

Vladislav
KRAPIVIN

I'M GOING TO MEET MY
BROTHER

Molecular Café Compilation
Mir Publishers Moscow 1968
Translated from the Russian (The translator is not indicated)

OCR: <http://home.freeuk.com/russica2>

Watch for the "Magellan"

I

Whoever has been to Konsata must remember the steep narrow steps down the cliffs. They start from a colonnade at the top and lead down to the sea. At the bottom there is just a narrow strip of shore between them and the water. Covered with porous rocks and shingle, this strip stretches along the yellow-white cliffs from South Valley right up to the North Point, where the obelisk to dead astronauts pierces the sky like an inclined needle.

It is a pleasant spot to collect the coloured stones rounded and smoothed by the waves, and to hunt for the fierce black crabs. The boys from the school whose grounds lie to the south of Ratal Cosmodrome, always stop here for a while on their way home. They cram their pockets with treasures whose value adults never have understood, and never will, and then run up the steep steps, which they prefer to the escalator that climbs the cliff a hundred yards or so further on.

At the time I'm writing about I had just finished a paper on the third expedition to the Amazon basin. Now for a whole month I could read the ordinary books I had missed from pressure of work.

I would take a book of poems, or a collection of Randin's stories, and go to the top of the Old Steps. The place was deserted. Grass grew between the flag stones and birds had built nests in the scrolls of the heavy capitals.

At first I was all alone at the colonnade, but later a tall dark man wearing a grey jacket of strange cut started coming there. To begin with we took no notice of one another as though by mutual agreement. But as hardly anyone else ever came there, and we were meeting every day, eventually we began to salute though we never spoke to one another. I read and the stranger, who seemed to have something on his mind, was too preoccupied to want to strike up a conversation.

This man always came in the evening. Then the sun hung over North Point, behind which rose the white buildings of Konsata, the blue of the sea was beginning to fade, and the waves were taking on a grey metallic hue. To the east the arches of the old viaduct would be tinted pink by the rays of the evening sun. The viaduct lay at the end of Ratal Cosmodrome, as a memorial of the days when planetary liners had not yet been adapted for vertical takeoff.

The stranger would seat himself on the plinth of one of the columns and, sit there, chin in hand, in silence.

He brightened up only when the schoolboys appeared on the beach. Then he would stand on the top step of the stairway and watch them at play until a fair-haired lad in a black-and-orange striped jacket would spot him and dash up the steps. Each time he would rush at such speed that his striped jacket, which he had flung over his shoulders, would stream out like a gaudy banner.

The gloomy stranger would change visible. He would cheerily meet the boy, and the two of them nodding goodbye to me would go off, discussing their affairs with animation.

At first I thought they were father and son. But one day I heard the boy shouting to someone as he ran: "I'm going to meet my brother."

Later I learnt, from the brothers' conversation, that the elder was called Alexander.

What ensues took place about a week after I first saw Alexander. He came along at the usual time and sat down by a column, whistling a strange and somewhat harsh tune. I was reading, but without much concentration, because I knew Valentine Randin's "Song of the Blue Planet" almost by heart. From time to

time I looked up from my book to glance at Alexander and it seemed to me that his face was somehow familiar.

There was a slight breeze. As I was turning the pages of my tattered book a loose page blew away and fluttered over the flags. It came to a stop almost at Alexander's feet. He picked it up and got up to give it to me. I got up as well and met in the middle of the colonnade.

This was the first time I had seen him so close and I found he was younger than I had thought. The wrinkles between his eyebrows gave his features a stern expression, but now he was smiling and the wrinkles had gone.

"Your book isn't very interesting it seems?" he said, giving me the page.

"It's just that I know it so well." I didn't want the conversation to end here, so I remarked, "Your brother's late."

"He was going to be late today, but I had forgotten." We sat down together. Alexander asked me to let him have a look at my book. I was surprised he did not know Randin's short stories, but I said nothing. As he opened the book and laid his palm across the pages to keep them from blowing away, I noticed a white forked scar on the back of it. He caught my glance and said: "It happened out there... on Yellow Rose."

Immediately I recalled everything. "The Snow Planet?" I exclaimed. "Alexander Sneg!" (*Sneg-snow.-Tr.*)

The unusual broadcasts, and special numbers of magazines with pictures of Sneg and his three companions—were all recent history, and all over the world people had spoken their names with admiration.

