

JACK WILLIAMSON

DARK STAR ONE

Carlos Mondragon. A lean brown man without friends or money or even much English, he came from Cuerno del Oro, a poor pueblito in the mountains of Chihuahua. Owning only the computer skills he had taught himself, he had stowed away on the quantum ship to escape a world with no room for him, hoping to find a dream.

Don Diego had warned him of the strange quantum craft, which moved at a speed that stopped time. One light-year or a billion, the Don swore, a quantum flight would be less than an instant to those aboard, ending only when or if the ship was about to collide with some great star. Which might happen anywhere or not at all.

He had never expected a black dwarf sun to stop them, or the flight to end on a planet of ice and eternal night. Yet, because of la rubia, he could not be sorry. La rubia, that was his name for the beautiful Doctora Rima Virili, whom he admired for her bright hair and her good shape and her tender smile for her small daughter.

She was the famous Anglo scientist with letters after her name, he only the illegal mojado who had yet to earn his place among these brave pioneers who were risking quantum flight for the chance to claim some new and better planet for humanidad. Her beauty frightened him; no rough campesino could ever hope to touch her.

"The ship's a seed," she had told Captain Stecker, when he did not wish to land. "The Mission exists to sow the human seed across the universe. We were meant to root and grow wherever we happened to fall. This may be hard soil, but we come prepared to terraform any soil. I think we can survive."

They were in the ship's control room. The holoscreens that arched above them were dark with imaged space, the black sun a round shadow on the stars, the ice planet a smaller blot beside it. The captain was a graceful, smiling Anglo with gold-enameled fingernails and a golden band around his flowing amber hair.

Handsome as un torero, the captain had the manner of Don Alfonso Madera. Cuerno del Oro meant horn of gold. Don Alfonso was a clever picaro who had stolen an ancient registro from the church. He made its faded pages into maps of the lost Cuerno mine, which he sold to turistas, bragging in la cantina that he could make los gringos believe that baby shit was gold.

"Anywhere but here." Without courage of his own, the captain drank it from a bottle; Mondragon heard the thickness in his voice. "We'll find some better world to settle."

"A problem, sir," Cruzet said. "This is the only planet here."

Los Doctores Cruzet and Andersen were Mondragon's amigos. They had let him prove his conocimiento of computers and work with them on the radar search team that searched this sunless dark until they found the planet. Cruzet's thoughts were often away among the stars, but Andersen was muy simpatico. A red-haired Tejano engineer who understood his Chihuahua Spanish and laughed at the dangers of quantum flight.

"The only planet or no planet, I'm not landing on that snowball." Speaking louder, Stecker forgot to smile. "Not since that beacon warned us off."

"Sir, we don't know it was any kind of beacon." Andersen spoke with quiet respect. "All we saw was an odd flash of light down on the planet." He frowned at its black dot on the holoscreen. "Odd because of the way it changed, flickering through all the colors of the spectrum. We had no time to record anything, and it was not repeated. The planet is so cold that it has to be dead."

"Something's alive there." Stecker's narrow jaw set stubbornly. "Mr. Hinch takes that flash for a response to our radar beam. A message from something that doesn't want us landing."

"Look at it, sir." Cruzet gestured at the tiny blot. "A world without sunlight, cold almost to absolute zero. What could live there?"

Cruzet was short and quick and dark. No Anglo, he came from the place of high tech called CERN, and his accent was hard for Mondragon to understand. He sometimes frowned as if Andersen's jokes were riddles to him, but he understood the difficult mathematics of the quantum.

"You say it's dead?" Doubtfully, Stecker squinted at the black blot. "How do you know?"

"Sir, we know dark dwarfs." Cruzet looked at Andersen and waited for his nod. "They're born hot. Heated by gravitational contraction and nuclear fission, but too small to burn the hydrogen that keeps bright stars bright. This one's old. It cooled when the unstable elements were used up. That must have happened several billion years ago. The planet's close to zero Kelvin now. No energy left for any possible life."

"Too bad, Rima." Andersen shook his head at la rubia. "A hard world to terraform -- "

"Forget it!" Stecker snapped. "We're not landing."

Mondragon had no liking for the captain. A man of Earth and not of space, he had been director of Mission StarSeed. Coming aboard to inspect the ship on the day before takeoff, he had abruptly seized command, explaining only that the mission was finished and his work on Earth was done.

"Sir, we've no choice," Cruzet told him now.

"Except to get back into quantum drive," he said. "And fly on the way we were."

"Impossible, sir," Andersen said. "Quantum craft don't control themselves. The launch from White Sands transformed us from a virtual particle into a virtual wave, firing us out of the pit like a bullet from a gun. We didn't bring the gun."

With no choice, they came down to a rocky headland at the rim of the continent of ice that covered half the planet. High cliffs rose north and west toward the ice. The frozen ocean lay south and east, beyond the ancient beach where la rubia and her team of engineers wished to begin excavations for the first habitat.

"No habitat," the captain told her. "If we excavate for anything, it will be for a launch facility. For whatever we need to get us off this damned snowball before we're attacked by God knows what."

"Sir," El Senor Glengarth protested, "I can't imagine anything that could attack us."

He was the first officer and the true master of the ship. Another Anglo, he was yet a fair man who had released Mondragon from security and allowed him to prove his habilidad with computers.

"Just look around us." Glengarth had gathered los expertos in the control dome to plan for survival. He gestured at the holoscreens that showed white-frosted rocks below and the flat white desert that had been an ocean. "I'm not much concerned about anything more hostile than the temperature."

He paused, with a small bow of respect for the captain.

"However, sir, it's true that nobody seems able to explain that peculiar flash. Before we undertake anything else, I want to assemble a vehicle and send out a party to look for the source."

He turned to smile at la rubia, and Mondragon flinched from a stab of jealousy for these fortunate Anglos, men whom los santos had favored with the culture and learning that made them her equals, privileged to know her, perhaps to win her love.

"With luck, Rima," he made a small chiste, "we'll be meeting a native engineer able to help you do your terraforming. You're going to need any help you can get."

When the scout maquina was ready, Mondragon volunteered to join Andersen and Cruzet on the search expedition. He wanted to earn his right among these people of science and courage, and perhaps, con buena suerte --

He dared not think of all he longed for.

Jake Hinch came to take command. A hawk-faced angry man with a ragged beard and a black beret, he was a friend of Stecker but still a stranger on the ship.

Cruzet and Andersen looked hard at each other when they heard the clink of bottles in his bag, but he merely muttered an order for them to carry on as planned and took refuge in his curtained cubicle at the rear of the machine, making no trouble.

The scout was new to all three of them, but easy enough to drive. A great, ungainly metal insect, it carried its bright steel shell high on six long lever-legs that rolled on big-tired wheels for feet. A heat lamp on a tall mast shone to shield them from the cold. They made practice runs along the old beach, and Andersen let Mondragon take the wheel when they set out across the frozen ocean.

"Steer by the sun," Andersen told him. "Just to the right of it."

The cold dwarf sun, the black spot on the stars. Never rising, never setting, it drifted very slowly higher and very slowly back again with the motion Cruzet called libration. Live stars blazed close around it, never dimming or even twinkling; no air or clouds had veiled them for geologic ages. The level whiteness showed no break ahead, no mark behind except the faint dark scar their tires made.

He caught a faint ozone bite from the cycler, which Andersen was still adjusting. Listening, he heard the whisper of the turbine, the muffled murmur when the others spoke, the rustle of his clothing when he moved. Nothing else, because this dead world had no air to carry sound.

He drove without the head lamps. Lighting the ice for only a few hundred meters, they had blinded him to everything beyond. Without them, his eyes adjusted to the starlight. A dim gray world with all color lost, except in the dull red glow of the heat lamp.

He had seen the troubling flash through the wide-field telescope as they orbited to land. A bright sudden light, burning through every color of the spectrum from deepest red to darkest violet, but gone before anybody could be sure of anything. It had come from a spot somewhere out across the frozen ocean, almost due east of the headland.

