

# *Grant's Big Advent Calendar*

THANKS FOR PARTICIPATING!

*Merry  
Christmas  
one and all*



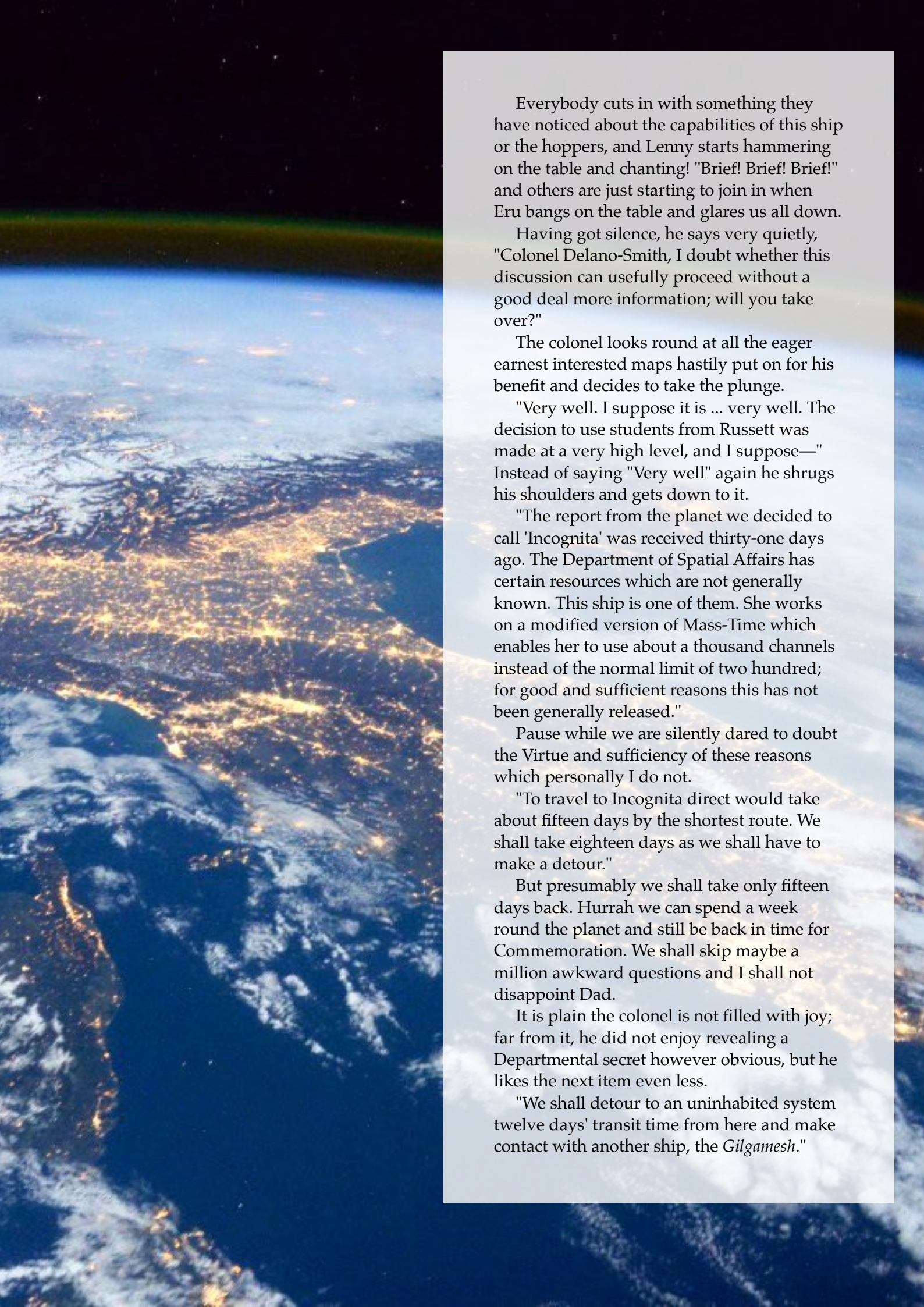
Here's your  
Master Author Showcase story  
from the pages of the  
Inner Circle Writers' Magazine



PRESENTS  
MASTER AUTHOR  
SHOWCASE

THE LOST  
KAFOOZALUM  
PART TWO

BY  
PAULINE ASHWELL



Everybody cuts in with something they have noticed about the capabilities of this ship or the hoppers, and Lenny starts hammering on the table and chanting! "Brief! Brief! Brief!" and others are just starting to join in when Eru bangs on the table and glares us all down.

Having got silence, he says very quietly, "Colonel Delano-Smith, I doubt whether this discussion can usefully proceed without a good deal more information; will you take over?"

The colonel looks round at all the eager earnest interested maps hastily put on for his benefit and decides to take the plunge.

"Very well. I suppose it is ... very well. The decision to use students from Russett was made at a very high level, and I suppose—" Instead of saying "Very well" again he shrugs his shoulders and gets down to it.

"The report from the planet we decided to call 'Incognita' was received thirty-one days ago. The Department of Spatial Affairs has certain resources which are not generally known. This ship is one of them. She works on a modified version of Mass-Time which enables her to use about a thousand channels instead of the normal limit of two hundred; for good and sufficient reasons this has not been generally released."

Pause while we are silently dared to doubt the Virtue and sufficiency of these reasons which personally I do not.

"To travel to Incognita direct would take about fifteen days by the shortest route. We shall take eighteen days as we shall have to make a detour."

But presumably we shall take only fifteen days back. Hurrah we can spend a week round the planet and still be back in time for Commemoration. We shall skip maybe a million awkward questions and I shall not disappoint Dad.

It is plain the colonel is not filled with joy; far from it, he did not enjoy revealing a Departmental secret however obvious, but he likes the next item even less.

"We shall detour to an uninhabited system twelve days' transit time from here and make contact with another ship, the *Gilgamesh*."

At which Lennie DiMaggio who has been silent till now brings his fist down on the table and exclaims, "You *can't!*"

Lennie is much upset for some reason; Delano-Smith gives him a peculiar look and says what does he know about it? and Lennie starts to stutter.

Cray remarks that Lennie's childhood hobby appears to have been spaceships and he suffers from arrested development.

B says it is well known Lennie is mad about the Space Force and why not? It seems to have uses. Go on and tell us Lennie.

Lennie says "*G-Gilgamesh* was lost three hundred years ago!"

"The flaw in that statement," says Cray after a pause, "is that this may be another ship of the same name."

"No," says the colonel. "Explorer Class cruiser. They went out of service two hundred eighty years back."

The Space Force, I remember, does not re-use names of lost ships: some say Very Proper Feeling some say Superstitious Rot.

B says, "When was she found again?"

Lennie says, "It was j-just thirty-seven revolutions of his native planet which means f-f-fifty-three Terrestrial years ago, she was found by an Interplanetary scout called *Crusoe*."

Judging by the colonel's expression this data is Classified; he does not know that Lennie's family come from one of the oldest settled planets and are space-goers to a man, woman, and juvenile; they pick up ship gossip the way others hear about the relations of people next door.

Lennie goes on to say that the Explorer Class were the first official exploration ships sent out from Earth when the Terries decided to find out what happened to the colonies formed during the Exodus. *Gilgamesh* was the first to re-make contact with Garuda, Legba, Lister, Cor-bis and Antelope; she vanished on her third voyage.

"Where was she found?" asks Eru.

"Near the p-p-pole of an uninhabited planet—maybe I shouldn't say where because that may be secret, but the rest's History if you know where to look."



Maybe the colonel approves this discretion; anyway his face thaws very slightly unless I am imagining it.

"*Gilgamesh* crashed," he says. "Near as we can make out from the log, she visited the Seleucis system. That's a swarmer sun. Fifty-seven planets, three settled; and any number of fragments. The navigator calculated that after a few more revolutions one of the fragments was going to crash on an inhabited planet. Might have done a lot of damage. They decided to tow it out of the way.

"Grappling-beams hadn't been invented. They thought they could use Mass-Time on it a kind of reverse thrust—throw it off course.

"Mass-Time wasn't so well understood then. Bit off more than they could chew. Set up a topological relation that drained all the free energy out of the system. Drive, heating system—everything.

"She had emergency circuits. When the engines came on again they took over—landed the ship, more or less, on the nearest planet. Too late, of course. Heating system never came on—there was a safety switch that had to be thrown by hand. She was embedded in ice when she was found. Hull breached at one point—no other serious damage."

"And the ... the crew?"

Dillie ought to know better than that.

"Lost with all hands," says the colonel.

"How about weapons?"

