running at him. He shook it threateningly at me.

If only I could free my hands to reach the neurogun under my kilt, I might still be able to save myself and the girls. I glanced over at them. They were half grown females, apparently almost as much afraid of me as of their captors.

The leader of the Maloons had gone to a small pile of supplies and

pulled out a bag. From the expression of anticipation on the faces of his men, I could see this was to be some kind of special treat.

I watched, still not understanding what it all meant, as each of them came up to their chief and took a small pinch of what was in the bag. Each then quickly thrust it into his mouth. Only the leader, I noted, refrained from taking any.

When the last of the group had been served, they all took their places in the circle again. They joined hands. Slowly at first they began to move in one direction. At a clicking signal from their chief, they stopped and went in the other direction. Gradually the speed of then-strange dance quickened. When it became too rapid to continue holding hands, they separated and threw themselves into wild, violent, almost convulsive body motions.

Was it due to what they had just eaten? I had read of drugs that produced this kind of manic reaction. That's what it had to be—a drug that created a mad, euphoric ecstasy.

Only the leader stood apart, watching and waiting, his eyes on me, the spear still in his hand.

If I had come to find out why the outlanders acted differently than the Thralls, I had found a logical explanation. Mind-expanding drugs had long been outlawed on Earth. But it was all there in the history tapes —the sordid stories of periods on Earth when people resorted to drugs for escape from reality. From what I had read, whole generations of youths had been nearly ruined.

I tried to remember how drugs had affected people. Yes, I recalled that drug addicts often went insane. Even the most peaceable of men and women would commit the most violent crimes under their influence. They would attack people without cause. Even kill in their mindless rage. And remember nothing about it afterward.

I peered up at the leader and could see murder in his expression. When the mad dance was at its height, I sensed, he would send his pack of drug-crazed men at the three of us. We had no chance. I groaned in my frustration. If only I had been more cautious. Even if I had used my neurogun to stun several of them, that might have frightened the rest into fleeing.

By now night had come. And yet it was light...

I looked up at the volcano. From its peak now rose flames that extended far into the black, smoke-filled sky. Too, I could feel pieces of hot ash falling on my arms and legs.

The Maloons had stopped their wild dance and were crowding, like bewildered animals, around their leader. When he pointed the spear at us and gave them what I was sure were orders to kill us, they seemed not to understand. Instead they kept twisting and jerking their bodies as they crouched before him.

I could see he realized he had lost control over his men. With a squealing, clattering cry of rage, he strode over to where the three of us lay helpless.

He raised the spear. The point was aimed at my chest. With a sharp whistle, he pulled the weapon back for the thrust. . . .

At that instant the mountain exploded!

I looked up. The whole top of the cone had blown off. Flames and smoke were shooting high into the sky.

Although the shock had sent him reeling for the moment, the leader struggled to his feet. Not to be foiled a second time, he raised the spear, his animal voice lifting up in a shrill cry of defiance.

The cry was cut short. Out of the haze a rock had come hurling into his face. He toppled over backward.

I felt hands at my bindings. It was Kaloro. A moment later the two girls were released.

The Maloon leader was on his knees, dazed by the blow. The others of his band were moving around aimlessly. I picked up the spear that had come so close to ending my life.

By now the sky was brilliantly lighted, with flames reaching upward a kilometer or more. Ashes and bits of hot stone rained down on us.

Kaloro had helped the two girls to their feet and had already started

with them down the mountain side, away from the erupting mountain.

I paused. I looked at the group of Maloons. It would be fatal to them for me to leave these poor drugged creatures here to die in the falling death that was increasing by the minute.

On a sudden impulse, I yanked the leader to his feet and prodded him with the spear to follow after Kaloro and the girls. Then I turned, and using the spear as a goad, managed to herd the others into a kind of controlled band. Pushing and prodding, I kept them going on down across the rocky area. It was hard going. At times I had to help one or another of the poor wretches over bad spots. It was death for any who dropped back.