Five hundred kilometers out, Andersen said. Closer to a thousand, Cruzet thought. The ice around it had looked bright on the radar image, as if rough enough to make a strong reflection. Perhaps an island? A mountain? Cruzet, who had seen it at a higher resolution, said it had looked too tall and thin to be any natural mountain.

A fortress of the ice gods?

Those gods of ice had been only a joke from Andersen, who liked to recall his Viking forebears, but nobody had thought of anything more possible. The flash had come just after the radar search beam swept the spot. Could Jake Hinch be right? Had it been an actual warning, from anything alive?

Would it come again? \* \* \*

Leaning over the wheel, Mondragon scanned the fiat infinity of bone-white frost. A film of frozen argon and nitrogen, Cruzet said, the last trace of the vanished atmosphere. He scanned the splendid sky above it, steady stars burning brighter than those he had known in his boyhood in Chihuahua, set in constellations he had never seen. Ice and stars and dead black sun, nothing else.

No sudden flame with all the colors of el arco iris. No signal from the ice gods, if gods or devils either might exist in this ice infierno where no life of any kind should be. Cruzet came at last to take the wheel, and he climbed into the quartz-domed observation bubble and kept on watching till he dozed and shook himself awake to watch again. Ice and stars and dead sun-disk, nada mas.

Andersen came to drive. At the kitchen shelf in the cabin, Cruzet stirred dry powder into hot water to make the bitter stuff they called syncafe and opened a pack of omninute wafers. Mondragon sliced a cold slab of soyamax, wishing for the goat enchiladas his mother used to make. They called Hinch to ask if he was hungry.

"Garbage!" he shouted through the curtain, voice slurred with whatever he had brought in his bottles. "I've got my own."

Andersen stopped the scout, and they ate soyamax and omninute.

"Compact calories," Andersen said. "Planned to keep the colony alive till we can do better. Every nutrient we need." He made a face. "It will make us try for anything better."

Mondragon slept an hour and took the wheel again. Frost and stars and the dead black sun. Still half asleep, he yawned and worked his stiff hands, stretched and stood behind the wheel, slapped his face and sat again, gripped the wheel and blinked at the level dark horizon.

Something there?

No spectral flash. Only a small black dot on the frost, but maybe something far away. He rubbed his eyes and veered a little toward it. The mountain Cruzet said looked too thin and high to be a mountain? His breath came faster. Should he radio the ship?

"Keep in constant touch," Glengarth had told them. "I don't know what's out there to concern us. Most likely nothing, but we've got to play it safe. If you come on anything unusual, anything at all, call at once. If you approach, do it with all the care you can."

He reached for the radiophone, but stopped his hand when he saw that the object ahead looked suddenly closer, too small for any kind of mountain. When it crept into the heat lamp's glow, he saw that it was no monolithic obelisk of the ice gods, but only a solitary boulder.

Yet it was itself a puzzle to him. What had tossed it here, so far from any land, since the ocean froze? He steered closer for a better look. It was ice, a dark mass the size of a car, jaggedly broken. Searching his small pool of dim red light, he found nothing else except smaller fragments shattered off when it fell. An ice meteorite, fallen a million years ago? Perhaps a billion?

Level frost, black sun, endless midnight, nada mas. He shrugged and drove on again, just to the right of the round black blot. Frost that had never thawed and never would. Stars that never changed. He blinked his aching eyes, his mind drifting back to Cuerno del Oro. The flat-roofed adobes around the plaza, the mud on the rutted streets when the rains came, the dust when they failed, the old stone church where his mother took him to mass. He remembered the ragged child he had been, bare feet numb and aching on frosty winter mornings when he had to herd his father's goats over the rocky hills above the village.

His first promise of escape had come from Don Diego Morales, who returned for the village fiestas and spoke of the starbirds that flew from the white sands in el norte to scatter the human seed across the new and richer worlds that might exist out among the stars.

"I'll learn to ride the star ships," he told the Don. "Cuando tengo suficiente anos."

"Nunca." The lean old Don shook his head. "The stars want no stupid campesinos. I am allowed to work at the launch site, but only at tasks too heavy or too dirty for a gringo. No hay nada." He spat brown tobacco juice at a spider in the dust. "They have no place for such as you."

"Pero yo --" he told the Don. "I will learn what the gringos learn and walk with them among the stars."

Growing up in the village, he learned all he could at la escuela. He learned his small ingles from the Don and the books the Don brought him from el norte. He learned to repair and run an old computer the Don had brought him when the Anglos threw it away, and saved his few pesos to pay for a new one.

Remembering, he felt glad la rubia could never know Cuerno del Oro, could never feel the pain of life there, never smell the sewer ditch or swat the flies or hear the hungry ninos crying. She would blame the people for what they could not help, scorn him for an ignorant mojado --

Or was the thought unfair to her?

He remembered her brave joven hijo Kip, who had found him hiding on the ship, seen his dripping blood, become un buen amigo. She was still the Anglo stranger who hardly knew he was alive, but perhaps if he could earn a place among these pioneers of the stars --

Perhaps.

A sharp jolt bought him back to the frost and the boulders. Fragments of broken ice scattered the pale ruby glow around him. He rubbed his eyes and found more fragments emerging from the starlight ahead, always larger until they became a barrier along the starlit horizon.

A sharper jolt. The scout rocked and dropped.

"Carlos?" Cruzet shouted from the cabin. "What hit us?"

He braked the scout to search his small red island. The vehicle had dropped off a ledge half a meter high, hidden under the frost.

"We fell." He pointed at the ledge. "A drop I didn't see."

"A fracture." Andersen stood peering over his shoulder. "The old sea is frozen to the bottom. Ice here can fracture like any rock." He turned to scan the boulder wall ahead. "Ejecta," he said. "From a meteor crater. We'll get around it. And then --"

He stopped himself, but his craggy face had lit.

"An adventure I never expected." He swung to grin at Cruzet. "You know I began in geology. Switched to astrophysics because our old Earth was known too well. Now this whole planet's ours. A new geology for us to read!"

"Ours?" Cruzet stood with him, staring off into the east, where they thought the flash had been. "Are you sure?"

Andersen went back to keep the fusion engine running.

"My turn to drive." Cruzet beckoned Mondragon away from the wheel. "Get some sleep."

He crawled into his berth in the main cabin. Hinch was snoring behind the curtain, but he couldn't sleep. Cuerno del Oro was too far away, the world of the ice gods too cold and dark and strange. He climbed again into the observation bubble. Cruzet had steered north to find a way around the crater.

The frost beyond lay flat again, white and flat to the black horizon. Ice and midnight, nada mas.

He sat at the instrument board, staring out across that dead starlit infinity, till the chime of the watch clock roused him to read the temperature of the surface radiation and enter it in the log. He used the sextant, as Andersen had taught him, to get a position that let him add one more black ink-dot to the line of black dots on the blank page that was to be their map. And he called the ship.

"Rima Virili here." La rubia's voice startled him. A voice like a song, musical with her beauty. "Acting aide to Mr. Glengarth."

"Buenas --" He stopped himself. He should not be speaking Spanish. Not to her.  
"Carlos Mondragon, reporting."

"Yes?" Her words were courteous and quick, with none of what he felt. "Anything unusual?"

"No problems." He tried for the same expressionless briskness. "Position three hundred seventy-one kilometers east of the ship. Eighteen north. We swung north to get around a crater where Mr. Andersen says a meteor struck the ice. Ice temperature nine degrees Kelvin. The way ahead looks clear. Nothing unusual. No island, no mountain, no signal light."

"Thank you, Mr. Mondragon. I'll inform Mr. Glengarth. Have you anything to add?"

He wanted to ask of el joven Kip. And of Day, the younger ninita, who had la rubia's bright hair and grieved for Me Me, the panda doll she had to leave on Earth. He wanted to tell her that even an untaught campesino might have the feelings of a man.

"Mr. Mondragon?" He had not spoken. "Anything else?"

She was still the gringa extranjera. He heard no warmth in her crisp, inquiring tone.

"Nada," he said. "Nothing more."

"Keep in touch," she said. "Mr. Glengarth is concerned. He wants full reports."