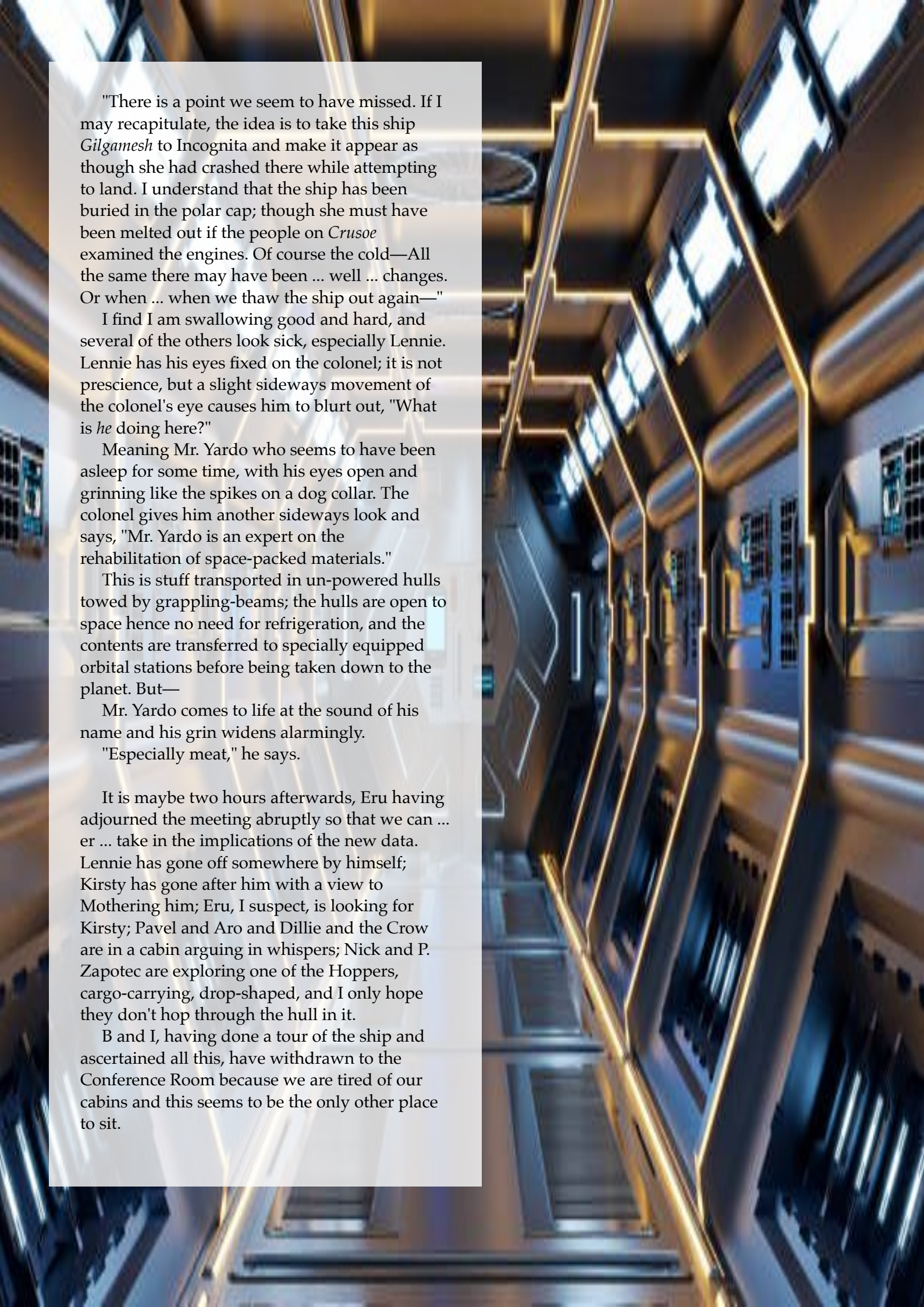
We are all startled. Cray is looking whitish like the rest of us but maintains his normal manner, i.e. offensive affection while pointing out that *Gilgamesh* can hardly be taken for a Menace unless she has some means of aggression about her.

Lennie says, "The Explorer Class were all armed —"

"Fine," says Cray, "presumably the weapons will be thoroughly obsolete and recognizable only to a Historian—"

Lennie says the construction of no weapon developed by the Space Department has ever been released; making it plain that anyone but a Nitwit knows that already.

Eru and Kirsty have been busy for some time writing notes to each other and she now gives a small sharp cough and having collected our attention utters the following Address.



"There is a point we seem to have missed. If I may recapitulate, the idea is to take this ship *Gilgamesh* to Incognita and make it appear as though she had crashed there while attempting to land. I understand that the ship has been buried in the polar cap; though she must have been melted out if the people on *Crusoe* examined the engines. Of course the cold—All the same there may have been ... well ... changes. Or when ... when we thaw the ship out again—"

I find I am swallowing good and hard, and several of the others look sick, especially Lennie. Lennie has his eyes fixed on the colonel; it is not prescience, but a slight sideways movement of the colonel's eye causes him to blurt out, "What is *he* doing here?"

Meaning Mr. Yardo who seems to have been asleep for some time, with his eyes open and grinning like the spikes on a dog collar. The colonel gives him another sideways look and says, "Mr. Yardo is an expert on the rehabilitation of space-packed materials."

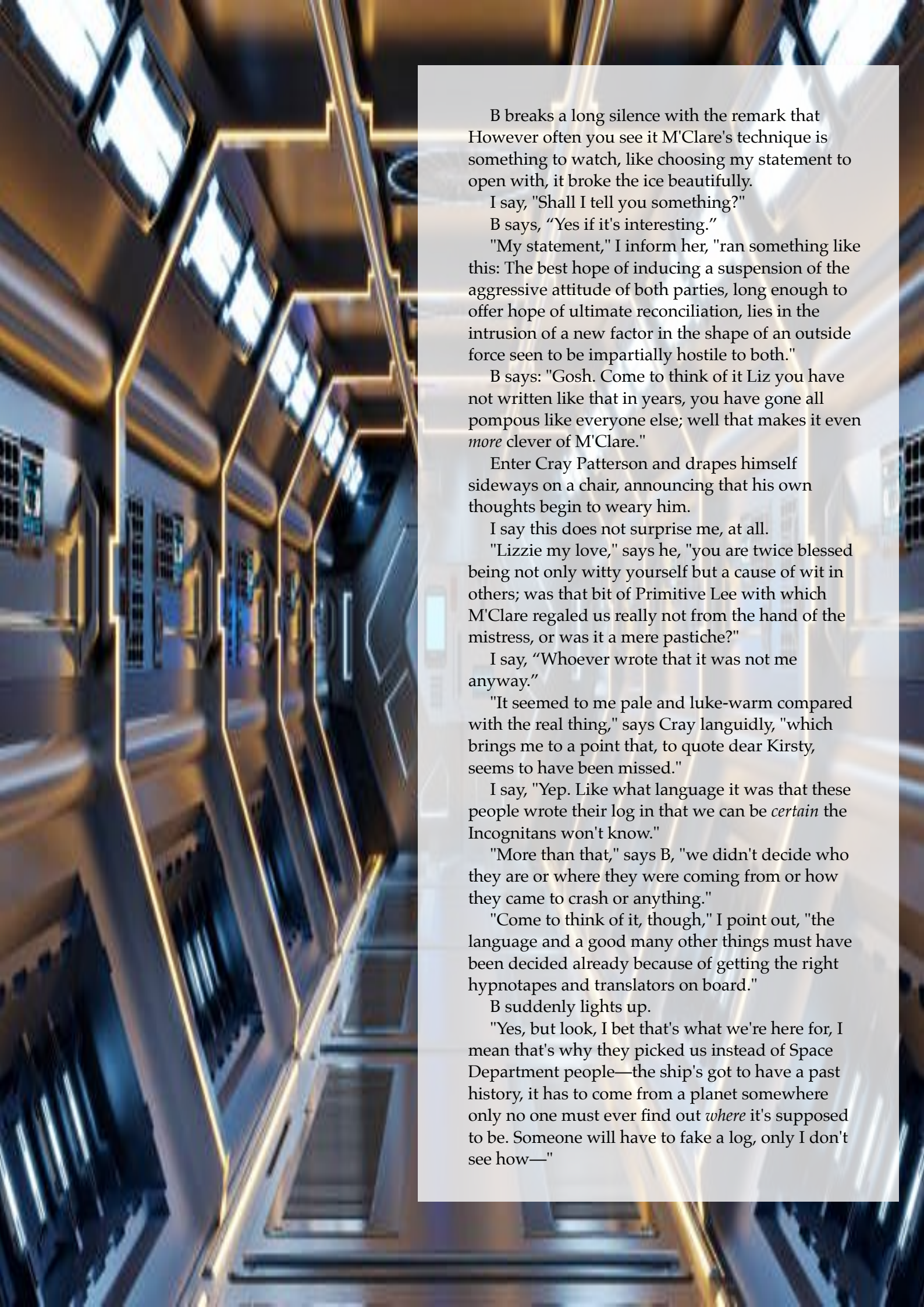
This is stuff transported in un-powered hulls towed by grappling-beams; the hulls are open to space hence no need for refrigeration, and the contents are transferred to specially equipped orbital stations before being taken down to the planet. But—

Mr. Yardo comes to life at the sound of his name and his grin widens alarmingly.

"Especially meat," he says.

It is maybe two hours afterwards, Eru having adjourned the meeting abruptly so that we can ... er ... take in the implications of the new data. Lennie has gone off somewhere by himself; Kirsty has gone after him with a view to Mothering him; Eru, I suspect, is looking for Kirsty; Pavel and Aro and Dillie and the Crow are in a cabin arguing in whispers; Nick and P. Zapotec are exploring one of the Hoppers, cargo-carrying, drop-shaped, and I only hope they don't hop through the hull in it.

B and I, having done a tour of the ship and ascertained all this, have withdrawn to the Conference Room because we are tired of our cabins and this seems to be the only other place to sit.



B breaks a long silence with the remark that However often you see it M'Clare's technique is something to watch, like choosing my statement to open with, it broke the ice beautifully.

I say, "Shall I tell you something?"

B says, "Yes if it's interesting."