Before me I saw a man who had returned to Earth three hundred years after setting out from it. That in itself was not astonishing—after all "Banderilla" and "Mousson" had also been in space for more than two centuries. And though the story of the photon frigate in which Sneg had returned was more unusual than that of the others, I was not thinking of that just then.

"Alexander," I said, feeling I had come up against a strange riddle, "surely three hundred years... and the boy is not more than twelve. How are you his brother?"

"I know you're an archaeologist," said Alexander after a pause. "You must feel time better than others. And understand people."

Will you help me if I tell you everything?" "I'll try to help you."

"Only three people, besides myself, know about what I am going to tell you. But they cannot help me. I badly need your advice. Only, where shall I begin? Though really, it all began on these steps."

II

It all began on these steps.

For the first time since the death of his parents Naal had come down to the seashore. The sea, brilliantly blue and foam-flecked and bordered by the great curve of the white town, was gentle and sunlit, as though no ship had ever perished in its depths.

Naal went down to the water. The nearer he got to the sea, the faster he ran down the steps, until finally he was rushing headlong toward the vast blue expanse with its sparkling spray and salty breeze.

He tripped over a stone and fell. He had not hurt himself badly, so, biting his lip and limping, he continued his descent. Like all boys, Naal believed salt water was the best cure for scratches and grazes, and had kicked off his sandals and was on the point of entering the water when, among the stones that were washed every now and again by the ripples, he saw a big black crab. Involuntarily he jumped back.

It is one thing to give way momentarily to fright, but quite another to be a coward. So in order to test his courage and revenge himself on the crab for his fright, Naal determined to catch the black hermit and throw him far out to sea.

The crab, apparently sensing danger, scuttled off and hid himself among the stones.

"Look out for yourself!" muttered the boy. He was engrossed in the sport and began to turn over a stone.

The flat stone splashed into the water, and the crab, seeing that he had been discovered, scuttled away even faster. But Naal was no longer looking for him. On the wet shingle he had seen a small blue box, round and smooth, like a water-worn stone. Where could it have come from, to be washed up on this shore by the sea?

The boy sat down on the shingle and examined his find. The box was tightly sealed, and Naal spent all of an hour scratching at it with the buckle of his belt before he was able to prize open the lid.

Inside, wrapped in an old piece of paper, lay a strange badge: a golden spray with gleaming stars scattered among its leaves. The stem bore the single short word: "Search".

Naal was so absorbed in his examination of the badge that he forgot about the paper, and he would not have remembered it if the wind had not blown it on to his lap. He smoothed the crumpled paper out and saw that it was a page of a very very old magazine. Water had not soaked through into the box and the paper was not spoiled.

Naal began to read it deciphering the old type with difficulty, and his face suddenly became very serious. But he went on reading, and at the bottom of the page found words as startling as the loud and sudden twang of strings.

When the schoolboys came to the shore two hours later, Naal was still sitting in the same place, his elbows resting on a sun-warmed rock watching the white crests rising along the coast.

"We've been looking for you," said an older boy. "We didn't know you'd gone to the beach. Why are you alone here?"

Naal did not hear him. The wind had grown stronger and the waves were getting louder. Do you know the noise of the waves? First there is a swelling sound as the wave comes rolling in. Then it breaks and crashes on the rocks, and the water spreads out and, hissing, sweeps up the shore. And it is followed by another.

III

Nothing in particular distinguished Naal from the other schoolboys in the South Valley. Like all the others, he was fond of swinging high and dangerously close to the gnarled and twisted trees, and of playing with his ball in the sunny copse. He was not very fond of studying the history of the discovery of the great planets. He could run faster than many of the boys, but was not a very good swimmer. He would join with pleasure in any game, but, he never came first. Only once had he done something that not everyone could have done.

A springy branch of a bush growing near the shore had torn the badge from his shirt, and the golden spray with its blue stars had fallen into the sea. Through the transparent water he could see it sinking to the bottom. Without a moment's thought, Naal had dived from the six-foot embankment, by good fortune missing the sharp

rocks below.

He soon came out on the beach, holding the badge in one hand, and without saying a word started squeezing his shirt out with the other.

No one knew where he had got this badge and why he treasured it so much, but no one questioned him. Everyone can have his own secrets, and since the loss of his parents Naal seemed to have grown much older and did not always answer the questions of his classmates.