The telephone clicked.

He was nadie. Nobody to her. Not to any Anglo, except perhaps her fine muchachito Kip. Yet he sat there searching the frost, wondering if her art of terraforming could be truly the magic that might turn this planet of ice into the home she wished to make for los ninitos. How could they survive at nine degrees Kelvin? Who except the ice gods, which were only El Senor Andy's joke --

"Carlos!" Cruzet's sharp, impatient voice. "Carlos, are you awake?"

"Que?" Groggy with sleep, he sat up in the chair. "Now I am."

"Look out ahead and call the ship."

Stiff from sitting too long, he turned to look. Cruzet had slowed the scout. A few hundred meters ahead, a cliff had risen between the frost and the midnight sky, a sheer wall of dark ice a dozen meters high. It ran straight to right and left as far as he could see.

"Madre de Dios!" he breathed. "!Que es?"

"Another geologic fault. Andersen says we're in a zone of quakes."



"Can we climb it?"

"Look just above it. We may not want to climb it."

He looked and saw nothing till a hot red point exploded like a nova deep inside the ice. It swelled into a burning disk of rainbow circles that made a target pattern as tall as the cliff. He saw no change for another half minute. Then a darkness spread from the center till all the color was gone.

"A word from the locals." Cruzet's sharp ironic voice crackled out of the interphone. "Welcome, stranger? Or is it scam? Scram while you can?" Two

Calling the ship, he waited for la rubia's voice. For a long time all he heard was the faint rush and murmur of the galaxy's distant heart. When at last he heard a voice, it wasn't hers.

". . . garbled . . . signal garbled . . . please repeat . . ."

"Scout calling." He tried again. "Reporting a wall of ice --"

"Carlos?" Glengarth's voice, suddenly stronger, edged with sharp concern. "What's happening?"

"A wall of ice across our path, senor. Muy alto. El Doctor Cruzet is backing us away."

"Take no chances --"

"Something else, Senor. Mas extrano. A bright light burning in the ice --"

"Can you describe it?"

"Circulos, senor. Circles of light that grow from the center like ripples on water till they show every color del arco iris. Though I think they cease now as we move away."

"Strange." Glengarth paused, perhaps not wanting to believe. "Did you see a cause?"

"No, Senor, except that it appeared as we came near. El Doctor Cruzet thinks perhaps it is intended as a signal."

"From whom?"

"Yo no se. Perhaps the beings of the mountain."

"Have you seen any mountain?"

"Not yet, senor. Nothing except the white frost that covers the ice all the way to the sky."

"Perhaps -- I hope you find no mountain. Are you in danger now?"

"Yo creo que no. Now we are stopping again, farther from the wall. The circles of color do not return."

"Let me speak to your commander."

"Mr. Hinch is below, sir. Sleeping. Or I think borracho."

"Get me Mr. Andersen."

"Andy here, sir." He spoke at once from the nose of the scout. "On the interphone."

"This wall?" Glengarth's tone had sharpened. "What about it?"

"It looks natural enough, sir. A natural geologic upthrust. The fault line runs north and south as far as we can see. Nothing to show when it happened. Could have been a billion years ago. But -- well sir, I just don't know --"

Doubt slowed his voice.

"It has certainly stopped us. For all I know, it could have been created to keep intruders off that island. If there really is an island. When you think about what we seem to be facing, anything able to survive here would have to be highly advanced."

"I suppose. What's this about Mr. Hinch?"

"He's down in his berth. Probably drunk."

"I see." Glengarth paused. "He's an odd one. A surprise to me when he wanted command of the vehicle, but he'd had some kind of dust-up with the captain. Any trouble to you?"

"None, sir. He just told us to carry on."

"Do that. Keep in touch. About this light in the ice?"

"Nothing I can explain, sir. A target-shape of expanding rings, colored like that flash we saw from space. Maybe meant to tell us we're close enough."

"I think you are." A sharper tone. "Wake Mr. Hinch if you can. Inform him that his orders are to turn back at once. And hold the line open. I want constant contact."

"Okay sir."

Mondragon kept the headphones on, but the contact was broken. He heard Andersen calling Hinch and then the whisper of the turbine as they pulled farther from the barrier.

"Hold it!" Hinch's hoarse sardonic bark came close behind him. "If Mr. Glengarth's still on the line, tell him I've been informed. Topsy, maybe, but not too drunk to run this bleedin' circus. We ain't going back."

Twisting Mondragon found Hinch behind him at the top of the cabin steps, gaunt face flushed behind the straggle of beard, a pistol in his hand.

"?Que?" he whispered. "?Que quiere?"

"!Escuche!" A slurred command. "Get this! All three of you. To hell with Stecker and the ship. We're going on to that bleedin' mountain. If there is a bleedin' mountain --"

"Senor --" He had to catch his breath. "Senor Hinch, have you looked outside?"

"I see the cliff." Hinch was breathing hard. The pistol shook in his hand. "I saw the bleedin' flash. Maybe meant to scare us off, but I don't scare. We'll climb the bleedin' ice --"

"!Senor!" he begged. "!Cuidado con la pistola!"

"Cuidado yourself!" Hinch waved the gun. "I ain't borracho, and we ain't turning back."

"I think we're in danger, sir," Andersen called, "if we ignore that signal --"

"We could die." Hinch laughed, a brief, harsh snort. "So what the bleedin' hell! We're already done for, murdered by this crazy mission. We can die slow, of cold and hunger here on the ice. Or faster, if that bleedin' scumbag Stecker gets us back on his death-trap ship and shoots it off again to God knows what. I'll take the ice gods, if you want to call 'em gods. No worse than Rip Stecker."

"Senor --" Mondragon watched the pistol and searched for words. "La Doctora Virili says we need not die. She says we came to terraform the planet. She says we have knowledge to keep us alive, on the ice or under it."

"Turned to bleedin' cannibals!"

"Creo que no, senor. I think we need not die. The engineers have technology for the art called terraforming--" He shrank from a sweep of the gun. "Please, Senor, I think we must continue our search. Perhaps the light bums to make us welcome."

"Not very bleedin' likely!"

"We don't know." Andersen's quiet voice again. "Mr. Hinch, you puzzle me. I believe you came with us because of some misunderstanding with Captain Stecker?"

"If you give a bleedin' damn --" Hinch stepped back and lowered the pistol, but his eyes had a look of desperation. "Let me tell you what a slimy bastard Rip

Stecker is."

"No friend of mine." Cruzet spoke somewhere below. "A dirty trick he played, throwing Captain Alt off the ship."

Startled, Hinch jumped and tipped his haggard head.

"A filthier trick on me! Kidnapped me off the bleedin' Earth. Got me drank and kept me aboard when I never meant to come. Just to shut me up about his bleedin' thievery."

Livid now, his gaunt face twitched.

"But I ain't dead. Not quite yet!"

"So, Mr. Hinch?" Andersen asked. "What do you want to say?"

"No secrets here. Not among the dead." Hinch grinned, his hollowed eyes glaring past Mondragon at the frost and the ice wall and the stars. "Rip's a slick one. Top con man of the bleedin' century, if you ain't already guessed it. He embezzled millions out of the bleedin' mission. Got aboard the ship maybe two minutes ahead of the law. If you wonder how I know, he used me for his bleedin' cat's-paw."

"Huh?"

"StarSeed Mission used to be big business. Real big business!" His ragged voice had slowed, and his arm seemed to relax with the gun. "Every bleedin' ship cost millions, and they launched a lot of ships. Rip Stecker's job was raising all those millions. Conning it out of the bleedin' true believers, and he knew how to diddle the nuts into trading all they had for their chance to shape human destiny -- that's what he called his one-way tickets to die.

"Did it in his own high style." Hinch laughed again, raucously. "Mark him up for that. Ritzy apartments in New York and Geneva. Women to match. He loved to gamble in top casinos all over the world, drunk half the time. Went wild at the end, squandering ten times his pay. That's when he got his hooks into me."

He waved the gun and grinned when Mondragon ducked.