"My statement," I inform her, "ran something like this: The best hope of inducing a suspension of the aggressive attitude of both parties, long enough to offer hope of ultimate reconciliation, lies in the intrusion of a new factor in the shape of an outside force seen to be impartially hostile to both."

B says: "Gosh. Come to think of it Liz you have not written like that in years, you have gone all pompous like everyone else; well that makes it even *more* clever of M'Clare."

Enter Cray Patterson and drapes himself sideways on a chair, announcing that his own thoughts begin to weary him.

I say this does not surprise me, at all.

"Lizzie my love," says he, "you are twice blessed being not only witty yourself but a cause of wit in others; was that bit of Primitive Lee with which M'Clare regaled us really not from the hand of the mistress, or was it a mere pastiche?"

I say, "Whoever wrote that it was not me anyway."

"It seemed to me pale and luke-warm compared with the real thing," says Cray languidly, "which brings me to a point that, to quote dear Kirsty, seems to have been missed."


I say, "Yep. Like what language it was that these people wrote their log in that we can be *certain* the Incognitans won't know."

"More than that," says B, "we didn't decide who they are or where they were coming from or how they came to crash or anything."

"Come to think of it, though," I point out, "the language and a good many other things must have been decided already because of getting the right hypnotapes and translators on board."

B suddenly lights up.

"Yes, but look, I bet that's what we're here for, I mean that's why they picked us instead of Space Department people—the ship's got to have a past history, it has to come from a planet somewhere only no one must ever find out *where* it's supposed to be. Someone will have to fake a log, only I don't see how—"



"The first reel with data showing the planet of origin got damaged during the crash," says Cray impatiently.

"Yes, of course—but we have to find a reason why they were in that part of Space and it has to be a *nice* one, I mean so that the Incognitans when they finally read the log won't hate them any more—"

"Maybe they were bravely defending their own planet by hunting down an interplanetary raider," I suggest.

Cray says it will take only the briefest contact with other planets to convince the Incognitans that interplanetary raiders can't and don't exist, modern planetary alarm and defense systems put them out of the question.

"That's all he knows," says B, "some interplanetary pirates raided Lizzie's father's farm once. Didn't they, Liz?"

"Yes in a manner of speaking, but they were bums who pinched a spaceship from a planet not many parsecs away, a sparsely inhabited mining world like my own which had no real call for an alarm system, so that hardly alters the argument."

"Well," says B, "the alarm system on Incognita can't be so hot or the observation ships could not have got in, or out, for that matter, unless of course they have some other gadget we don't know about."

"On the other hand," she considers, "to mention Interplanetary raiders raises the idea of Menace in an Unfriendly Universe again, and this is what we want to cancel out.

"These people," she says at last with a visionary look in her eye, "come from a planet which went isolationist and abandoned space travel; now they have built up their civilization to a point where they can build ships of their own again, and the ones on Gilgamesh have cut loose from the ideas of their ancestors that led to their going so far afield—"

"How far afield?" says Cray.

"No one will ever know," I point out to him. "Don't interrupt."





"Anyway," says B, "they set out to rejoin the rest of the Human Race just like the people on *Gilgamesh* really did, in fact, a lot of this is the truth only kind of backwards—they were looking for the Cradle of the Race, that's what. Then there was some sort of disaster that threw them off course to land on an uninhabited section of a planet that couldn't understand their signals. And when Incognita finally does take to space flight again I bet the first thing the people do is to try and follow back to where *Gilgamesh* came from and make contact with them. It'll become a legend on Incognita—the Lost People ... the Lost ... Lost—"

"The Lost Kafoozalum," says Cray. "In other words we switch these people off a war only to send them on a wild goose chase."

At which a strange voice chimes in, "No, no, no, son, you've got it all *wrong*."

Mr. Yardo is with us like a well-meaning skeleton.

During the next twenty-five minutes we learn a lot about Mr. Yardo including material for a good guess at how he came to be picked for this expedition; doubtless there are many experts on Reversal Of Vacuum-Induced Changes in Organic Tissues but maybe only one of them a Romantic at heart.

Mr. Yardo thinks chasing the Wild Goose will do the Incognitans all the good in the galaxy, it will take their minds off controversies over interhemispherical trade and put them on to the quest of the Unobtainable; they will get to know something of the Universe outside their own little speck. Mr. Yardo has seen a good deal of the Universe in the course of advising on how to recondition space-packed meat and he found it an Uplifting Experience.

We gather he finds this desperate bit of damfoolery we are on now pretty Uplifting altogether.

Cray keeps surprisingly quiet but it is as well that the rest of the party start to trickle in about twenty minutes later the first arrivals remarking Oh *that's* where you've got to!

Presently we are all congregated at one end of the table as before, except that Mr. Yardo is now sitting between B and me; when M'Clare and the colonel come in he firmly stays where he is evidently considering himself One of Us now.

"The proposition," says M'Clare, "is that we intend to take *Gilgamesh* to Incognita and land her there in such a way as to suggest that she crashed. In the absence of evidence to the contrary the Incognitans are bound to assume that that was her intended destination, and the presence of weapons, even disarmed, will suggest that her mission was aggressive. Firstly, can anyone suggest a better course of action? or does anyone object to this one?"

We all look at Lennie who sticks his hands in his pockets and mutters "No."

Kirsty gives her little cough and says there is a point which has not been mentioned.

If a heavily-armed ship crashes on Incognita, will not the government of the hemisphere in which it crashes be presented with new ideas for offensive weapons? And won't this make it *more* likely that they will start aggression? And won't the fear of this make the other hemisphere even more likely to try and get in first before the new weapons are complete?

Hell, I ought to have thought of that.

From the glance of unwilling respect which the colonel bestows on M'Clare it is plain these points have been dealt with.


"The weapons on *Gilgamesh* were disarmed when she was rediscovered," he says. "Essential sections were removed. The Incognitans won't be able to reconstruct how they worked."

*Another* fact for which we shall have to provide an explanation. Well how about this: The early explorers sent out by these people—the people in *Gilgamesh* ... oh, use Cray's word and call them Lost Kafoozalum... anyway, their ships were armed, but they never found any enemies and the Idealists of B's story refused even to carry arms any more.

(Which is just about what happened when the Terries set out to rediscover the colonies, after all.)

So the Lost Kafoozalum could not get rid of their weapons completely because it would have meant rebuilding the ship; so they just partially dismantled them.

Mr. Yardo suddenly chips in, "About that other point, girlie, surely there must be some neutral ground left on a half-occupied planet like that?" He beams round, pleased at being able to contribute.



B says, "The thing is," and stops.

We wait.

We have about given up hope when she resumes, "The thing is, it will have to be neutral ground of course, only that might easily become a thingummy ... I mean a, a *casus belli* in itself. So the *other* thing is it ought to be a place which is very hard to get at, so difficult that neither side can really get to it first, they'll have to reach an agreement and co-operate."

"Yeah," says Dillie "that sounds fine, but what sort of place is that?"

I am sorting out in my head the relative merits of mountains, deserts, gorges, et cetera, when I am seized with inspiration at the same time as half the group; we say the same thing in different words and for a time there is Babel, then the idea emerges:

"Drop her into the sea!"

The colonel nods resignedly.

"Yes," he says, "that's what we're going to do."

He presses a button and our projection-screens light up, first with a map of one pole of Incognita, expanding in scale till finally we are looking down on one little bit of coast on one of the polar islands. A glacier descends on to it from mountains inland and there is a bay between cliffs. Then we get a stereo scene of approximately the least hospitable of scenery I ever did see—except maybe when Parvati Lal Dutt's brother made me climb up what he swore was the smallest peak in the Himalayas.

It is a small bay backed by tumbled cliffs. A shelving beach can be deduced from contour and occasional boulders big enough to stick through the snow that smothers it all. A sort of mess of rocks and mud at the back may be glacial moraine. Over the sea the ice is split in all directions by jagged rifts and channels; the whole thing is a bit like Antarctica but nothing is high enough or white enough to uplift the spirit, it looks not only chilly but kind of mean.

"This place," says the colonel, "is the only one, about which we have any topographical information, that seems to meet the requirements. Got to know about it through an elementary planetography. One of the observers had the sense to see we might need something of the sort. This place"—the stereo jigs as he taps his projector—"seems it's the center of a rising movement in the crust ... that's not to the point. Neither side has bothered to claim the land at the poles...."

I see their point if it's all like this—

"... And a ship trying to land on those cliffs might very well pitch over into the sea. That is, if she were trying to land on emergency rockets."

Rockets—that brings home the ancientness of this ship *Gilgamesh*—but after all the ships that settled Incognita probably carried emergency rockets, too.

This settled, the meeting turns into a briefing session and merges imperceptibly with the beginning of the job.

The job of course is faking the background of the crash; working out the past history and present aims of the Lost Kafoozalum. We have to invent a planet and what's more difficult convey all the essential information about it by the sort of sideways hints you gather among peoples' personal possessions; diaries, letters et cetera; and what is even *more* difficult we have to leave out anything that could lead to definite identification of our unknown world with any known one.

We never gave that world a name; it might be dangerous. Who speaks of their world by name, except to strangers? They call it "home"—or "Earth," as often as not.

Some things have been decided for us. Language, for instance—one of two thousand or so Earth tongues that went out of use late enough to be plausible as the main language of a colonized planet. The settlers on Incognita were not of the sort to take along dictionaries of the lesser-known tongues, so the computers at Russett had a fairly wide choice.