Outwardly nothing very much had changed in his life since he learned of his misfortune. Even before, he had lived most of the time at school. Both his father and mother were authorities on ocean deeps and were often away on expeditions. But now he knew that the bathyscaphe "Reindeer" would never return and never again would someone appear at the end of the walk to whom he could rush at top speed, forgetting everything else in the world.

Months had passed. There had been quiet mornings with school lessons, and days full of sun and noisy games, and sparkling rain. Perhaps he would have forgotten his grief. But one day the waves washed the small blue box ashore by the Old Steps. Wherefrom, he had no idea. Only it was not a relic of the lost bathyscaphe.

At night, when the windows reflected the orange gleam of Ratal Lighthouse, Naal would get the crumpled page out from 'the blue box. He needed no light: he knew every line by heart. It was from a very old magazine, published about three hundred years ago and it told of the setting out of the photon frigate "Magellan".

The textbook on the history of astroflight spoke of this ship briefly and dryly: the "Magellan" had set out for one of the yellow stars with the aim of finding a planet like Earth. Apparently, the crew had used information about this planet, obtained from the wrecked frigate "Globe", which had not been correct. The "Magellan" should have returned after a hundred and twelve years, but there had been no news of it. The young astronauts, stirred by legend and lacking experience, had obviously perished without achieving their aim.

The textbook didn't even give their names. Naal had learned them in the page he had found. The captain's name was Alexander Sneg.

Naal had heard from his father that' one of their ancestors was an astronaut. And when, on the beach that day, he had read the

name "Sneg", he had felt both pride and resentment—resentment at the textbook for its dry and probably incorrect words about the cosmonauts. There may have been many reasons why the frigate was lost. And was the crew to blame?

"What if they didn't find anything when they reached that yellow star and continued their flight? What if... what if they're still flying?" thought Naal, arguing with the book. But at this thought he suddenly screwed up his eyes, as though frightened by his own thought. He conjured up the long shady walks in the school park and at the end of it a tall man in the silvery jacket of an astronaut, a man to whom he could run, forgetting everything else in the world.

And what if he returned? He might still return. Time passes many times slower in a spacecraft than on Earth. What if the frigate returned? Then Naal would meet, not an ancestor, not a stranger from another century, but a brother. Because at the bottom of the page from the magazine he had read what someone had said to the crew of the "Magellan": "Don't forget the old names. You'll return in many years' time, but the grandsons of your friends will meet you like friends. The grandsons of your brothers will become your brothers...."

Naal realized that all this was pure fantasy. Yet he vividly pictured to himself how it would happen. It would be morning. He saw this morning clearly—the bright sun, already high overhead, and the sky so blue it was reflected on the white buildings, the white clothes, and the silvery sides of the frigate. Auxiliary rockets had just landed the spacecraft gently on the field of the cosmoport, and this huge astrofrigate—a glittering tower with a black crest one hundred and fifty metres high—stood still, resting on the black cylinders of the photon reflectors. The luminous letters in old-fashioned script of the name "Magellan" stood out distinctly on the crest. Naal could see the tiny figures of the astronauts descending slowly by the spiral gangway. Now they would set foot on land and walk towards the people meeting them. Naal would be the first to welcome them, he would get in front of all the others. He would ask at once which of them was Alexander Sneg. And then.... No, he wouldn't say much. To begin with he would just say his name. For he, too, was a Sneg.

Naal was not used to concealing his joys and his sorrows. But he spoke about this to nobody. For, without willing it, he had begun to dream of a miracle—and who would believe in miracles? But

sometimes at night, watching the gleaming cosmodrome beacons, Naal would get out the crumpled page. Everyone, after all, has the right to his dream, even if it's unrealisable.

There are no miracles; but by a strange coincidence, that very year the Fifth Pilot Station received a signal that stirred the whole of our planet: "Earth.... Send me return signal. I am coming in. I am 'Magellan'."

IV

The moon had not yet risen, but the upper part of the Power Ring had shown itself above the hills as a steep irregular curve. Its diffused yellowish light shimmered through the window and lay in a broad band on the carpet.

Naal switched on his wrist radio, but there was nothing new. The boy could wait no longer, however. He hesitated a moment, then jumped out of bed, and was dressed in a flash. Throwing his jacket over his shoulders, he went over to the window. It was half-open; it was never really shut because a crimson Martian convolvulus, clinging to the ledge with tiny thorns, had found its way into the room. The slender stalk would have been cut in two if the window had been shut tight.