"I'd made my own mistakes. Dipped into the wrong till and did ten years for it. Branded with that, I tried to change my name and make a better start. He found me out and put me to work for him. As mission auditor. I got sick of him and went to the law, which is why he did me in."

He twisted to glare belligerently at Cruzet.

"And why I ain't afraid of him, or you, or any bleedin' ice gods. I ain't going back to die on the ship and let that bastard gnaw my bones. Got it?"

"Thank you, Mr. Hinch." Andersen spoke very quietly through the interphone. "I

think we've got it. I'm glad to know where you stand, but I wonder how you hope to get past this fault in the ice."

"Your problem." Hinch grinned. "You're the engineer."

He went below again. Mondragon heard a bottle clink. Another kilometer back from the ice wall, Andersen stopped the scout to inspect the reactor and the turbine. Cruzet put on his airskin and went down through the lock to check the tires and steering gear.

"Vehicle still heated into safe service range," he reported. "An ice fog around us since we stopped. Formed from frozen air that sublimates under the lamp and freezes again as it spreads."

"Write it in your bleedin' log." Hinch was pushing into the bubble. "If you think anything human will ever live to see it."

Yet, in spite of such sarcasm, he turned suddenly amiable, offering to share his whisky. Mondragon made fresh syncafe and toasted omninute wafers in the microwave. They gathered in the cabin for a meal before Cruzet took the controls to drive them north along the wall. It sank a little, but after ten kilometers it was still four meters high.

"Let's take a look," Andersen called. "I think we can climb it here."

"If you can --" Hinch twisted to squint at him doubtfully. "Do it."

They stopped near the fault. Andersen climbed down through the lock with a box of tools. In the bubble, Mondragon watched him at the wall, drilling holes with a laser that exploded the ice into steam that froze into a thin red fog around them. Loading explosive into the holes, he gestured Cruzet to back them away.

The silent blast lit a great eruption of steam and ice fragments with a flash that dazzled Mondragon. When he could see again, the starlight showed a sloping gap in the barrier. Anderson came back aboard, and Cruzet drove them jolting through it.

"Call the ship," Andersen told Mondragon. "If Mr. Hinch doesn't mind."

Hinch didn't mind.

"What the bleedin' hell," he muttered. "The bleedin' bastard can't touch us now."

Calling, he heard only the hiss and whisper of the cosmos.

"We've dropped below line of sight," Andersen told him. "Which means that any signals have to be reflected down to reach us. The planet seems to have no reflecting ionosphere. Only a broken ring of something higher. Dust, I imagine. We must be under a gap in the ring."

Staring from the bubble as they rolled on, all Mondragon saw was the same infinite flatness of ash-white frost, the same unbroken black horizon, the same eternal stars. Hinch roved the machine for a time, peering ahead from the nose and then from the bubble, and finally vanished into his curtained cubicle.

Andersen stowed his tools away, yawned, and went down to take a nap. When the watch clock chimed, Mondragon read the sextant and the surface temperature, made another black dot on the route map, and got no answer to another call. He was dozing when he heard Cruzet's excited yelp.

"Look ahead! Another light!"

He blinked his sticky eyes and found a point of changing color low above the east horizon. Red that changed to orange, yellow to green, blue to violet and faded into indigo. Long seconds of darkness, and it began again.

"One more warning." Andersen looked at Hinch, who had followed him into the bubble. "Sir, I think we've come far enough?"

"Drive on." Hinch's eyes were red and hollow, the whisky slowing his gritty voice. "Ice gods or ice devils, I'll see how they take human heat."

Andersen turned to Mondragon. "Try the ship."

Again all he heard was the rush of energies too vast for him to understand. Andersen went down to spell Cruzet at the wheel. Alone in the bubble, cut off from all humankind, Mondragon felt that they were utterly alone in their tiny shell, trapped under the uncaring silence of the ice and the weight of endless time. Almost, he thought, as if they were already dead.

The telephone startled him.

"Calling . . . calling scout . . ."

La rubia! Her voice was a thread of life, stretched too thin, too far from warmth and life and hope. In a moment like a dream, he seemed to see her as if she stood somehow on the stony hill behind Cuerno del Oro, facing a wind that blew her bright hair back, holding la ninita and the panda doll in her arms.

"Ship calling scout." Her voice was suddenly stronger. "Can you hear?" "¡Si!" He gasped the words in Spanish. "Escucho."

"Carlos?" He was sorry for the Spanish, but at least she knew his voice. "Where are you now?"

"We blasted a way through the ice wall. We are driving on."

"You were ordered to return." A crisp reprimand. "Mr. Glengarth thinks you're in danger."

"Perhaps. Mr. Hinch doesn't care."

"Let me speak to him."

"He's below. Probably sleeping."

"Get him on the phone." Her voice grew sharper. "Captain Stecker wants a word with him."

"He won't want to talk, but I have something else to report. We see something like a new star low in the east, changing through the rainbow colors we saw from space."

"I think you are danger. Let me speak . . ."

That thread of life had broken. Her voice was gone.

He called Andersen to the bubble, to be there if she got through again. At the wheel himself, he drove on toward the light. No star at all, it burned always brighter, swelled into a rippling target-shape, climbed till he found the mountain under it. No mountain, either, but a thin black rectangle so tall he could not believe it. He stopped the scout, and they all gathered in the bubble, hushed with puzzlement.

"What the devil!" Hinch exploded. "What the bleedin' devil!"

"Nothing natural," Andersen murmured. "Looks like a building, but tall as a mountain. Perhaps they were gods."

They drove on, stopped to study it, drove on again across an ancient beach and up toward where it stood, on a low hill worn smooth with time and silvered with frost. Higher, higher, the tower climbed to blot out half the stars. The flow of color across its face cast a rainbow shimmer over them, brighter than the heat lamp.

"Enough." They were still two hundred meters away, but Andersen raised his hand. "Close enough."

"?Que es?" Mondragon breathed. "What is it?"

They craned their necks and kept on looking. The work of giants, Mondragon thought, if not actual gods. Shading his eyes against the unsteady light, he could trace darker seams between the enormous blocks that formed the wall, blocks twenty meters, maybe thirty on a side. One must have fallen, shattering into a great pile of rubble.

"A door?" Cruzet frowned and pointed. "Is that a door?"

A rectangular patch of deeper darkness half hidden by the rubble, at first it looked too small to be an entrance, not half the height of the titanic blocks around it, but when he let his eyes measure it again, he thought it would be half a dozen meters wide. Squinting through the glow from overhead, he found

only darkness inside.

"Near enough," Andersen said again. "I think we've learned enough --"

"Enough?" Hinch's hoarse rasp stopped him. "I'm going in to face the bleedin' monsters in their den and find out what their bleedin' signal means." THREE

We've found their bleedin' hive. I'm going in." Hinch goggled at Andersen, his eyes blood-shot and wild. "Coming along?"

"Not our mission, sir." Andersen shook his head. "We were just to look and report what we found. We've found enough to trouble me. The report's our duty now."

"What, exactly, have we found?" Hinch demanded.

"I take it to be convincing evidence of intelligent life and a sophisticated civilization older than the ice. Maybe still alive --"

"Ice gods!" Hinch mocked him. "Can you tell 'em what the bleedin' ice gods are?"

"Sir, I think we've found a potential danger to the ship. To any colony we might plant. I think we ought get back while we can, at least into radio range."

"If you're all bleedin' cowards --" Hinch glared at Andersen and then at Cruzet. "I ain't! Get me into my airskin."

Andersen stared back for a moment.

"You shouldn't, sir." He shrugged reluctantly. "But you're in charge."

"Senor --" Mondragon had to gulp and catch his breath. "Senor, you should not go solo."

"Then come along."

"Okay, Senor."

His own words surprised him. He saw Cruzet and Andersen glancing at each other as if to say he was a fool, but he followed Hinch down to the lock.

He had worn the airskin only once, for a test walk down to the old beach and back. The tight-fitted fabric was filled with channels that breathed recycled air over all his body to dry the sweat and cool or warm it. The recycler made a hump on his back. A crystal shell covered his head. Andersen sealed him inside and made him check the controls.