Fortunately it was almost as bright as day. Keeping them on the move and together would have been impossible in the dark. The gushing flames from the volcano became more intense if anything.

At the edge of the protective jungle, Kaloro and the girls awaited us. There was surprise on their faces when I finally brought up my little group.

Kaloro's expression at first was one of consternation. Then he looked pensively at me for a moment and broke into a smile of understanding. It was almost as if he knew why I was risking our lives to save these miserable Maloons.

Actually why had I saved them?

I tried to reason it out and couldn't. Was it because of something father had taught me? Was this what he meant by practicing religion? Frankly I was surprised myself why I had brought these half-crazed creatures back with me. Hadn't the leader tried to kill me!

I looked over at him. He seemed utterly crushed in spirit as he stood with the others waiting for me to decide what to do with them.

Somehow it all fit together. The pieces were beginning to come into place. This was why I had started out that morning. It was my mission.

Well, if it was a mission, I would have to see it through... all the way through!

I motioned to Kaloro to take the lead on the return trip. At this distance from the volcano, the falling ash was much reduced. Looking back, I could see that the eruption was lessening. I brought up the rear, using my spear to keep the stragglers moving.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We traveled less than an hour along the edge of the jungle-forest when I realized it would be impossible to go further. Ahead was only darkness. Once inside the jungle I would not be able to keep my little group of captives together and under observation. As long as we stayed just outside the forested area, the volcano's fire gave us the light I needed to keep watch over them.

I called a halt by shouting at Kaloro and motioning all to sink to the ground.

The big problem now was how to get through the night safely. At the moment my captives seemed subdued. Even the leader lay on the ground, apparently accepting his defeat.

I knew very little about drugs and what they did to people. Certainly it seemed to make them wild enough at the time. Possibly their apathy now was a normal after-effect.

What happened when the apathy wore off? Would I find myself, during the night, with a dozen revived 'bad ones' overcoming Kaloro and me?

One thing I was pleased about. So far I had not had to use, or even show, my neurogun. The bows and arrows were back in the cavern in an unopened package. Even the spear had not become a very formidable weapon in the native's hands. The leader had clearly not known of its deadly value as a throwing device. He had held it more as he would a long stick, good only for thrusting or hitting.

All this meant that, at least until now, I had been largely successful in keeping the knowledge of these weapons from them. Still it was good to know I had the gun if I was faced with more trouble than I could handle.

Kaloro and the two young girls were already asleep, huddled together at one side. The Maloons were sprawled around on the ground wherever they

had been standing when I called the halt. We were now beyond reach of the falling ash.

I went over to look down at the leader. At first I thought he was asleep. Then his eyes opened and he glared up at me. His expression was one of fear. Then, even as I watched, it changed. A thin curtain came across his eyes. His mouth tightened into a tiny O. He rolled over and turned his back on me.

The night ahead, I realized, could be highly perilous. I would have liked to tell Kaloro to take the first watch. The captives were still reacting to the drug. But for how long? The last half of the night, when they began to recover, would probably be the critical time.

If only Bretta were here to tell Kaloro what I wanted of him. Now, I would have to stand watch myself all night.

For hours I walked aimlessly around the sleeping figures. Or I sat and watched the flames still leaping up from the volcano. The eruption had passed its peak and was already on the wane.

Somehow, probably not long before daybreak, I must have drifted off to sleep. A touch awoke me. Someone was trying to take the spear from my hand. With a quick twist of my body I rolled sideways as one of the Maloons fell across the spot where I had been.

I got to my knees, the spear still clutched in my right hand. In the volcano's light, I could see all twelve of the band standing in a half circle around me.

Two of them advanced. I swung the spear in a wide arc that made them jump back.

Getting to my feet, I kept turning and twisting to make myself a poor target for an attack.

Obviously they were not trained fighters. Instead of coming at me in a group, smothering me with their numbers, they chose to stay back out of range of my swinging lance. Only two or three at a time made feints in my direction.