Outside the window the bushes, wet from the recent rain, glistened in the light of the Ring. They cast a barely perceptible greenish reflection on the white walls and broad panes of the school buildings. Above the hills an orange ray quivered on the thin clouds and died away: Ratal Cosmodrome was signalling to someone again.

Naal pushed the glass of the window aside and stepped out on to a well-trodden path.

The Head of the school, Alexei Oskar, had not yet gone to bed, and was reading. Fresh air, smelling of rain burst through an opened door and stirred the pages of his book.

A boy stood in the doorway.

"Naal?"

"Yes."

Stammering slightly and hurrying to finish the conversation, Naal told his story for the first time.

Oskar rose and turned toward the window. Contrary to general opinion, he did not consider himself an experienced teacher. He was simply gifted with the ability to make the right decision at the right time. But now he was at a loss. What could he say? Try some explanation or talk the boy out of it? But could he? And if he did, would it be right?

The Head said nothing, but time was passing, and he could stay silent no longer.

"Listen, Naal," he began, not yet knowing what he would say next. "It's ... night-time now...."

"Oskar, let me go to the Summer Coast," said the boy quietly. It was not even a request. There was a yearning in his voice like that irrepressible longing for Earth that makes astronauts perform desperate deeds.

There are times when ordinary ideas and rules are powerless. What could Oskar say? Only that it was night-time and that he ought to wait till morning. But what was the use of that?

"I'll drive you to the station," he said.

"There's no need to. I'd rather walk. Alone..."

The boy went out.

Oskar went over to the videophone, called the Summer Coast, and dialling the number of the pilot's station, frenziedly pressed the button for urgent calls.

No one answered. Only a robot said calmly: "All is well."

Journey by night

I

It would have been better if he had not taken that road.

As a short cut, Naal had decided to get to the station across the hills. In a quarter of an hour he had reached the pass. Above the rounded summits hung the white moon in the bright ellipse of the Power Ring. To the right the beacons of Ratal were winking slowly. To the left, partly concealed by a line of low hills, shone the lights of Konsata, stretching in a broad semi-circle; and behind them, like a misty wall, stood the sea, shimmering faintly in the moonlight.

The whole valley was crossed by an old viaduct—the huge black Bridge of Ratal.

So far Naal had not been afraid of the meeting and had no doubts about his decision. The news of the "Magellan" was too unexpected and wonderful, and his happiness left no room for doubts. And he felt no fear until the moment he first saw the viaduct. Naal could not have explained why he began to have qualms. Perhaps it was that the two-hundred-metre-high arches which stood like gigantic gates across the road were too dark and enormous. They reminded him of the inconceivable magnitude of everything connected with space, of the distances traversed by the "Magellan", of the three centuries.... "The grandsons of your brothers will become your brothers!" Anyone could have said anything three hundred years ago!

The black supports of the viaduct stood like a double line of Atlantes and mutely questioned the boy: where was he going? Why? What absurd ideas had got in his head?

Naal looked back as though hoping for support. But the lights of South Valley were hidden behind the hill now.

He stopped in his tracks for an instant and then, all at once, dashed towards the viaduct, running straight toward it through the tall, damp grass. Some prickly plant scratched his leg, and he stopped vindictively tore it up by the roots and then ran on. Faster, faster, so that throbbing fear would not catch him! In a minute he was crossing the broad band of shadow and would leave the black gates of Ratal Bridge behind.

II

The carriage of the Circle Express, which passed through Summer Coast to the northern tip of the continent, was empty. Naal made himself comfortable in the seat and watched the darkness fly past the windows at five hundred kilometres an hour.

He was tired. At any other time he would have fallen asleep, of course, but that fear, like a boring tune, kept ringing in his ears: "What if he doesn't answer me? Or if he thinks it's all a joke? What interest is a kid to a space hero just returned to Earth after three hundred years?"

The boy suddenly pictured to himself the immense field of the cosmoport filled with thousands of welcoming people. Thousands of greetings, thousands of hands stretched out to be shaken, and what would he be doing there? What would he say?

And as suddenly the thought came into his head that he must not spend the night in town, waiting for morning and landing of the spaceship. He must tell Alexander everything immediately. "Pilot-5" was keeping in touch with the frigate. The station was forty kilometres from Summer Coast. It would only take another five minutes.