"Watch your cycler," he said. "The air cartridge should do you ten to twelve hours."

They scrambled down to the frost and stood peering up at the tower. Darker than



the sky, it covered half the constellations. He shuddered as if the planet's bitter cold had got into the airskin. De verdad, the powers of the ice gods must be enormous.

Brighter than the heat lamp, the glow from those swelling circles on the tower's face rimmed their shadows with changing color. The vastness of the tower and the strangeness of the light seized him like the hand of death, turning this frozen world into the hell where Father Martino used to warn him that los demonios would be waiting to receive him when he died.

Hinch himself was suddenly another demon. Lean as a spider in his own tight yellow airskin, he still wore the black beret, even in the helmet. His gaunt, gray-bearded head seemed too big for it, and his haggard eyes behind the thick-lensed glasses looked half blind and hardly human. With the pistol and a long-bladed knife buckled to his belt, he had become un verdadero diablo.

Mondragon shrank from him, feeling a sudden pang of sickness for his own native poblito, the flat-roofed adobe where he was born, the rocky hills where he used to herd his father's goats, the old church where his mother prayed. The days since he left it had been a long nightmare of events stranger than he had thought death would be.

The flight across the light-years that took no time at all, this black sun, these blazing stars that never dimmed, this monstrous work of unknown things. Ciertamente this was not the rich new Earth El Senor Stecker and the evangelistas of Mission StarSeed had promised their believers.

Yet la rubia was here, with el joven Kip. And little Day, ana muchachita que bonita. Terraforming was a magic of science he did not understand, but engineers who could build and fly quantum craft had to be respected. At least, with the favor of los santos, he would do whatever he could --

"Chicken?" Hinch's jeering voice rang in his helmet. "Or have the ice gods frozen you?"

Anger clenched his fists and faded slowly into shame. He had done nothing for la rubia, found nothing he could even hope to do. He felt helpless in the thin airskin, naked to the cruel cold and el gringo's crueler scorn. Hinch had become un loco, urging them on till some evil monster killed them.

Yet he himself was no pollo, no kind of chicken.

"!Hijo de cabron!" he muttered, and tramped after Hinch toward the tower. The area was level, as if an ancient pavement lay beneath the frost, but that rubble mountain stood half across their path, the fallen stone shattered into fragments larger than houses.

Beyond it, Hinch glanced back at him and pushed ahead into la entrada, a square tunnel ten meters high. Dim starlight followed them a few dozen meters, and faded into blackness. Hinch slowed to search it with a pale flashlight that soon found the end of the passage, a blank plate of some dull-gray metal, scarred

with ages of corrosion.

"!La puerta?"

A door? Flickering unsteadily over it, the little spot of light found no knob or handle or lock, not even any visible seam to outline any kind of door. Door or not, they had no key.

"!No hay problema!" Hinch gritted. "Mr. Andersen has a very useful llave." \* \* \*

Breathing deeper, relieved to be escaping los acertijos of the tower, he hurried after Hinch back to the scout. Cruzet was on watch in the bubble, but Andersen came down from the nose to meet them at the air lock.

"A bleedin' wall across the tunnel!" Hinch was still in the airskin, his rusty voice booming out of the interphone speakers. "The bleedin' creatures want to seal us out. I want you to get us in the way you got us past that ice uplift."

"High explosive?" Andersen shook his head. "That's asking them to hit us back."

"If they can." Hinch tilted his head to squint as if the cabin lights had blinded him. "But if you want my guess, they died a billion years ago. Anything alive would clean up that mess of rocks outside."

"Something's alive," Cruzet protested. "Alive enough to see us coming."

Hinch glared at him.

"Think about it, sir," Andersen begged him. "They don't want us here." "Maybe they'll kill us." Hinch shrugged. "Maybe they can't. Maybe they've got something we can use." His gaunt head jerked toward the tower. "Maybe --"

"Are you crazy?"

"Aren't we all?" His voice went shrill. "Dead already, don't forget. God knows what's in there for us to grab --"

"You are crazy," Andersen told him. "You really are."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Andersen." Hinch's yellow-gloved claw gripped his gun. "Just let me into the bleedin' tower."

Andersen frowned, shifting on his feet.

"I'll set the charge." He shrugged. "With a timer to let us get back to where I hope we're safe."

Mondragon returned to the tunnel with them, carrying a backpack filled with blocks of something wrapped in bright-red foil. Andersen's laser drill failed to mark the gray metal plate, but it bit slowly into the stone, a jet of silent steam blowing plumes of black dust from the holes.

"Keep alert," Andersen told him. "Warn me if you see anything happening."

Uneasily watching, all he saw was the soundless dark. Andersen drilled three deep holes at the edge of the barrier, packed them with explosive, set the timer. Gathering his tools, he led them out of the tunnel.

Just outside, Hinch stopped to wait.

"Far enough," he muttered. "I want to rush 'em with their bleedin' pants still down."

"If they wear pants --" Andersen grinned for an instant, and hurried on. "I don't want to know."

Cruzet drove them back down to the old beach. They waited in the bubble, watching with binoculars. Hinch had crouched behind the rubble mound. Counting under his breath, Andersen finally whispered, "Now!"

Mondragon felt the scout shiver. Hinch straightened, stood a moment peering around him, and darted into the tunnel. They waited again, taking tums with the binoculars. Hinch didn't come out. Neither did anything else.

Time passed. The stars blazed overhead, as they had blazed forever. The signal light -- if it was a signal light -- kept blazing on the tower. Rainbow hues rippled over rocks and frost. Andersen updated the log. Cruzet heated water for bitter syncafe.

"Coffee it ain't." Andersen drained his cup, made a face, and frowned at them. "Want to go in to look for Mr. Hinch?"

"Hardly." Cruzet scowled. "Are we idiots?"

"Yo creo que no." Mondragon shook his head. "I think we must go back to tell what we have seen."

"But not quite yet." Andersen looked at his watch. "We'll give him eight more hours. About the limit of his cycler cartridge. If he's still alive."

On watch in the bubble three hours later, Mondragon felt a heavier jolt. The sky seemed to dim. Clutching at his seat, he looked up to see that great disk of flowing color flicker and dim. It went out. The tower was left a stark black shadow that reached to the zenith.

"What was that?" Andersen came muttering up the steps into the bubble. "I was asleep."

"?Un terremoto? The tower light was extinguished."

They stood peering back at the tower and out across the flat whiteness of the frozen sea. Andersen typed a note into the log and shook his head. "I don't get

it. The planet ought to be cold to the core, with no energy left for any kind of quakes --"

"!Alli!" Mondragon caught his breath and pointed. "El Senor Hinch."

Hinch had come out of the tunnel and dropped flat behind the rubble mound, though nothing seemed to pursue. He had lost the pistol and the knife. In a moment he was on his feet again, running hard, empty hands beating wildly around his head as if trying to strike at some invisible attacker.

"!Salio!" Mondragon shouted to Cruzet. "Open the lock for him!"

"Will do."

He heard the motors whir and the muffled clang of the opening door. Hinch came up beside them, beating desperately at nothing. The black beret was gone. The glasses had slid aside, hanging on one ear. He ran with his head twisted to look back, darting from side to side as if he hadn't seen the scout.

"!Senor!" Mondragon gasped into the microphone. "!Aqui!"

Deaf to him, Hinch veered around them and ran on until they lost him in the starlight.

"We'll follow," Andersen said. "He'll have to stop when he's exhausted. We'll try to pick him up."

They traced his footprints, sometimes visible where his boots had crushed the film of frost, though often too dim to see. He had run fast and far. They had come nearly six kilometers out across the frozen sea before Mondragon saw a dark scar ahead, with no tracks beyond it.

"!Alto!" he shouted. "Stop!"

Cruzet stopped the machine a few meters from a sharp-edged crevasse two meters wide.

"Opened by that quake." Andersen stared into it, blankly nodding. "Since we came."

It ran almost straight in both directions as far as they could see. Still in their airskins, Andersen and Mondragon went out to look over the edge. The rim was pink in the heat lamp's glow, but the sheer ice walls turned black a few meters down. They saw no bottom.