We had to take a hypnocourse in that language. Ditto the script, one of several forgotten phonetic shorthands. (Designed to enable the tongues of Aliens to be written down; but the Aliens have never been met. It is plausible enough that some colony might have kept the script alive; after all Thasia uses something of the sort to this day.)

The final result of our work looks pretty small. Twenty-three "Personal Background Sets"—a few letters, a diary in some, an assortment of artifacts. Whoever stocked this ship we are on supplied wood, of the half-dozen kinds that have been taken wherever men have gone; stocks of a few plastics—known at the time of the Exodus, or easily developed from those known, and not associated with any particular planet. Also books on Design, a Form-writer for translating drawings into materials, and so on. Someone put in a lot of work before this voyage began.





Most of the time it is like being back on Russet doing a group Project. What we are working on has no more and no less reality than that. Our work is all read into a computer and checked against everybody else's. At first we keep clashing. Gradually a consistent picture builds up and gets translated finally into the Personal Background Kits. The Lost Kafoozalum start to exist like people in a History book.

Fifteen days hard work and we have just about finished; then we reach—call it Planet Gilgamesh.

I wake in my bunk to hear that there will be brief cessation of weight; strap down, please.

We are coming off Mass-Time to go on planetary drive.

Colonel Delano-Smith is in charge of operations on the planet, with Ram and Peter to assist. None of the rest of us see the melting out of fifty years' accumulation of ice, the pumping away of the water, the fitting and testing of the holds for the grappling-beams. We stay inside the ship, on five-eighths gee which we do not have time to get used to, and try to work, and discard the results before the computer can do so. There is hardly any work left to do, anyway.

It takes nearly twelve hours to get the ship free, and caulked, and ready to lift. (Her hull has to be patched because of Mr. Yardo's operations which make use of several sorts of vapors). Then there is a queer blind period with Up now one way, now another, and sudden jerks and tugs that upset everything not in gimbals or tied down; interspersed with periods when weightlessness supervenes with no warning at all. After an hour or two of this it would be hard to say whether mental or physical discomfort is more acute; B consulted, however, says my autonomic system must be quite something, after five minutes *her* thoughts were with her viscera entirely.

Then, suddenly, we are back on Mass-Time again.

Two days to go.

At first being on Mass-Time makes everything seem normal again. By sleep time there is a strain, and next day it is everywhere. I know as well as any that on Mass-Time the greater the mass the faster the shift; all the same I cannot help feeling we are being slowed, dragged back by the dead ship coupled to our live one.

When you stand by the hull *Gilgamesh* is only ten feet away.

I should have kept something to work on like B and Kirsty who have not done their Letters for Home in Case of Accidents; mine is signed and sealed long ago. I am making a good start on a Neurosis when Delano-Smith announces a Meeting for one hour ahead.

Hurrah! now there is a time-mark fixed I think of all sorts of things I should have done before; for instance taking a look at the controls of the Hoppers.

I have been in one of them half an hour and figured out most of the dials—up down and sideways are controlled much as in a helicar, but here a big viewscreen has been hooked in to the autopilot—when across the hold I see the air lock start to move.

*Gilgamesh* is on the other side.

It takes forever to open. When at last it swings wide on the dark tunnel what comes through is a storage rack, empty, floating on antigrav.

What follows is a figure in a spacesuit; modern type, but the windows of the hopper are semipolarized and I cannot make out the face inside the bubble top.

He slings the rack upon the bulkhead, takes off the helmet and hangs that up, too. Then he just stands. I am beginning to muster enough sense to wonder why when he comes slowly across the hold.

Reaching the doorway he says: "Oh it's you, Lizzie. You'll have to help me out of this. I'm stuck."

M'Clare.


The outside of the suit is still freezing cold; maybe this is what has jammed the fastening. After a few minutes tugging it suddenly gives away. M'Clare climbs out of the suit, leaving it standing, and says, "Help me count these, will you?"

*These* are a series of transparent containers from a pouch slung at one side of the suit. I recognize them as the envelopes in which we put what are referred to as Personal Background Sets.

I say, "There ought to be twenty-three."

"No," says M'Clare dreamily, "twenty-two, we're saving one of them."





"What on earth is the use of an extra set of faked documents and oddments—"

He seems to wake up suddenly and says: "What are you doing here, Lizzie?"

I explain and he wanders over to the hopper and starts to explain the controls.

There is something odd about all this. M'Clare is obviously dead tired, but kind of relaxed; seeing that the hour of Danger is only thirty-six hours off I don't understand it. Probably several of his students are going to have to risk their lives—

I am on the point of seeing something important when the speaker announces in the colonel's voice that Professor M'Clare and Miss Lee will report to the Conference Room at once please.

M'Clare looks at me and grins. "Come along, Lizzie. Here's where we take orders for once, you and I."

It is the colonel's Hour. I suppose that having to work with Undergraduates is something he could never quite forget, but from the way he looks at us we might almost be Space Force personnel—low-grade of course, but respectable.

Everything is at last worked out and he has it on paper in front of him; he puts the paper four square on the table, gazes into the middle distance and proceeds to recite.

"One. This ship will go off Mass-Time on 2nd August at 11.27 hours ship's time....

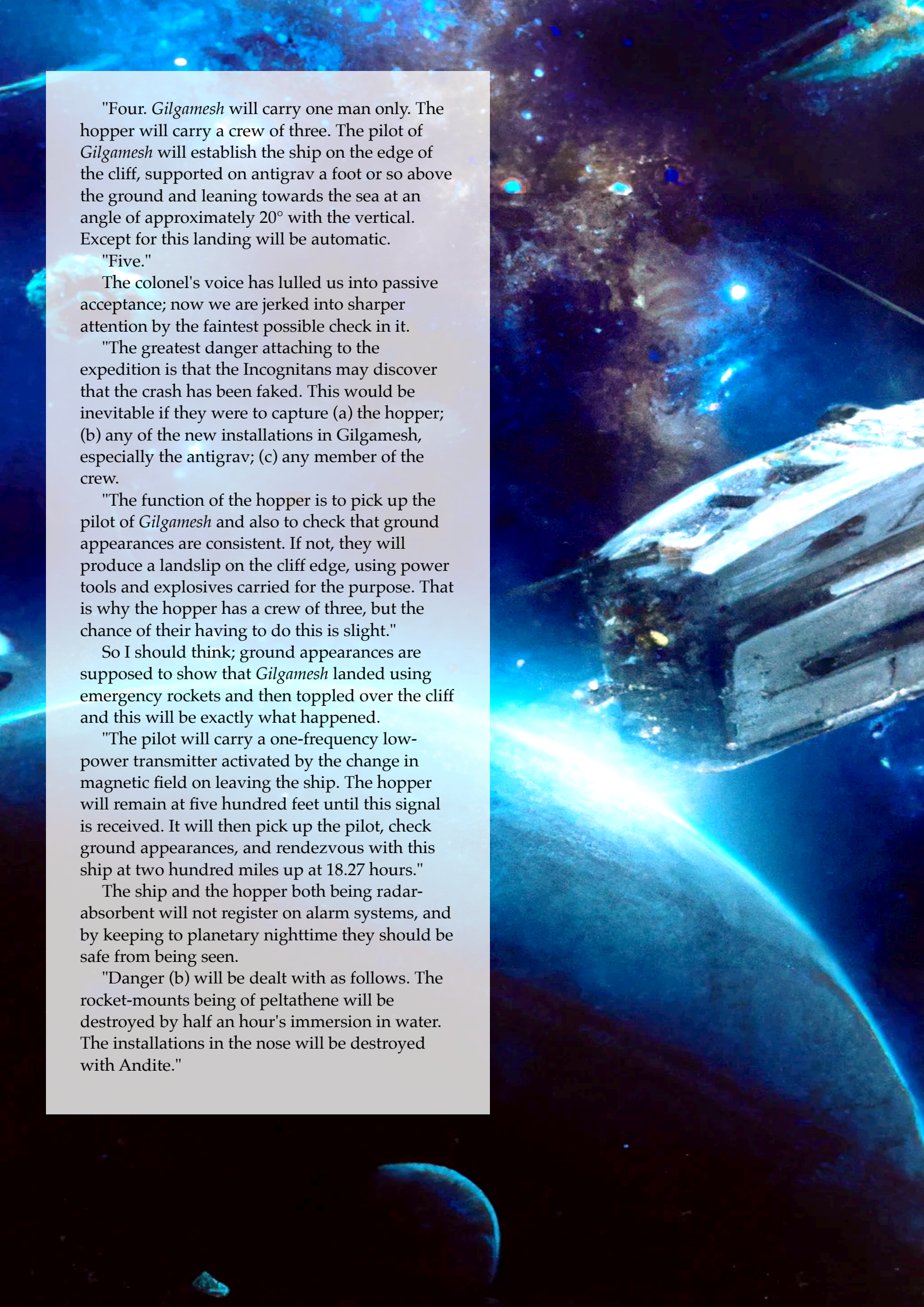
"Thirty-six hours from now.

"... At a point one thousand miles vertically above Co-ordinates 165OE, 7320S, on Planet Incognita, approximately one hour before midnight local time.

"Going on planetary drive as close as that will indicate that something is badly wrong to begin with.

"Two. This ship will descend, coupled to *Gilgamesh* as at present, to a point seventy miles above the planetary surface. It will then uncouple, discharge one hopper, and go back on Mass-Time. Estimated time for this stage of descent forty minutes.