Waiting for the next revolution, Naal alighted on the moving circular platform. As the circles' speed slackened, he jumped from one to another until he reached the stationary centre—then down the tunnel from the platform.

A dark field lay before him. Behind shone the dim lights of the platform; in the distance in front he could see the luminous blue spire of the pilot's station. A breeze was blowing and its gentle murmur soothed Naal for some reason or another. Striding through the long grass, he made straight for the spire.

It had obviously been raining here too quite recently. The wet blades stuck to his knees. The breeze was warm and damp.

Soon Naal came out to the road and began to walk faster. The wind, too, blew faster, trying to tear the light jacket from his shoulders.

III

Pilot Station 5 had long ceased to give any detailed information. To all inquiries the robot-phone replied briefly: "All is well." Many people tried to tune in on the spaceship's wave, but failed: no one knew the old system of broadcasting.

The first communication about approaching photon frigate had been received from the intermediate station on Jupiter. But now Earth was in direct touch with the ship. The pilots did not leave their station for a minute. Three were on duty at the vector beacon, a fourth slept in an armchair by it. The crew of the spaceship had already transferred control to Earth, and it was up to the pilots to land the frigate on Coast Cosmodrome.

Only a few hours ago Sergei Kostyor had established two-way sound communication with the frigate. But so far the crew had transmitted no other information than data on the automatic system needed for landing.

The pilots brought the ship into a circular orbit, and it hung above Earth, a satellite with a twenty-four hour revolution.

Sergei had finished transmitting his coordinates, when Miguel Nuevos said:

"Somebody's been signalling for over an hour and wants a reply."

"Somebody's got insomnia," retorted Sergei without turning round. He was intently following the vector that was crossing the black spot of the cosmodrome on the luminous map.

"It's an urgent call—six frantic signals. That's not just curiosity."

"If it's important, why don't they get into direct communication?"

"I don't know."

A few minutes later Sergei himself heard the pips of the urgent call. But neither he, nor the other two pilots on duty at the parallel transmitters, could go to the videophone.

"Misha, you might answer, after all," Sergei pleaded. But Miguel had already fallen asleep in his armchair.

The signal was not repeated. Another half hour passed. The automatic instruments on the ship had been given their final instructions. Sergei closed his eyes with relief. But the red line of figures still danced before him and his eyelids ached with fatigue.

At that moment somebody touched him on the sleeve. The pilot took his hand from his eyes and saw before him a twelve-year-old boy, fair-haired and sunburnt, in an unbuttoned striped jacket, with a gold badge on his pale-green shirt and fresh scratches on his legs. The boy was looking up at Sergei, and wanting, apparently, to explain everything in one breath, said a few words, whose meaning the pilot did not immediately catch.

"What are you talking about? How did you get here?" asked Sergei.

When he had reached the central building, Naal had at once discovered a door and found himself in a long narrow corridor, down which his footsteps echoed hollowly. The floor was as smooth and shiny as glass and reflected the high ceiling. As he walked down the corridor, that feeling of alarm began to ring again in Naal's ears, and became a steady whine. He began to feel anxious again, a lump came into his throat. Naal felt his heart thumping unevenly, like a ball bouncing downstairs.

At the end of the corridor there was a sharp bend, leading to a broad staircase. Naal went up, stopped for an instant with his hand raised, then, making up his mind, pushed open the frosted

translucent doors.

He saw a round hall with low walls and a transparent cupola criss-crossed with meaningless white lines. The stars could be seen through the grid of these lines. The floor, which was inlaid with black and white diamonds rose slightly in the centre, where there was a small dais. Three men were standing on it in front of a black cone-shaped apparatus. Not far from the dais a fourth man was sleeping in one of the armchairs scattered about the hall. The men at the apparatus were talking, and their voices sounded hollow and unnatural. Naal heard every word, but could not understand what they were talking about. Fatigue, probably, had made him slightly giddy and everything had somehow become unreal. He walked across the black and white diamonds to the centre, mounted the dais, and took one of the pilots by the sleeve. The man turned, and by the expression of astonishment in his face, Naal realized he had not heard his footsteps.

Then, in order to explain everything at once, the boy said: "I've come to meet my brother."

It was like a dream. Naal was telling his story and heard his own voice, like someone else's echoing and vanishing in the great hall. He did not remember how long he talked. Probably not very long. The lights on the control panels by the circular walls were flickering, and the blue zigzags on the screens were all the time rapidly changing their design.