Suddenly the leader, who had been staying off to one side, uttered a

series of sharp, frightened whistles. His men turned toward him. And I too saw what had happened.

Kaloro must have been knocked out at the same time I was attacked. Only he hadn't been completely made unconscious. Somehow he had staggered to his feet and had seized the Maloon leader around the head. The man's cry to his own men was one of desperation and pain.

Kaloro spoke to them. What he said I had no idea. In fact what happened next was quite mystifying. The men fell to the ground in my direction, groveling even, their faces in the dust.

I walked over to where Kaloro was holding the struggling enemy chieftan. There was one natural weapon I had that father had shown me how to use well. I doubled my fist and hit the leader as hard as I could on his snout. He crumbled in a heap at Kaloro's feet.

I smiled at my friend and patted his arm. The two Thrull girls covered back of him. I looked around at the Maloons lying prone on the ground.

What a strange battle I thought to myself. Even the Maloons, I felt, were probably basically as peaceable as the Thralls. They simply had no concept how to fight. I was even surprised at Kaloro's action in subduing the leader.

Fully awake now, I went around and lifted each one of the men in turn. If I read their expressions correctly, they were in awe of me. I wondered what Kaloro had told them.

The light from the volcano was still bright enough for me to keep good watch. But there would be no more sleep that night.

When dawn came, I prodded my group of captives into action. By my calculation, we were only about a half day's journey from the cavern.

Was I doing right in bringing these captured Maloons to the home of the Thrulls? What could I accomplish by doing this? If the Thrulls saw these miserable, cowed creatures from across the mountains, would they take courage and make plans to resist any further invasion? On the other hand, would they take a cruel vengeance on them, killing them as a warning? Or would they treat them well and send them back to their own people to let well enough alone? I suppose this was the hope I really had.

Stumbling along through the jungle, our captives continued to be listless at first. As midday passed, they kept glancing over at their leader who walked with downcast eyes.

They knew they were nearing the home of the Thrulls. Undoubtedly they were becoming increasingly fearful of what was going to be done to them there. If they were to make any attempt to escape, it would have to be soon.

Kaloro and the two girls were in the lead. The captives were in the middle. I brought up the rear.

I called for a brief rest. Going up to Kaloro, I motioned for him to send the girls ahead. They certainly knew the rest of the way. We were probably only a half hour or so from their cavern home. He understood what I meant. A moment later the two girls had scampered off out of sight ahead.

I returned to face the group. The men were crowded around their leader. He was clicking away at them with vehemence. As I approached they turned as one to face me. I could see conflicting emotions in their expressions —obedience to their chief and yet awe of me.

I glanced over at Kaloro. He seemed terrified.

The leader gave a sharp command. The group advanced in a body. They had clearly learned a lesson about combining their attack.

I held up my spear menacingly. For a moment they hesitated. Some even glanced back at their commander.

With help at least an hour away, I had no illusions about being able to hold off this small mob for that long now that they had regained their warlike spirit.

Now was the time, I realized, for a small miracle. Reluctantly I reached under my kilt and pulled out my neurogun. It fit snugly in my hand and I held it so they could not see it.

A little mumbo-jumbo, I felt, might make what I was about to do even more mystifying and effective. As the Maloons moved in a half circle toward me, I leaped high in the air, pretending to be seized by some wild spirit. I made faces. I yelled out words of utter nonsense. I twirled around,

dropping my spear as though I no longer needed it.

The antics did stop them for a moment. Then, at a whistling command from their chief, they rushed toward me.

I saw a small opening between them that led to their leader. I lunged through before they realized what I was doing. I faced their raging chieftain.

To them it merely looked as I was pointing my finger. Quickly I set the charge at the lowest strength and fired. For a half second the man stood immobile. Then he slowly sank to the ground, his body twitching only slightly.

I swung around and faced the rest of them. Again I aimed my finger in their direction. One, not seeing what had happened to his chief, kept coming. I touched the control button and he fell.