"Three. The hopper will then descend on its own engines at the maximum speed allowed by the heat-disposal system; estimated at thirty-seven minutes. *Gilgamesh* will complete descent in thirty-three minutes. Engines of *Gilgamesh* will not be used except for the heat-disposal and gyro auxiliaries. The following installations have been made to allow for the control of the descent; a ring of eight rockets in peltathene mounts around the tail and, and one outsize antigrav unit inside the nose. 'Sympathizer' controls hooked up with a visiscreen and a computer have also been installed in the nose.

A futuristic spacecraft is shown in space, angled towards the viewer. The background is a vibrant blue nebula with various star patterns and light trails. The spacecraft has a metallic, segmented appearance with some internal structures visible through a transparent section. The overall scene is set against a dark, star-filled sky.

"Four. *Gilgamesh* will carry one man only. The hopper will carry a crew of three. The pilot of *Gilgamesh* will establish the ship on the edge of the cliff, supported on antigrav a foot or so above the ground and leaning towards the sea at an angle of approximately 20° with the vertical. Except for this landing will be automatic.

"Five."

The colonel's voice has lulled us into passive acceptance; now we are jerked into sharper attention by the faintest possible check in it.

"The greatest danger attaching to the expedition is that the Incognitans may discover that the crash has been faked. This would be inevitable if they were to capture (a) the hopper; (b) any of the new installations in *Gilgamesh*, especially the antigrav; (c) any member of the crew.

"The function of the hopper is to pick up the pilot of *Gilgamesh* and also to check that ground appearances are consistent. If not, they will produce a landslide on the cliff edge, using power tools and explosives carried for the purpose. That is why the hopper has a crew of three, but the chance of their having to do this is slight."

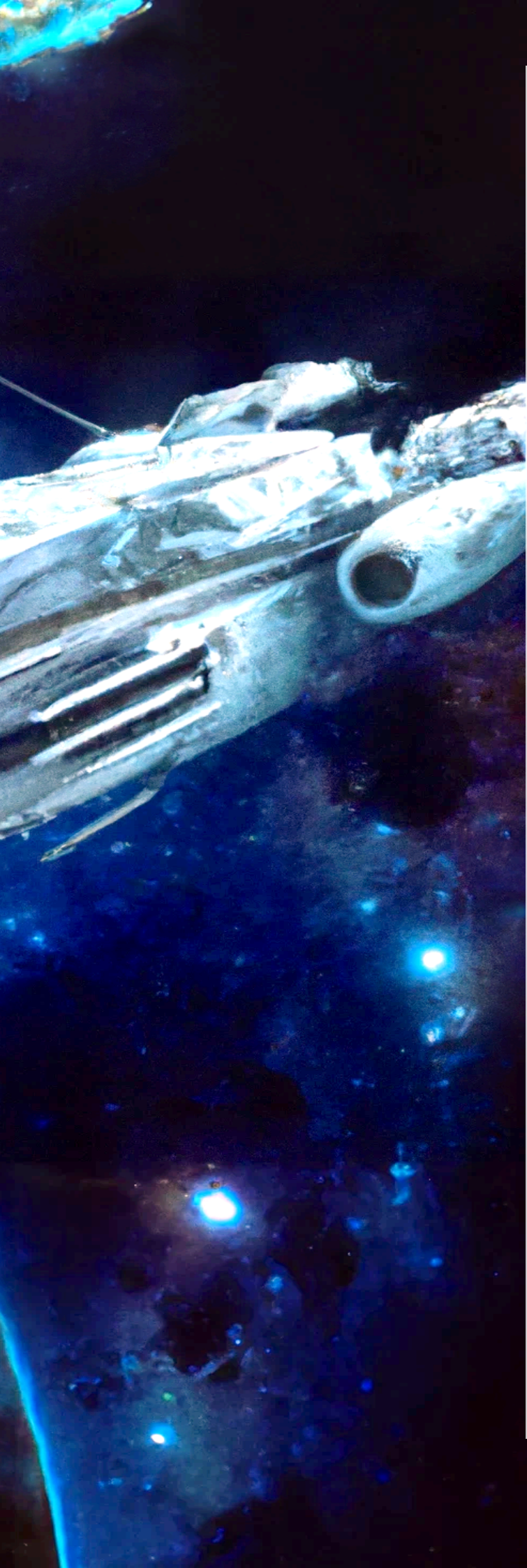
So I should think; ground appearances are supposed to show that *Gilgamesh* landed using emergency rockets and then toppled over the cliff and this will be exactly what happened.

"The pilot will carry a one-frequency low-power transmitter activated by the change in magnetic field on leaving the ship. The hopper will remain at five hundred feet until this signal is received. It will then pick up the pilot, check ground appearances, and rendezvous with this ship at two hundred miles up at 18.27 hours."

The ship and the hopper both being radar-absorbent will not register on alarm systems, and by keeping to planetary nighttime they should be safe from being seen.

"Danger (b) will be dealt with as follows. The rocket-mounts being of peltathene will be destroyed by half an hour's immersion in water. The installations in the nose will be destroyed with Andite."





Andite produces complete molecular disruption in a very short range, hardly any damage outside it; the effect will be as though the nose broke off on impact; I suppose the Incognitans will waste a lot of time looking for it on the bed of the sea.

"Four ten-centimeter cartridges will be inserted within the nose installations. The fuse will have two alternative settings. The first will be timed to act at 12.50 hours, seven minutes after the estimated time of landing. It will not be possible to deactivate it before 12.45 hours. This takes care of the possibility of the pilot's becoming incapacitated during the descent.

"Having switched off the first fuse the pilot will get the ship into position and then activate a second, timed to blow in ten minutes. He will then leave the ship. When the antigrav is destroyed the ship will, of course, fall into the sea.

"Six. The pilot of *Gilgamesh* will wear a spacesuit of the pattern used by the original crew and will carry Personal Background Set number 23. Should he fail to escape from the ship the crew of the hopper will on no account attempt to rescue him."

The colonel takes up the paper, folds it in half and puts it down one inch further away.

"The hopper's crew," he says, "will give the whole game away should one of them fall into Incognitan hands, alive or dead. Therefore they don't take any risks of it."

He lifts his gaze ceilingwards. "I'm asking for three volunteers."

Silence. Manning the hopper is definitely second best. Then light suddenly bursts on me and I lift my hand and hack B on the ankle.


"I volunteer," I say.

B gives me a most dubious glance and then lifts her hand, too.

Cray on the other side of the table is slowly opening his mouth when there is an outburst of waving on the far side of B.

"Me too, colonel! I volunteer!"

Mr. Yardo proceeds to explain that his special job is over and done, he can be more easily spared than anybody, he may be too old to take charge of *Gilgamesh* but will back himself as a hopper pilot against anybody.



The colonel cuts this short by accepting all three. He then unfolds his paper again.

"Piloting *Gilgamesh*," he says. "I'm not asking for volunteers now. You'll go to your cabins in four hours' time and those who want to will volunteer, secretly. To a computer hookup. Computer will select on a random basis and notify the one chosen. Give him his final instructions, too. No one need know who it was till it's all over. He can tell anyone he likes, of course."

A very slight note of triumph creeps into the next remark. "One point. Only men need volunteer."

Instant outcry from Kirsty and Dilly: B turns to me with a look of awe.

"Nothing to do with prejudice," says the colonel testily. "Just facts. The crew of *Gilgamesh* were all men. Can't risk one solitary woman being found on board. Besides—spacesuits, personal background sets—all designed for men."

Kirsty and Dilly turn on me looks designed to shrivel and B whispers, "Lizzie how wonderful you are."

The session dissolves. We three get an intensive session course of instruction on our duties and are ordered off to sleep. After breakfast next morning I run into Cray who says, Before I continue about what is evidently pressing business would I care to kick him, hard?

Not right now I reply, what for anyway?