"What do you think, pilot? He won't refuse to answer?" asked Naal, throwing off his torpor for an instant. A short silence followed. Then someone uttered a phrase which for its simplicity and banality, was quite out of keeping with what was happening.

"What a business!"

Somebody was trying to wake the sleeper. "Misha! Miguel! Get up! Listen!"

Flashes were dancing rapidly on the screens, and the senior pilot, who was called Sergei, said suddenly, "You're asleep, sonny."

He took him up in his arms and laid him in a big soft armchair. But Naal was not asleep. He was watching the dancing lights and heard the words echoing under the dome: "Aman. ..." "Three centuries..." "He wasn't afraid.... And what if?" "He's asleep." "No."

The man who had said "no" asked Naal: "What's your name, spaceman's brother?" "Naal."

He did not hear their question repeated, but he felt the pilots had not understood, so he said: ("Nathaniel Sneg." "Sneg!" he heard voices say. "A strange combination."

Naal wanted to say "There's nothing strange about it. I was named after Nathaniel Leeds, captain of the bathyscaphe 'Light'."

Somebody moved the armchair and said: "He's asleep."

"I'm not asleep," said Naal and opened his eyes. "Pilot, has the 'Magellan' replied?"

Sergei bent over him. "You go to sleep. They said they'd meet you in a week. The crew have decided to land by rocket in the forest zone. Apparently they don't want a noisy welcome. They've missed Earth and the wind, and the forest so much. In a few days they'll come to Summer Coast on foot.

Naal's dream was dwindling fast.

"And me? And the people? Don't they want to meet anyone?"

"Don't worry," said Sergei. "They've promised to meet you in a week, haven't they?"

Naal saw now that the hall of the pilot's station was not so very big. The screens were dimmer and the sky above the transparent cupola had become low and cloudy.

"Where are they going to land?"

"They asked us not to say."

"Can't I know?"

"White Cape Peninsula."

Naal got up.

"Stop here for the night," said Sergei. "In the morning we'll decide what to do."

"No, I'm going home."

"I'll go with you."

"No."

So it was all over. It had been a silly fairy-tale he'd been foolish enough to believe in.... Three hundred years....

He did not wait to hear what else the pilot had to say and strode off quickly, then ran across the black-and-white diamonds of the hall, down the glassy floor of the corridor, and along the gravelled path. Once again he found himself in the dark field and went on towards the distant platform.

He walked slowly. Why hurry? "We'll meet in a week." But if somebody wants to meet someone else, he doesn't even wait an hour.

IV

Maybe it would all have ended there. But about a hundred yards from the station Naal passed a stand of "bee" planes. And an idea popped into his head that seemed quite ridiculous at first. But, having walked a little further, he stopped. "Perhaps Alexander couldn't reverse his decision about landing, when he heard everything from the pilot? He isn't alone, after all," thought Naal.

Feeling his heart thump with this new hope, Naal went back hesitatingly to the machines. He would be twelve in only three months and that was the age when you were allowed to pilot a "bee" on your own. Could he break the rule?

Still undecided, he got into the cockpit and pulled down the protective hood. Then he checked the engine. Yellow lights twinkled encouragingly on the controls panel. Then Naal took off on the horizontal propellers and immediately turned the "bee" to the north-east.

The high speed would enable him to reach the White Cape in two hours.

He may have fallen asleep during his flight. At any rate, it seemed very short to Naal. There was only one thought in his head: "I'll go to him and tell him who I am. I don't care what happens."

If he were met with cold stares, he would get into the cabin without saying a word, and take off, and fly south-west.

Trouble started when the "bee", having crossed the gulf with the stars reflected in it, was flying above the dark forest towards the cape. The east was beginning to turn blue, but at the zenith the sky was still dark. Somewhere up there hovered the "Magellan", abandoned by its crew.

Naal tried in vain to see lights down below or, at any rate, the darkcone of the landing rocket. Twice he flew to the tip of the cape just above the tops of the trees. And then the engine began to fail. Its batteries were exhausted. The lad realized he had taken a machine that was not ready for flying. To get a last broad look at the dark forest below, Naal began to climb on the horizontal propellers, and continued to climb until the engine failed. The propellers stopped, and the "bee", spreading its wings, glided to the ground.

Naal realized his mistake too late. Down below was dense

forest, and it was quite impossible to make a landing by gliding.