I faced the rest who had by now come to a complete stop. I could tell they were shocked by what they had seen. They kept staring at my finger, my magical finger.

I motioned them back. Kaloro, too, seemed equally awed by what he had seen me do. By this time I had made a few more magical waves of my hand which gave me the chance to slip the gun back under my kilt.

I was sorry I had had to use the stunner. At least I felt they had not realized what it was. And anyway, unlike the spear and the bows and arrows, even if they saw it was a weapon, they would never be able to duplicate it.

I knew that the two Maloons I had stunned would be recovering within the hour. My hope was that the girls would alert the leaders in the cavern and they would send out a rescue party.

I sat down and again pointed my weaponless finger at the group. They quickly found places on the ground away from me. I was even somewhat amused to see that my friend, Kaloro, was just about as confused as were the Maloons.

It was something less than an hour later when we heard the crowd of Thrulls coming toward us. They were singing what I had to suppose was a

song of thanks at our safe return.

I glanced over at Kaloro. He smiled back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The welcoming party in the great cavern that afternoon was one of the most moving experiences of my life. With Bretta on one side of me, holding to my arm, and Kaloro on the other side, relating in his whistling voice what had happened, I sat as the center of attention.

Every once in awhile Kaloro stopped his story-telling and the whole community burst into what I had to assume was a song of celebration. It was triumphant and jubilant. I could not help but be emotionally impressed.

Once I interrupted the story to have Bretta tell, as best she could, of what I told her was Kaloro's brave part in the adventure.

For three hours or more, it went on. Food was brought to us. The mothers of the two young girls we had rescued came up and touched me gently on the cheek. From observing them, I recognized this as their way to show their love and affection. The girls themselves clung close to Bretta. Obviously they were old friends.

At length, as darkness approached, the ceremony ended.

So far I had not seen what had been done with the prisoners. I asked Bretta to find out for me from Leebo. After a brief exchange, she said, "They are in a small cave near the storerooms. Leebo says they are being held there until you decide what you want done with them."

So it was up to me after all!

I told Bretta to ask the leaders of the Thrull community to gather in front of me.

When Leebo and Morlo and Kaloro and a half dozen others finally stood before me, I told Bretta what I wanted her to tell them. How much she was able to understand herself, or how much she was able to translate into their strange language, I had considerable misgivings.

In essence what I told her to tell them was that I wanted them to hold the leader as hostage. They were not to harm him. Before winter came, I would come back and decide further what to do with him.

As for the rest of the invaders, they were to be sent back to their people with the message that the Maloons should never make any further attempts to cross the mountains. Most of all they were to be told never again to eat whatever it was that made them act so warlike. I ended by advising they should tell the Maloons that if they disobeyed, the thunder mountain would destroy them.

I had no idea whether or not what I said, through Bretta, was understood by the Thralls.

Bretta struggled through the difficult task of translating. When she had finished, I could see the look of surprise on the faces of the Thrull leaders in front of me. They motioned to Kaloro and in a few minutes he was back with our captives, all but their chieftain. They looked completely terrorized as they stood in a row facing us.

I told Bretta to tell them what she had told the Thrull leaders. Their eyes never came up while she was talking, until gradually it began to dawn on them that they were to be set free and not killed.

Kaloro added more to what Bretta had said, possibly embellishing my message with threats to force their good future behavior. His clicks and whistles were sharp and forceful.

At the end they nodded their heads in the universal gesture of agreement. Food was given them which they gulped down avidly. Then a small escort took them down the central passageway to the sea exit.

As I watched them go, I wondered if I had done right.

If we had detained them, their people might have come as a body to their rescue. At least this way they were carrying a strong message back with them—a message, if they understood and followed it, that could keep the two groups apart and at peace with each other. If ever a race was ill-equipped to wage war, it was this one. If the Maloons stayed on their side of the mountains, and if they kept away from the drug they had been using, peace was possible.

I knew these were big 'its'.