"I think the gods of ice were angered," Mondragon said. "I think they opened the ice to swallow El Senor Hinch."

He felt a chill of fear, and a sadness for Hinch. Un loco, but perhaps more unlucky than evil. El hombre mas maslissimo was surely Captain Stecker, who had made Hinch a greater thief than he had ever been, and then brought him on the

flight to silence the story of their crimes. Not that the ice gods would care about human good or human evil. They had simply moved with their terrible power to defend themselves from the intruder who broke into the tower in spite of their warnings. Por la gracia de Dios, they had not harmed the scout.

Aboard again, they found Cruzet in the bubble.

"Are we trapped?" He nodded anxiously at the fissure. "Or can we get across?"

"We must." Andersen stood a moment staring grimly back at the tower. "With news of this for Glengarth. I think it means we'd better get off the planet, any way we can."

!Que lastima! Mondragon thought. Oue lastima pot la Doctora Virili y los ninitos pobrecitos. Ciertamente now, this dark world would never be terraformed into the home she hoped for.

"I'll take the wheel." Andersen studied the crevasse. "It's hardly two meters wide. With the legs extended to full span, I think I can drive us --"

He stopped, with an odd sound in his throat. His lanky body jerked and stiffened. Eyes strangely glazing, he stood rigid for an endless minute, staring at the tower.

"Take . . . wheel . . . now . . ." He caught a wheezy breath. His voice had slowed, his loud words stranger than his blind and glassy eyes. "Drive . . . back . . . tower . . ."

"Andy?" Cruzet shrank from him "What's hit you?"

"Take . . . wheel . . . drive . . . tower . . . now . . ."

Four

!Muerto!" Mondragon shrank from that glassy glare.

"Un muerto."

"Now!" Andersen's stiffened arm lifted convulsively, as if to strike him, and the dead voice came again. "Tower . . . now!"

"Okay." Silent for a dozen heartbeats, Cruzet nodded quietly. "Okay, Andy. Anything you want."

With a dazed shrug, he returned to the controls and drove them back to the tower. Mondragon crouched away from Andersen, feeling sick with pity and dread. A brave and able man of science, a friend who never seemed to care that he was only an illegal polizon aboard the ship without rights or place--

What was Andersen now?

Something too strange to be human, he stood without motion, as if the ice gods had turned him to a man of ice. His breath was a slow, labored rasp. His blind stare fixed on the tower ahead, he said nothing else until Cruzet stopped them beside that mountain of broken stone.

"Lock . . ." His strange loud groan came again. "Out . . . now!"

Moving with clumsy awkwardness, he climbed down into the air lock. Following uneasily, Mondragon heard the hum and thud of the opening valve and saw Andersen clamber into it, bareheaded.

"!Pare, Senor!" he shouted. "You require your helmet."

Andersen froze.

"Hel?" He labored with the word. "Hel-met . . . now!"

Cruzet came down to help him seal and lock the crystal shell. Climbing into the bubble, they watched him stalk unsteadily out of the heat lamp's glow. Reeling at first as if he had no sense of balance, he rounded the rubble pile and disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel.

"!Una maquina!" Mondragon whispered. "No longer a man."

"My friend," Cruzet made a bitter face. "Since high school. We came looking for a better world than Earth. Came a thousand light-years for this!"

"Perhaps we should follow?" Mondragon frowned uncertainly. "To see what happens? Help him if we can?"

"He wouldn't want us taking such a risk." Cruzet shook his head. "Our duty is still to get word back to the ship."

And to la rubia, though word of this would bring her no cheer.

"Voy --" His own voice unnerved him, but the duty was plain. Cruzet could carry the news with no aid from him. He gulped and began again. "Voy a it. El Senor Andy was kind to me. Perhaps he needs me now."

Cruzet had been another man of science, who spoke the language of mathematics, lived in the vast cosmos where worlds were only atoms, and who sometimes spoke of mankind as only one more species in danger of extinction. Yet his voice broke now, and tears filled his eyes.

"If you would --" he whispered hoarsely, and paused to frown in thought. "He will be in trouble when his air cell fails. It's already had seven or eight hours of use. You might follow with a spare."

"!Hecho! Hecho. Anything I can."

Cruzet found the spare and showed him once more how to fit it to the airskin.

Carrying it slung over his shoulder, he left the scout and followed around the rubble and into the tunnel. That eroded metal barrier showed no damage when he reached it, but Andersen had gone on beyond the ragged gap the blast had torn in the stone. Climbing through the gap, he stabbed his light into blackness beyond.

"?Senor?" He tried to shout, but the weight of darkness and la potencia of the ice gods had crushed his voice to a rusty quaver. "Donde -- ? Where are you?"

No answer. He called again, listened again, pushed on again, trying to shut his mind to el miedo y los demonios of the dark. The tunnel here sloped sharply upward. Shivering from something more than cold, from the dead stillness of many billion years, he listened and climbed again until a tiny square of blue light glowed and brightened far ahead, Andersen's angular frame outlined for a moment against it.

Breathing faster, he pushed to the top of the slope and came out of the tunnel into a space so great that the shock of wonder stopped him. The floor was a wide field of some dull gray stuff, a full kilometer long. The walls towered sixty meters high. They were pocked with row on row of dark triangular pits. Hundreds of small holes, thousands, rising in row after row. The ceiling was an endless arch, shining with the cold blue glow.

Andersen was lost for a moment in that dim vastness. Tiny in the distance, he was already halfway down the endless floor, stalking stiffly on toward a wide stair that led up to a long platform against the far wall.

"!Senor!" His shout was a hoarse bark. "!Un momentito! !Un momentito por la humanidad!"

Andersen lumbered on, ignoring him. Mondragon tried to run, and lost his breath. A yellow light flashed in his helmet, and he heard the computer's urgent female voice: Warning! Cycler overload. Reduce air demand.

He stumbled on, but Andersen reached the stair two hundred meters ahead, climbed it to the great stage, and marched on toward a huge black cylinder half embedded in the wall. It revolved as he approached. A deep niche moved into view. Andersen reeled into it. The cylinder turned again, and the platform was empty before Mondragon reached it.

A doorway? Into what?

He waited, hoping it would open again for him, or perhaps to let Andersen return. It didn't open. He set his helmet radio to its greatest power and called again. No response. He hammered his fists against the cylinder's slick black face. As useless, he thought, as pounding on a steel bank vault.

"!Socorro!" he appealed to los santos y la Madre sagrada. "Make them set El Senor free, and I'll believe forever."

Did he expect his mother's useless santos to rule los demonios de hielo? He tried to laugh and blundered blindly around the empty platform till a red light

flashed in his helmet. A gong rang, and he heard the anxious female voice. Warning! Air cartridge low. Terminate activity.

He could only clench his fists. His time here was up. Andersen was gone. Hinch was dead. The gods of ice had left them nothing. Nothing except the duty to carry their report back to the ship. Yet what could they report? No good news for la rubia. Only that they had found the ice gods as unknowable and implacable as all gods were, using dreadful powers to protect the secrets of their temple.

The best he could do was to leave the spare cell where Andersen could find it, if they ever let him out. Mondragon laid it outside the door. Time to go, yet still he waited, calling with his helmet radio at the cylinder's blank black face and listening to the dreadful stillness until the red light flickered again and the computer chirped with its synthetic concern: Warning! Terminate activity now!

He walked back down the stair but stopped to look at those thousands of holes in the walls. They were a meter wide at the bottom, nearly twice as high. Each held a little pile of oddly shaped objects half buried in fine gray dust.

Curious, he reached for a narrow strip of something like plastic or thin glass. It was nearly two meters long, curved and tapered to a point at one end. Dully translucent when he held it: toward the glowing ceiling, it had a faded amber color like nothing he had ever seen. He laid it back to inspect the one beside it. Its mirror image.

?Que es?

Frowning, he dug others out of the dust. They came in pairs, he saw, right and left. Parts of things that had been alive? Squinting into the dark at the back of the pits, he saw that each held something round and yellow-white, a little larger than a human skull.