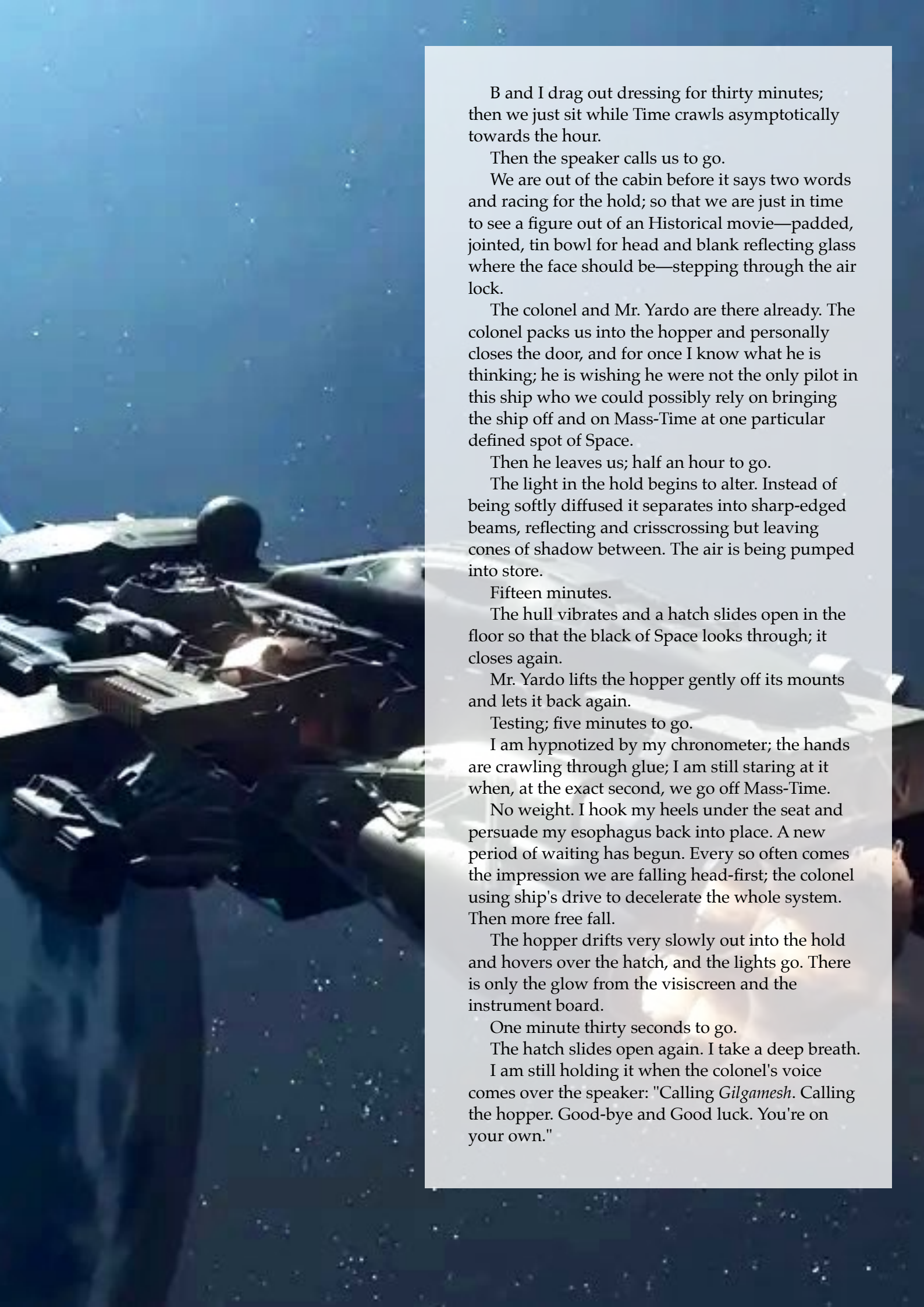
"Miss Lee," says Cray, dragging it out longer than ever, "although I have long realized that your brain functions in a way much superior to logic, I had not sense enough yesterday to follow my own instinct and do what you do as soon as you did it; therefore that dessicated meat handler got in first."

I say: "So you weren't picked for pilot? It was only one chance in ten."

"Oh," says Cray, "did you really think so?" He gives me a long look and goes away.

I suppose he noticed that when the colonel came out with his remarks about No women in *Gilgamesh* I was as surprised as any.

Presently the three of us are issued with protective clothing; we just might have to venture out on the planet's surface and therefore we get white one-piece suits to protect against cold, heat, moisture, dessication, radioactivity, and mosquitoes, and they are quite becoming, really.



B and I drag out dressing for thirty minutes; then we just sit while Time crawls asymptotically towards the hour.

Then the speaker calls us to go.

We are out of the cabin before it says two words and racing for the hold; so that we are just in time to see a figure out of an Historical movie—padded, jointed, tin bowl for head and blank reflecting glass where the face should be—stepping through the air lock.

The colonel and Mr. Yardo are there already. The colonel packs us into the hopper and personally closes the door, and for once I know what he is thinking; he is wishing he were not the only pilot in this ship who we could possibly rely on bringing the ship off and on Mass-Time at one particular defined spot of Space.

Then he leaves us; half an hour to go.

The light in the hold begins to alter. Instead of being softly diffused it separates into sharp-edged beams, reflecting and crisscrossing but leaving cones of shadow between. The air is being pumped into store.

Fifteen minutes.

The hull vibrates and a hatch slides open in the floor so that the black of Space looks through; it closes again.

Mr. Yardo lifts the hopper gently off its mounts and lets it back again.

Testing; five minutes to go.

I am hypnotized by my chronometer; the hands are crawling through glue; I am still staring at it when, at the exact second, we go off Mass-Time.

No weight. I hook my heels under the seat and persuade my esophagus back into place. A new period of waiting has begun. Every so often comes the impression we are falling head-first; the colonel using ship's drive to decelerate the whole system. Then more free fall.

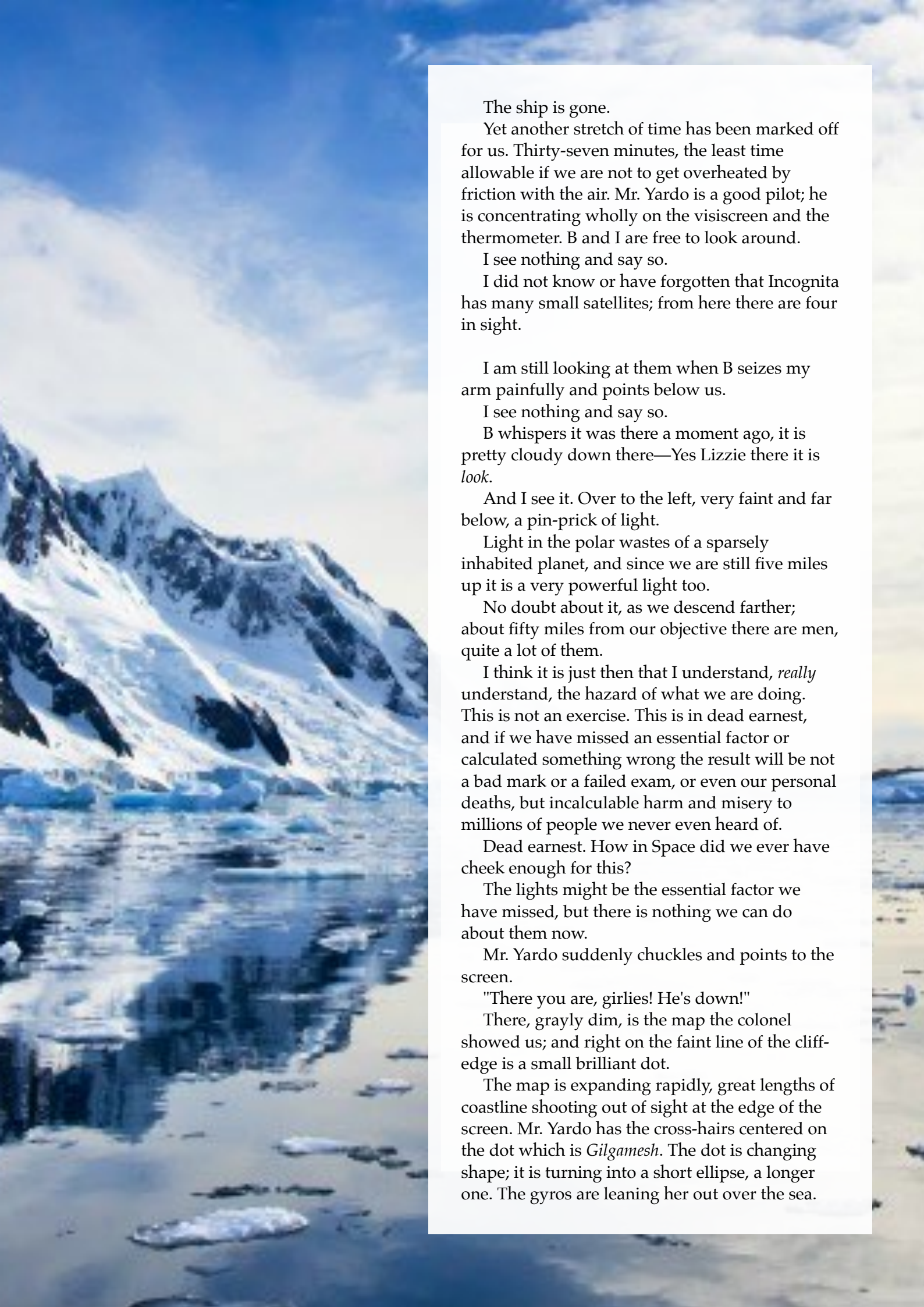
The hopper drifts very slowly out into the hold and hovers over the hatch, and the lights go. There is only the glow from the visiscreen and the instrument board.

One minute thirty seconds to go.

The hatch slides open again. I take a deep breath.

I am still holding it when the colonel's voice comes over the speaker: "Calling *Gilgamesh*. Calling the hopper. Good-bye and Good luck. You're on your own."





The ship is gone.

Yet another stretch of time has been marked off for us. Thirty-seven minutes, the least time allowable if we are not to get overheated by friction with the air. Mr. Yardo is a good pilot; he is concentrating wholly on the visiscreen and the thermometer. B and I are free to look around.

I see nothing and say so.

I did not know or have forgotten that *Incognita* has many small satellites; from here there are four in sight.

I am still looking at them when B seizes my arm painfully and points below us.

I see nothing and say so.

B whispers it was there a moment ago, it is pretty cloudy down there—Yes Lizzie there it is *look*.

And I see it. Over to the left, very faint and far below, a pin-prick of light.

Light in the polar wastes of a sparsely inhabited planet, and since we are still five miles up it is a very powerful light too.

No doubt about it, as we descend farther; about fifty miles from our objective there are men, quite a lot of them.

I think it is just then that I understand, *really* understand, the hazard of what we are doing. This is not an exercise. This is in dead earnest, and if we have missed an essential factor or calculated something wrong the result will be not a bad mark or a failed exam, or even our personal deaths, but incalculable harm and misery to millions of people we never even heard of.