As night came on and I prepared to cuddle next to Bretta, I thought to myself that I had done the best I could. I liked these people. They were gentle and friendly and loving. I would have felt very badly indeed if I had brought into their lives a new warlike spirit.

With the cavern settling into darkness and the people into sleep, Bretta and I whispered to each other.

"Peder," she said, "when are we going back to father and Sven and Inga?"

"I thought maybe tomorrow. Our task here is done."

"Could I ask a favor of you, Peder?"

"Of course."

"Could I take Tama back with us?"

"Who is Tama?"

"She is one of the girls you saved. She is my best friend."

"I think that is very thoughtful of you, Bretta. But how about Tama's mother? Will she let her go?"

Bretta giggled. "Tama has already asked. Her mother says she can come with us. Not for always. Maybe just for the summer."

"I'll see Kaloro about it in the morning."

"Tama asked him too. He said it would be all right."

I gave Bretta a playful pat on her bottom. "It seems as if you have thought of everything. And I'm glad you did. Maybe we should take a young boy for Sven to play with."

"Could we, Peder? Could we? Sven would like that."

As I drifted off to sleep, I thought there were many aspects to having the two young ones with us. We could teach them our language. Sven,

especially, would gain by learning theirs just as Bretta had done.

Yes, there were many advantages...

If the Evenson family was to live in peace on this primitive planet, our first and most important task was to learn the ways of its people and how to get along with them.

The first steps had been taken. Would we falter in later steps?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The whole community assembled the next morning to see us off. Our things were carried by the Thrull leaders on through the waterway that led out of the cavern. Even the bundle containing the bows and arrows had not been opened.

On the beach they all lined up to make their farewells. My heart was touched when they joined together in a joyous song. It could only have been an expression of their feeling of brotherhood with us. Soft and sweet at first, it rose in volume until the humming-ululation reached a peak of emotional intensity, then gradually died away.

Coming with us was Tama, one of the two girls we had brought back from the mountain, and a boy named Boro. Both youngsters were smiling broadly at being the center of attention. I could see no sorrow on the part of the two mothers as they embraced their children. This was a happy thing that was happening to Tama and Boro. Whatever their feelings about leaving their home and their families was overshadowed by the anticipation of coming with us.

I told Bretta to tell the two mothers we would bring their children back at the end of summer. Then I asked her to tell Kaloro that I would like him to visit us soon.

Before turning to head down the beach, I took a look at the volcanic mountain in the distance. Its fury had been spent. Just as on that first time, it now had merely a cap of black smoke hovering over it.

I was surprised, and pleased, to see the entire group follow us for almost an hour as we made our way down the shoreline. Finally only the

four of us were left to go on alone.

I knew that Tama and Boro would get tired quickly walking on the sand. After our first rest period, I picked up their small packs and suggested they could swim along beside us in the shallow water.

After seeing what fierce creatures there were in the sea, I knew I was taking a chance letting them do this. But also I could see they were enjoying it thoroughly now. And, like the obedient children they were, they did stay reasonably close to the beach.

It was on the afternoon of the second day when we reached the sandy beach behind our cave home. Coming within calling distance, I cried out. There was no response.

With Bretta and her two young friends at my heels, I climbed up into the rocky rear entrance. Again I called out. Still no answer.

As usual it was dark in the cave. With a growing sense of apprehension, I hurried through the narrow tunnel into the main body of our cave-home. Still no sign of father or of Inga and Sven.

I stumbled over a bit of rock rubble on the floor. I groaned with dread. One of the first things we had done when we moved into the cave the year before was to clear out all such fallen stone.

Where was our family? What could have happened?

Hurrying on through to the front entrance, I was half-blinded for a moment by the bright sunlight. I rubbed my eyes and looked around. No one was in sight.

Panic seized me. While Bretta and I were gone, something tragic must have happened!

"Where is father?" Bretta asked as she came up, leading Tama and Boro by the hand.

I shook my head, hardly able to speak. "I don't know," I finally replied.

I helped the youngsters climb down the rock steps to the open space below. I called out as loudly as I could.