?Craneos?

Skulls of the ice gods? Too far back for him to reach, they stared out of the dimness with hollow cavities that looked to be the empty sockets of huge and wide-spaced eyes. Smaller openings toward the sides might have been for ears or nostrils, though he saw no jaws or teeth.

Feeling a sudden chill, as if a billion years of frozen night had gotten into the airskin, he reached again for one of those long, translucent shells. A wing cover, perhaps, if the creature had been able to fly? Stirring the dust, he found brittle, thin-walled tubes that ended in hinge-like joints. Bones of arms or legs? Shivering, he laid them in the dust where they had been and backed away to frown again at the endless rows of holes in the walls above him, crypts for many thousand beings.

The necropolis of the ice gods?

Or had they been gods at all?



Warning! The red light had flickered again, and the computer voice trilled its digitized alarm. Air cell near exhaustion. Terminate activity now.

He looked back across that high stage. An altar to the absent gods? Whatever they had been. The black cylinder had not turned again. He called once more, and listened to the silent centuries. His mother had dreaded fantasmas, the evil ghosts of the dead, and he shuddered to a sudden sense that the tower was una rumba embrujada, a haunted tomb.

Had these dead creatures lit that spectral beacon to lure them across the frost to join them in death? He had always wanted to laugh at his mother's fears of brujas, of los ojos malos y demonios de la noche, but suddenly now the airskin felt cold with his sweat.

Breathing hard, he tried to hurry, tramping back across the acres of gray and empty floor beneath the graves of the dead ice gods, and on down the sloping tunnel. It seemed to stretch longer now, the choking darkness thicker. Fighting for breath, he stumbled giddily and stopped to wonder why he should hurry.

He was back in Chihuahua, lost at night on the hills above the village. He thought he saw lights below, but they were far off and the life was gone from his knees. Panting, he found no air. He fell, and did not try to stand. His father would surely find him when the sun came up, and he thought he could already smell the tortillas de maiz y cabrito con chile his mother would have ready for them at la casa.

Sleeping, he dreamed that he was on another world, far off among the stars. A strange world at first, because of the terrible winter. The sky was gray and dark. The sun was low in the east, an enormous dull-red ball that gave no heat. A bitter wind blew out of the north, drifting masses of broken ice across the sea beneath him.

He was numb and aching with the cold, yet his task absorbed him. He was riding a square block of dark stone. It was twenty times his height, yet he had learned the skill how to steer it. Keeping it safely above the ice, he guided his flight toward the sun and felt a thrill of pride when he saw the great walls they were building. Un monumento that should endure forever.

His gente were busy all about the island. He waited in the air till he saw el arno flying up to show him where the block must be set. When that was done, he could eat and rest and warm himself. He could sleep until el arno sent him back to the quarries --

"Carlos?" El amo's voice came faintly from somewhere far away. "Can you hear me?"

He didn't want to wake, because he was still cold and stiff and aching. "Are you okay?"

El amo's voice had changed. He groaned and stretched and opened his eyes to find

himself in a strange little box. A strange creature had seized the wing that was no longer a wing.

"Carlos, can you speak?"

Too cold and weak to move, he lay staring blankly around him till suddenly he knew that the box was the cabin of the scout. The creature was El Doctor Cruzet. His head ached, and his throat felt dry and painful. He fought for air till he found breath enough to speak.

"How -- " He tried to sit up and sank back to breathe again. "How did I get here?"

"You came reeling out of the tower like a dead man." Cruzet bent closer, peering into his eyes as if he had been a dangerous stranger. "I helped you through the lock. Got your airskin off. Hours ago. I thought you were really dead."

"I think-- I think I died," he whispered. "Yet they saved my life. Gracias a Dios. I don't know why. I don't know how."

"We don't know them." Cruzet shrugged, still frowning at him. "I'm not sure I want to know them."

He slept again, with no dreams. Stronger when he woke, and no longer shivering he sat up to sip at the bitter syncafe Cruzet offered.

"Una pesadilla." He shrank from Cruzet's questions. "A nightmare of evil I do not wish to remember." Yet he tried to tell what he could. "I never overtook El Senor Andy," he finished. "That strange door received him, and never let him out. I waited for him. Waited too long. My air failed. I fell and dreamed.

"Un sueno muy extrano. I dreamed I was one of them, a creature that had wings. I was transporting great blocks of stone, riding them from some far-off quarry to build a tower. It seemed like this tower, though in another world. I flew above an ocean, toward an island. A strange sun was low in the east. Enorme, but red and very dim. It gave no heat --"

"I think you had more than a dream." Cruzet slowly nodded. "I think you saw this world as once it was." He frowned, thinking. "The sun must have seemed larger then, before tidal drag had pushed the planet so far out."

"El Senor Andy --"

"My friend." Cruzet swayed to a tired and bitter shrug. "Dead by now --"

"Por verdad, Senor, he is alive." Mondragon whispered the words, surprised at them. "He will return to us."

Cruzet squinted. "How do you know?"

"Yo no se. But I am sure."

"If you are --" Cruzet stood back from him, eyes narrowed in thought. "I don't like what we've met here." He spoke at last, very calmly. "Something that has survived on this ice a billion years and more. Something that sensed us a million kilometers out. Something that shakes the planet like a bowl of jelly. And works men like puppets. It's beyond my comprehension."

"They frighten me." Mondragon shuddered. "Perhaps they defend the bones of their ancestors. Perhaps they don't. They killed El Senor Hinch. I think they saved my life. El Senor Andy- ?Quien sabe?"

"We haven't seen them, but they face us with a difficult predicament." Cruzet's steel calm surprised him. "A circumstance we must accept." His lean jaw jutted. "I'm going in, to look for Andy."

He got into his airskin.

"I'll take the holocam," he said. "We'll need pictures for Glengarth, if they'll let me take pictures. Give me twelve hours. If you don't see us coming out by then, try to get back to the ship."

"!Que Dios te bendiga!" Mondragon stood up to stare through a window at the red-lit rubble and tall black shadow of the tower. "They are nothing we can understand."

"Pray for Andy," Cruzet begged him, "if you believe in prayer."

Breathing deep and thanking los santos for good air, he helped seal Cruzet's helmet and let him through the lock. "Sagrado Jesus y los santos . . ." He used to laugh when his mother wanted him to come with her to mass, but he was murmuring the old prayers he could recall as he watched Cruzet pick a way out of the heat lamp's glow and vanish into the tunnel.

Climbing into the bubble, he watched the tower and watched the stars, sadly thinking that la rubia's dream of terraforming would have to die. Groggy at last from watching groggy for sleep, he brewed more syncafe and jogged in place and fought to stay alert. Six long hours had gone before Cruzet limped wearily out of the tunnel.

"No sign of Andy." Peeling his airskin off, he made a dismal shrug. "Except that something has taken the air cell from where you said you left it."

"He will come back." Mondragon filled their mug with hot syncafe. "We must wait."

"If you can tell me what they are --" In the bubble again, Cruzet stared up at the tower's topless shadow and turned back to stare at him. "Tell me what they want. Why they lit the beacon for us. And what they want."

"Yo no se."

"We must write up what we know." Cruzet tossed his shoulders in the manner of his own, and stood a moment squinting into the dark before he turned to the keyboard. "For whatever use it may be if we never get back."

Tapping the keys, he spoke aloud.

"The creatures were evidently bipedal, though half of them had at least vestigial wings. A sex difference, or perhaps the young had wings, shed as they aged? Skeletal features suggest that they originated as marine creatures or amphibians. To judge from the brain cases, they must have been as intelligent as we are. Smarter, perhaps, or they would never have survived."

"Or did they?" Mondragon shuddered. "Los huesos . . . The bones looked so very dead."

"One thing I do know." Cruzet rubbed at his reddened eyes. "I'm famished and dead for sleep."

When the log entry was typed, they made sandwiches of soyamax between omninute wafers and shared a bar of precious Earth chocolate they found in Hinch's bag. Taking turns, they watched and rested till Cruzet rolled out of his berth and reached for his airskin.

