

IN THE DARK

HALF WAY to Antares Jack Turner was hit by something like a blinding white explosion, and the ship staggered for a moment in its course, its fittings groaning at their joints. Everything movable smashed in that instant, and Turner sprawled on the floor, his head a drunken mess of stars and lurid colours. . . .

When he came to it was much later and very much darker. He opened one eye uncertainly, prepared to see some monster from the old space-tales looking over him, but saw nothing except a whole lot of broken clocks and estimators on the navigator panel. Climbing groggily to his feet, he went over to inspect them. Finally he patted one of the dials on its face, sorrowfully, and sat down again.

He had, he realized, no idea of where he was or what condition the ship was in: in any case, while he had been out the lights had gone off. Nor was there anything to be seen from the starboard space-hole. 'All,' remarked Turner loudly to himself, 'seems to be lost. I think I will have a cup of coffee while I think this out.' Fortunately, whatever had destroyed most of his instruments had overlooked the coffee-pot, and he warmed the brandy-flavoured caft syntabs in gratitude. As long as possible he wanted to put off inspecting the rest of the ship. If the oxygen had escaped, or the hydroponics had grown to gigantic size, or the engine had fallen out of the ship and was dropping away in space, he would rather not know about it. He cupped the steaming syntabs with ruminative fingers, feeling emotionally and physically numbed. 'Let's face it,' muttered Turner into his cup, 'I'm incompetent if not emotionally unstable. Only a mug like me could fail the ratings and get shoved on to this cargo-hopping backwater. Perhaps I've gone native living alone. But I defy Dan the Space Ranger himself to plot a course off-course without instruments.' And then: 'I've been expecting this sort of thing so long I must've got used to it.' With a feeling almost of embarrassment he did the rounds of the ship.

Except for a displacement of rhythm in the engine, like a clock which has been dropped and goes on obstinately ticking, there were a few breakages and nothing more. The oxygen was intact, as were the food supplies, at which Turner breathed relief. Feeling more hopeful he got the scanner and started scanning the universe, which remained coyly invisible to the naked eye. Within moments he picked up a small cluster only about fifty light-years away. He made for it.

The *Able* was an old tug and took six weeks (earth time) to arrive within orbit of the largest planet in the cluster. Turner gazed at it from a height of ten thousand miles, circling it slowly to determine where he had best land. It was as variegated as earth; the blue-green of seas alternated with almost Martian desert, and at one end were splashed the snows of a solitary pole like an ice-cream topping. He had no means of making tests, and a school atlas could have told him more about it than his instruments—assuming, of course, that the planet was known. That it might not be known had not occurred to Turner before, and he stared down with a new respect. Three moons dominated the sky, and under the drifting clouds only a part of the greener lands were in sunlight. He started to land.

The ship plummeted down five thousand miles, and then sank more slowly as the vast face of the planet rushed up to meet it; Turner moaned. He had never got over feeling sick in free fall. His eyes glassy and fixed horrified at the viewer in front of him, he noticed nevertheless a complete absence of towns on the face below; the planet as a whole looked deserted. His landing was made with faith rather than skill, but as the shock of touchdown reverberated through the ship and no explosion resulted, he sat back for a while and grinned inanely.

He had come to rest in a large valley not far from the sea. The sun warmed him as he crept through the airlock, and the air at first breath was scent-laden and heavy. Nicer than earth, he thought, and inched further out of the airlock from which he had ejected only his first half in case of asphyxiation. Underfoot the grass was mattress-soft and springy; it was slightly blue. He bent