On a sudden impulse I strode over to where father had built our stone cooking fireplace. A small fire was burning there.

With a new surge of hope, I climbed up the highest rock I could find and yelled out at the top of my voice. From afar came a faint reply.

A few minutes later, father, Inga and Sven came into view across the river. Father and Inga, between them, were carrying one of our game animals.

Without waiting to strip off their clothes, they plunged into the water. A moment later we were hugging and kissing each other. Even Tama and Boro came in for their share of the embraces.

"What happened in the cave?" I asked father. "It's full of rubble."

"Three nights ago we had a terrible time. Apparently a volcano erupted up the way you had gone. Volcanoes, I understand, are often linked together through passages far underground. We know from all this lava that the mountain behind us here is a volcano. Anyway, late in the day, the ground began to shake. Pieces of rock started to fall on us from our cave ceiling. There was only one thing for us to do—get out of there as fast as we could. We slept that night in the open next to our cooking fire."

"Does this mean the cave isn't safe any more?" I asked.

"I'm afraid so, Peder. We could go for years without any further trouble. Or it could happen any time. It isn't worth the risk to stay there."

"Where will we live?"

My father grinned. "I have plans. Now that you are back and can help, I'd like to build a sturdy log cabin here on this open space. We'll build it with the fireplace on one end. We had no way to heat the cave for next winter's cold. A fireplace-heated cabin will be warmer... and safer."

Father paused and looked at Sven and Boro playing together. "Now I want to hear all about your trip to the Singing People. Was it a success?"

Until the children started to clamor for something to eat, I related to father and Inga what had happened to Bretta and me. I told about the Thrull community and their strangely beautiful cavern with the

quartz-crystal ceiling, their simple way of living, their use of nets to catch fish. I told of the fight I had with the invaders, about the eruption of the volcano, and how Kaloro and I had rescued the two young girls. I spoke of my concern whether or not I had done the right thing in letting the Maloons, except for their chief, go back across the mountains to their own people.

One thing I said I was proud of—I had given the Singing People no new weapons. If they were ever to develop a warlike spirit, it would have to arise in some way other than through anything I had done.

After we had eaten, and the children put under blankets for the night, father, Inga and I talked on in the darkness.

What had happened to me with the Singing People, what father was learning about our continued survival on this primitive planet, all lent a sober note to our talk.

We agreed we had a future. We had come a long way from the first horrifying crash landing that killed our mother and rendered father mindless for such a long time.

Somehow we had survived those early horrors. We had learned much. Undoubtedly there would be new troubles, new problems in the years ahead. But as the three of us sat on the ground, with the flickering light of the fireplace behind us, I felt a gentle kind of peace settle down over me.

I didn't speak of it. But I wondered if father and Inga were thinking, as I was, of what we would do if a rescue ship ever came to our planet of Iduna...

EPILOGUE

Well, the day did come when a ship arrived at our planet. Not the next day, nor the next month, nor even the next year. It was actually twelve years later.

As the Evenson family stood in the open space before our six room cabin, we looked up at the orbiting ship overhead. Twice it had gone around the globe. It would probably go at least two more times before sending a lifeboat down. We knew they had seen us.

How shall we greet them?

Do we want to be rescued?

Father and Inga, from their expressions were not looking forward to going back to Earth. Only Sven and Bretta, peering up at the orbiting ship, revealed a new and unexpected excitement.

According to the record father had faithfully kept, I was now thirty three years old. Inga was thirty two. Sven, only four when we came to Iduna, was now seventeen. Bretta, a year older, was a beautiful eighteen-year old.

Looking at the whole Evenson family, I was proud of how we had survived against all odds. The Singing People were our friends.

When the Maloons from across the mountains had tried another invasion several years later, the Thrulls had again called on father and me to help them. By this time we had all learned the whistling language of our primitive allies. Together, father and Sven and I performed what the invaders must have believed were supernatural feats. After that, while the two sections of the species never truly mixed, they did attain a degree of war-free relationship.