Dead earnest. How in Space did we ever have cheek enough for this?

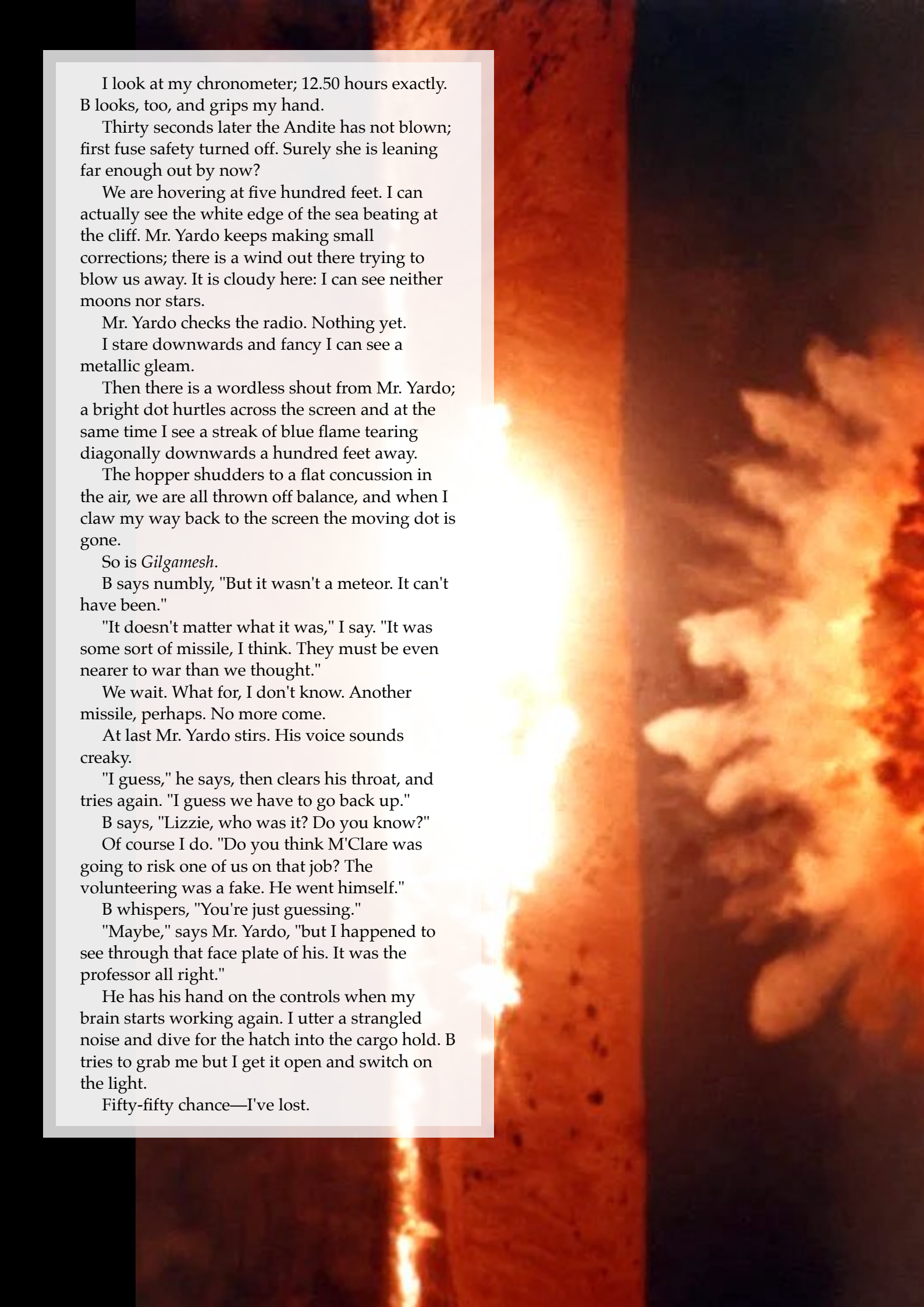
The lights might be the essential factor we have missed, but there is nothing we can do about them now.

Mr. Yardo suddenly chuckles and points to the screen.

"There you are, girlies! He's down!"

There, grayly dim, is the map the colonel showed us; and right on the faint line of the cliff-edge is a small brilliant dot.

The map is expanding rapidly, great lengths of coastline shooting out of sight at the edge of the screen. Mr. Yardo has the cross-hairs centered on the dot which is *Gilgamesh*. The dot is changing shape; it is turning into a short ellipse, a longer one. The gyros are leaning her out over the sea.



I look at my chronometer; 12.50 hours exactly. B looks, too, and grips my hand.

Thirty seconds later the Andite has not blown; first fuse safety turned off. Surely she is leaning far enough out by now?

We are hovering at five hundred feet. I can actually see the white edge of the sea beating at the cliff. Mr. Yardo keeps making small corrections; there is a wind out there trying to blow us away. It is cloudy here: I can see neither moons nor stars.

Mr. Yardo checks the radio. Nothing yet.

I stare downwards and fancy I can see a metallic gleam.

Then there is a wordless shout from Mr. Yardo; a bright dot hurtles across the screen and at the same time I see a streak of blue flame tearing diagonally downwards a hundred feet away.

The hopper shudders to a flat concussion in the air, we are all thrown off balance, and when I claw my way back to the screen the moving dot is gone.

So is *Gilgamesh*.

B says numbly, "But it wasn't a meteor. It can't have been."

"It doesn't matter what it was," I say. "It was some sort of missile, I think. They must be even nearer to war than we thought."

We wait. What for, I don't know. Another missile, perhaps. No more come.

At last Mr. Yardo stirs. His voice sounds creaky.

"I guess," he says, then clears his throat, and tries again. "I guess we have to go back up."

B says, "Lizzie, who was it? Do you know?"

Of course I do. "Do you think M'Clare was going to risk one of us on that job? The volunteering was a fake. He went himself."

B whispers, "You're just guessing."

"Maybe," says Mr. Yardo, "but I happened to see through that face plate of his. It was the professor all right."

He has his hand on the controls when my brain starts working again. I utter a strangled noise and dive for the hatch into the cargo hold. B tries to grab me but I get it open and switch on the light.

Fifty-fifty chance—I've lost.



No, this is the one we came in and the people who put in the new cargo did not clear out my fish-boat, they just clamped it neatly to the wall.

I dive in and start to pass up the package. B shakes her head.

"No, Lizzie. We can't. Don't you remember? If we got caught, it would give everything away. Besides ... there isn't any chance—"

"Take a look at the screen," I tell her.

Sharp exclamation from Mr. Yardo. B turns to look, then takes the package and helps me back.

Mr. Yardo maneuvers out over the sea till the thing is in the middle of the screen; then drops to a hundred feet. It is sticking out of the water at a fantastic angle and the waves are hardly moving it. The nose of a ship.

"The antigrav," whispers B. "The Andite hasn't blown yet."

"Ten minutes," says Mr. Yardo thoughtfully. He turns to me with sudden briskness. "What's that, Lizzie girl? A fish-boat? Good. We may need it. Let's have a look."

"It's mine," I tell him.

"Now look—"

"Tailor made," I say. "You might get into it, though I doubt it. You couldn't work the controls."

It takes him fifteen seconds to realize there is no way round it; he is six foot three and I am five foot one. Even B would find it hard.

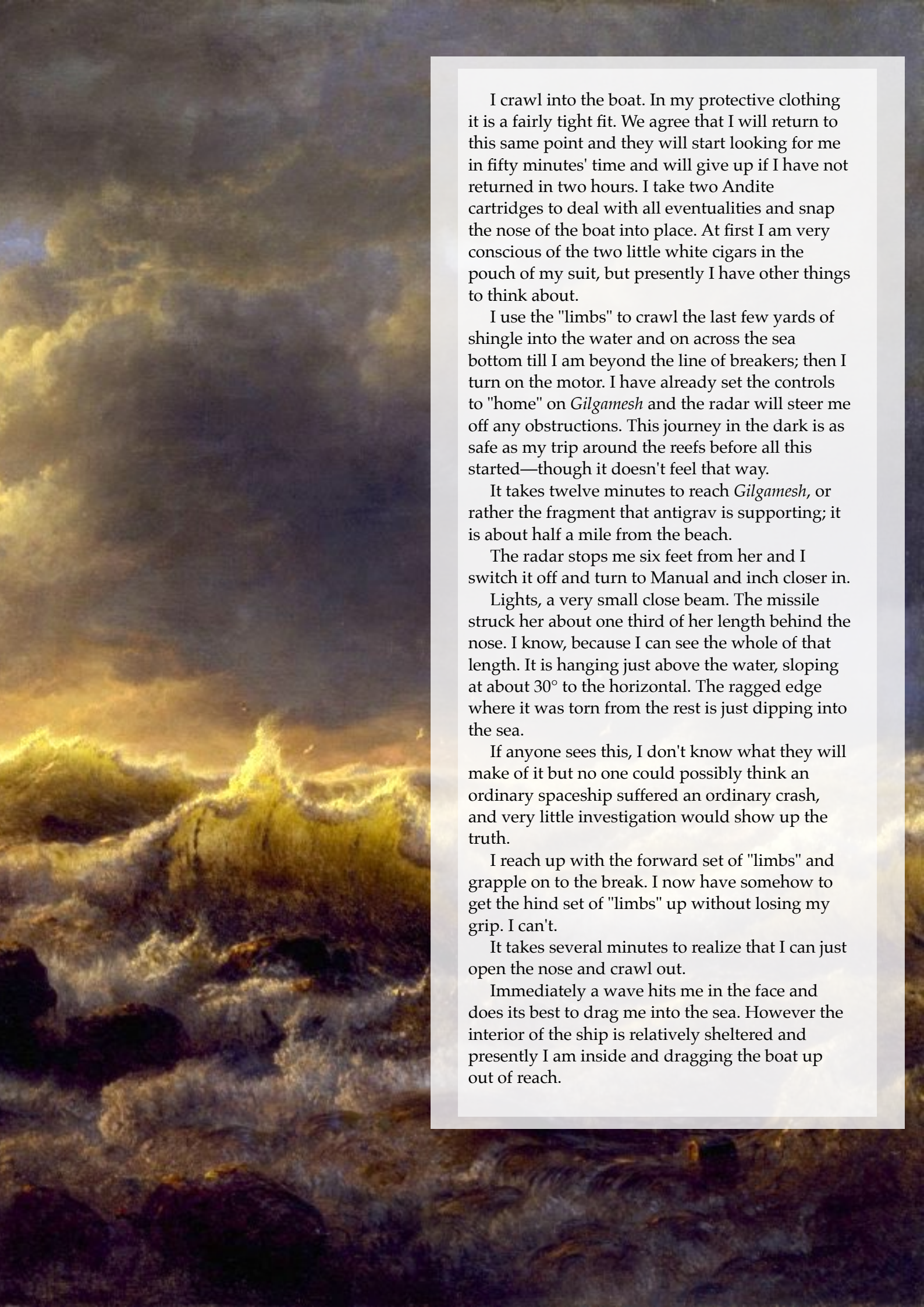
His face goes grayish and he stares at me helplessly. Finally he nods.