"One more look," he said. "Before we have to give him up and try to get back."

Gone only half an hour, he plodded heavily back from the tower and took a long time getting through the lock. Out of his airskin, he blinked at Mondragon in a dazed way before he spoke.

"They've shut us out," he said. "Sealed up Hinch's hole in the wall."

Mondragon followed him forward. Reaching for the wheel, Cruzet stopped to stare blankly back at the tunnel mouth, his face as pale as if the frost had got into his bones.

"The seal's something like a dark concrete," he muttered as if to himself. "Smoothed even with the stone. Which means they must have come outside to finish it, though they didn't bother to clean up the debris from the blast." He shrugged and gripped the wheel. "I guess it means they're tough with us."

Mondragon climbed into the bubble, watching the tower as Cruzet backed away and started down the slope to the frozen beach. Before they had gone a kilometer, he felt a sharp jolt. Cruzet stopped the scout and climbed into the bubble.

"What did you see?"

"Nada, Senor."

"Too many quakes." Cruzet's iron control gave way to a shiver. "On a planet too old to quake. I don't like it, but we've got to try again."

He returned to the controls. Before they had rolled a dozen meters, another quake rocked them.

FIVE

They were sitting in the bubble, watching the tower and alert for anything, when Andersen came limping back around the rubble mountain. He stopped, staring as if the darkness confused him, and stumbled on toward them.

"!Gracias!" Mondragon breathed. "Gracias a todo de los santos."

He was waiting to help Andersen out of the lock.

"?Senor? ?Como 'sta?"

Swaying unsteadily, Andersen looked pale and drawn. He stood frowning through the stubble of red beard as blankly as if Mondragon had been a stranger, but the clumsy stiffness of la maquina male was gone.

"Senor," Mondragon whispered. "!Somos amigos!"

"Thank God!" he murmured at last. "Thank God you waited."

"Andy?" Cruzet came down from the wheel. "What did they do to you?"

"Nothing." He shrugged and stumbled toward his berth. "But we had a conversation."

"How --" Cruzet searched for words. "Tell us."

"Dead on my feet." He sank down to his berth. "Too groggy to talk, but they're letting us go. We can start back now."

Mondragon saw his haggard eyes fix on the syncafe machine and filled a mug for him. He gulped it down, held the mug out for more, and dropped it, asleep where he sat. Mondragon eased him down to the berth, pulled his boots off and spread a blanket over him.

"You heard him?" Cruzet whispered. "He said we can go?"

"Si," Mondragon murmured uncertainly. "I think."

"We'll try."

He turned the scout and drove cautiously away. No quake stopped them. Driving faster, he crossed the old beach and followed their track back toward the ship. Mondragon stood a long time over Andersen. His breathing was heavy. Once he stiffened and shouted incoherently in that dead voice, but seemed to relax when Mondragon spoke.

The tower was lost in the starlight behind when Mondragon went forward for his

turn at the wheel. All he could see was stars and frost and their track, a thin dark scar stretched across the starlit flat infinity to the flat horizon. He watched the track and watched the stars and wondered what Andersen would say of los demonios del hielo.

A sudden jolt rocked the him.

"Carlos?" Cruzet shouted from the cabin. "Another quake?"

Frowning into the starlight, he found a dark and jagged mark across the track just ahead. He stopped the scout.

"Un otto terremoto, yo creo." Climbing down the steps, he found Andersen sitting up on the side of his berth. "I think they want to keep us till they kill us. Like they killed Senor Hinch."

"Not so." Andersen stood up, yawning and stretching. "They promised not to harm us." He shuffled into the toilet to relieve himself and wash his face. He came back grinning at a water bottle and a dish of omninute wafers that Cruzet had set on the shelf at the end of the berth. "Though I thought they were going to starve me."

"Senor, there was another quake," Mondragon protested. "I see a split in the ice ahead of us."

"But not to stop us." He gulped water and sat back on the berth. "They were closing that crevasse that caught Hinch, so that we can leave. They're with us now."

"If you're that sure--" Cruzet squinted sharply at him. "What are they? What do they want?"

"I'm famished." He picked up a wafer and laid it back. "But their story won't take long to tell. They is the wrong word, really. We were dealing with a single mind that has survived. A singular mind. Our scales of time never quite meshed, but it chills you through to know how old the planet is. I believe the last of them died before our Earth was born."

He stopped, staring at the bulkhead.

"So?" Cruzet urged him. "If they're all dead --"

"You can imagine the problem they faced at the end." He hunched his shoulders and pulled his arms against him, as if a cold wind had struck him. "Their sun and their planet were dying young. They'd hoped and worked to survive, but events conspired against them. They knew other worlds existed, but they'd failed to invent wavecraft or anything equivalent. What they did was to create an AI. An artificial intelligence designed to preserve the best of their civilization, a culture that must have been as advanced as our own--"

"Just a computer?" Cruzet interrupted him. "Playing its funny games with us?"

"A very serious game." Andersen shook his head. "It's nothing quite alive, as we define life, but it has been able to maintain and defend itself though all these ages. As it still intends to do. It tried to warn us away. It put a stop to Hinch when he became a threat. But now, since it learned about our wavecraft, it has accepted us. That gives it hope, if hope is the word for any AI. It sees a possibility that we can facilitate its program."

"Program?" Cruzet leaned to face him. "What's that?"

"Survival." Andersen paused, gazing off as if at something far away.

"They are dead, but the AI is programmed to keep their culture alive. And I think something more than that. Call it their racial mind."

"It cares about us?"

"If an AI can care." He nodded, looking again at the wafers.

"I got it to understand our predicament here. Marooned on a world too cold for us, with no technology really adequate to keep us alive or get us away. I believe it intends to give us the science and resources we may need."

"And in return?" Cruzet stiffened, eyes narrowed doubtfully. "What does it want?"

"It asks for nothing." A quizzical shrug. "Except for us to learn their culture and their science. To become a new vehicle for the mind of their race. I don't get all the implications, but it's giving us time to learn what it wants us to know. It's used to taking time."

"That's all?" Cruzet sat down on the opposite berth, staring at him. "Really all?"

"Enough. Quite enough, when you think about it."

He reached for the wafers.

"?De verdad, Senor?" Mondragon shook his head. "?Truly, hay no demonios?"

"Only a program in a machine." The haunted eyes came to rest on him. "Yet I think it should be called a mind."

"?Que es la nigromancia mala? The evil magic that raised a wall of ice to stop us and opened that pit to swallow Senor Hinch?"

"Magic to us. Science to them." He leaned for another wafer. "I inquired. Toward the end, they tried to escape the cold by going underground. They built heat engines to use the heat left in the planet's core. Cooling finally shrank it, causing tectonic stresses that had to be controlled. They learned to stop quakes and make quakes. Cold as the surface is now, there's still core heat left they

can tap in emergencies such as our arrival."

"Muy extraño," Mondragon whispered. "More than I can understand." "And I." Andersen shrugged. "We'll all have enough to learn." He got to his feet. "I'm getting some breakfast," he told Cruzet. "But we can be driving on."

"?La raja, Señor? That crack in the ice?"

"They promised to close it for us. Perhaps with the shock we felt."

"Bien, Señor. Muy bien, if that is true."

It was true. La raja was only a narrow mark across the frost when they reached it. Driving on, he followed their track toward the ship and groped for entendimiento.

"Will the science of los muertos allow the wavecraft to be launched again?" he asked Cruzet. "Perhaps to find the better world we hoped for? Or will La Doctora Rima be enabled to terraform the planet as she wished?"

"Who knows?" Cruzet shrugged and turned to stare across the frost ahead. "We'll be learning. Learning quite a lot."

"When I was a child," Mondragon said, "my mother used to tell of three wise kings who came with gifts from the east. They never came to Cuemo del Oro with anything for me, but now I think we may become los tres hombres sabios of this dark world."

"Why not?" Smiling, Cruzet nodded. "The future they have promised is a richer gift than I ever imagined."

Los muertos had touched him, he thought, when they saved his life. Touched him with the edge of their wisdom. That had made him something more than el pobre mojado he had been.