Tama and Boro learned to understand us but were never able to form the vowels and consonants that were the basic elements of our language. All the Evensons, on the other hand, were able to imitate, crudely I must admit, the whistling speech of our semi-aquatic friends. We eventually gave up trying to teach them to speak our language. Instead we concentrated on learning to speak theirs.

Father was never quite sure if the Singing People were originally land animals or water animals. He thought most likely they were land animals, gradually adapting themselves to the water. The shortening of their arms and legs, the nature of their breathing apparatus, their sleek, furry bodies, the wide mouths with the rows of razor-sharp teeth, the webbed hands with the long sharp talons—all seemed to indicate that possibly after many more thousands of generations, they could become entirely an air-breathing, marine animal much like the dolphins of old Earth.

While I am proud of how the Evenson family has managed to survive on this primitive planet, I was bitter too.

Looking at Sven and Bretta, I knew how wrong life on Earth would have been for them. Both of them have grown into wonderful, beautiful human beings. Sven was almost two meters tall, or well over six feet in the archaic measuring system once used on Earth. His shoulders were broad, his arms and legs well muscled, his head covered with a wild growth of flaxen hair.

Bretta too had developed into a tall, well-proportioned young woman, her body lithe and graceful. Her eyes were clear, her skin fresh and forever tanned with glowing health.

While father had grown older with the years, as have Inga and I, we were not greatly different than when we arrived on Iduna.

If there was any difference in me, it could be in my beginning to understand the old religion that mother and father had followed. It has given to me, not only a deeper meaning to life, to our relationship with the Singing People and with each other, but a better appreciation of the awesome power of nature that we could see around us every day we lived on this lovely, unspoiled planet.

Why then was I bitter?

I was bitter looking back at what Earth life had done to Inga and to me. There was no question in my mind, and father agrees with me, that the packaged foods we had eaten as our only available diet were part of a deliberate plan to make us conform to what the ruling powers had decided we should be.

With too many people to fit into ever-more confining space on Earth, they must have used a doctored food to make people nonviolent, nonambitious, and undersized.

I remember how Sven and Bretta were when we arrived on Iduna—mild, inoffensive, apathetic children. Then, as the months and years went by, with their eating natural foods and living under natural conditions, they had changed. They had grown into the proud and beautiful beings they now were—as human beings ought to be.

And courage! When our neurogun had finally become inoperative from lack of use, Sven had developed ingenious hunting methods. Single-handed he had searched out and killed several of the huge tusked beasts when they had threatened to invade our peaceful domain. He and

Bretta roamed the countryside in all directions. They were our hunters.

Every month or so they have visited the Thrulls in their crystal cavern. Return visits are just as common.

Yes, I was proud of my young sister and brother. And yet the bitterness remained.

Peering up at the ship orbiting overhead, I was at loss exactly what to do when the landing party came down. Father is not as strong or robust as he was a dozen years ago. He has left the direction of our little family to me.

Why then was I so bitter? Why, now after twelve years do I feel such reluctance to return to Earth?

I have only to glance over at Bretta and Sven and then down at my own body. Inga and I were like everybody else on Earth when we left it. Like everybody else we had been subject to the government-prepared package foods system. Already full grown when we reached Iduna, the natural foods and natural life had done little to change us. We were still the same as all Earth people —limited to the size they wanted us to be so we would fit into the tiny spaces allotted to us.

Inga and I were only a little over a meter tall ... a matter of less than four feet on the old scale!

What irony! What a terrible thing the Earth rulers had done to us—to keep us deliberately small.

That is why I was so bitter.

I looked up again at the orbiting ship, and saw their lifeboat slip out of its under-belly.

No, father and Inga and I, I believed, would not be going back. As for Sven and Bretta... what a sensation they would make on Earth! What a lesson they could bring! They would be like a god and goddess out of man's past... a past that could point to a better future.

Yes, it might be well if Sven and Bretta returned...