"All right, Lizzie. I guess we have to try it. Things certainly can't be much worse than they are. We'll go over to the beach there."

On the beach there is wind and spray and breakers but nothing unmanageable; the cliffs on either side keep off the worst of the force. It is queer to feel moving air after eighteen days in a ship. It takes six minutes to unpack and expand the boat and by that time it is ten minutes since the missile hit and the Andite has not blown.







I crawl into the boat. In my protective clothing it is a fairly tight fit. We agree that I will return to this same point and they will start looking for me in fifty minutes' time and will give up if I have not returned in two hours. I take two Andite cartridges to deal with all eventualities and snap the nose of the boat into place. At first I am very conscious of the two little white cigars in the pouch of my suit, but presently I have other things to think about.

I use the "limbs" to crawl the last few yards of shingle into the water and on across the sea bottom till I am beyond the line of breakers; then I turn on the motor. I have already set the controls to "home" on *Gilgamesh* and the radar will steer me off any obstructions. This journey in the dark is as safe as my trip around the reefs before all this started—though it doesn't feel that way.

It takes twelve minutes to reach *Gilgamesh*, or rather the fragment that antigrav is supporting; it is about half a mile from the beach.

The radar stops me six feet from her and I switch it off and turn to Manual and inch closer in.

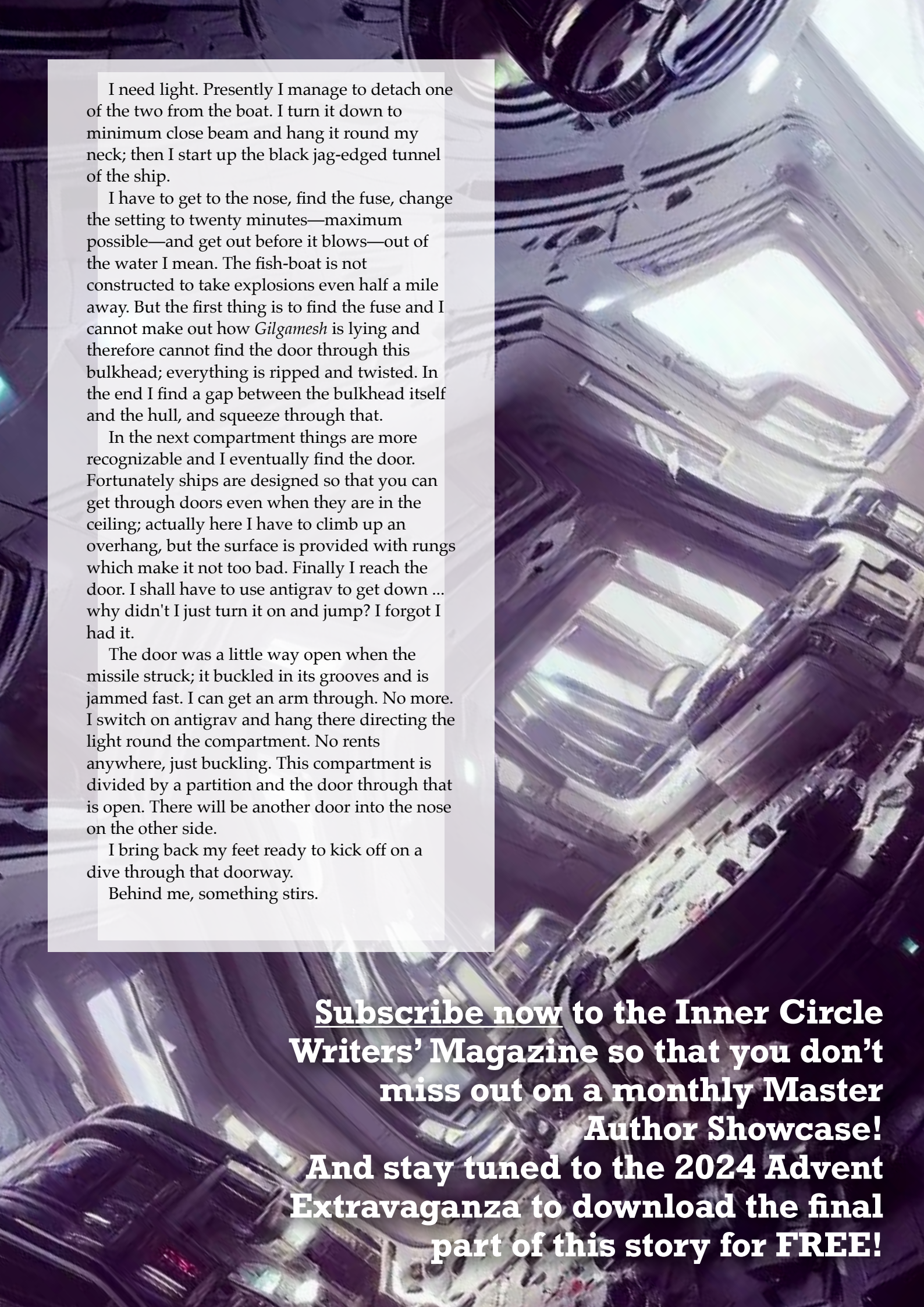
Lights, a very small close beam. The missile struck her about one third of her length behind the nose. I know, because I can see the whole of that length. It is hanging just above the water, sloping at about 30° to the horizontal. The ragged edge where it was torn from the rest is just dipping into the sea.

If anyone sees this, I don't know what they will make of it but no one could possibly think an ordinary spaceship suffered an ordinary crash, and very little investigation would show up the truth.

I reach up with the forward set of "limbs" and grapple on to the break. I now have somehow to get the hind set of "limbs" up without losing my grip. I can't.

It takes several minutes to realize that I can just open the nose and crawl out.

Immediately a wave hits me in the face and does its best to drag me into the sea. However the interior of the ship is relatively sheltered and presently I am inside and dragging the boat up out of reach.



I need light. Presently I manage to detach one of the two from the boat. I turn it down to minimum close beam and hang it round my neck; then I start up the black jag-edged tunnel of the ship.

I have to get to the nose, find the fuse, change the setting to twenty minutes—maximum possible—and get out before it blows—out of the water I mean. The fish-boat is not constructed to take explosions even half a mile away. But the first thing is to find the fuse and I cannot make out how *Gilgamesh* is lying and therefore cannot find the door through this bulkhead; everything is ripped and twisted. In the end I find a gap between the bulkhead itself and the hull, and squeeze through that.

In the next compartment things are more recognizable and I eventually find the door. Fortunately ships are designed so that you can get through doors even when they are in the ceiling; actually here I have to climb up an overhang, but the surface is provided with rungs which make it not too bad. Finally I reach the door. I shall have to use antigrav to get down ... why didn't I just turn it on and jump? I forgot I had it.

The door was a little way open when the missile struck; it buckled in its grooves and is jammed fast. I can get an arm through. No more. I switch on antigrav and hang there directing the light round the compartment. No rents anywhere, just buckling. This compartment is divided by a partition and the door through that is open. There will be another door into the nose on the other side.

I bring back my feet ready to kick off on a dive through that doorway.

Behind me, something stirs.

**Subscribe now to the Inner Circle Writers' Magazine so that you don't miss out on a monthly Master Author Showcase! And stay tuned to the 2024 Advent Extravaganza to download the final part of this story for FREE!**

# CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

© 2024 by Grant P. Hudson.  
Clarendon House Publications,  
76 Coal Pit Lane, Sheffield, South Yorkshire,  
United Kingdom S36 1AW  
[www.clarendonhousebooks.com](http://www.clarendonhousebooks.com)  
Email: [grant@clarendonhousebooks.com](mailto:grant@clarendonhousebooks.com)