But for some reason he did not feel very frightened. As he watched the trees rushing past right under the wings, he tried to level his flight. But when he saw the black tree-tops in front of him, he automatically applied the brakes. There was a crash, a series of violent jolts, then a softer one. The back of the seat hit him between the shoulders and something hard pressed against them. Some fragrant dry stalks clung to his cheek. "Where's the rocket?" thought the boy, and collapsed on the grass.

The fourth sun

I

"Of course, neither the pilots nor the boy knew the reasons for our strange decision," said Alexander. "The reason was perplexity. Not the ordinary perplexity that can be caused by unexpected news, but a kind of helplessness and panic. What could we reply?"

"I won't say anything about the flight. They are all alike, unless there's an accident. Work and long sleep in a state of anabiosis. Half a century had passed on Earth and about twelve years in the ship when, having gone into orbit round Yellow Rose, we at last approached the planet.

"At first we felt the bitterness of an unsuccessful search. Before us we saw a land of ice—without life, without the rustle of forests, without the splashing of waves. Shrouded in a haze of cold mist, the great bright yellow sun could be seen above the broken contours of the mountains. It certainly did resemble a yellow rose. The frozen ocean shimmered with pinks and yellows. The clefts in the rocks, the cracks in the ice, the shadows of the gloomy precipices—all were deep blue. Ice.... A cold glitter.... Silence.

"The only thing to cheer us up was the air— real, almost terrestrial air, only as cold as a mountain spring. The very first day we discarded our helmets and breathed it with our teeth clenched from the cold. We were heartily sick of the chemically pure insipid air of the ship's compartments. I myself believe that is what causes nostalgia for Earth so agonizing that it's terrible even to think about. But there, on the Snow Planet, We no longer suffered that so acutely. There was something congenial to humans in that frozen world, ice-bound by the cold, but we did not realize it at first. Each time we left the frigate, we saw only a kingdom of snow, rock, and ice."

II

They saw deep gorges clouded with a blue haze. The broad flat rays of the sun turned from orange to green as they penetrated into the ravines through fissures in their steep walls and broke up into hundreds of emerald sparks amid the broken ice. When the rays reached the bottom, the mass of ice crystals sparkled in a cluster of

fantastic lights.

Through the windows of the "Magellan" the sky looked at night like a black wall with the broken outlines of blue constellations on it. At times the high transparent clouds would begin to shimmer with a yellowish light which streamed over the icy faces of the mountains, lighting up great rock cliffs in the darkness.

But yet it was not dead, this cold planet. Sometimes heavy clouds would come from the west, shrouding the orange sinking sun and sweeping the hideous black shadows off the ice. And then it would begin to snow, real snow, like that on the coast of the Kara Sea or around the cities of the Antarctic. It melted on the palms of their hands, turning to ordinary water. And the water would get warm.

And once, they discovered a valley in the southern hemisphere where there was neither snow nor ice. There the rocks were bare, the stones silvery with moisture, and there was gravel on the banks of the unfrozen brook. A sparkling waterfall, surrounded by hundreds of tiny rainbows, thundered among the rocks. It seemed to want to waken the world slumbering in the cold.

Not far from the waterfall Kar discovered a small plant with black leaves clinging to the rock face. He took off his glove with the intention of pulling the slender knotty stalk, but the pointed black leaves suddenly jerked and bent towards his hand. Kar automatically pulled his hand back. "Don't touch it," advised the cautious Larsen. "Who knows what it is?" But Kar had his own ideas. A sly smile flickered on his lips. He passed his hand over the little black shrub and once again its slender leaves bent towards him.

"It's attracted by the warmth," said Kar in a soft voice, and then he shouted to the biologist, who had fallen behind: "Thael! Here's a real discovery for you at last!"

At that moment the navigator did not fully understand the importance of his discovery.

In the evening they all gathered in the mess-room of the "Magellan". There were five of them: blond, broad-shouldered Knud Larsen, good-natured and absent-minded in everything not connected with computers; two Africans—the merry little biologist

Thael and the navigator Tey Karat, who was always called simply Kar; the pilot and astronomer George Rogov, who was fair-haired like Larsen, but swarthy like the Africans, and was the youngest member of the crew; and finally, Alexander Sneg, who was the reconnaissance navigator and artist. Lately he had been so engrossed with his sketches that he had handed over command to Kar.

When they had assembled, Kar said: "It's a strange planet, isn't it? But one thing is obvious: if it weren't covered with ice, there'd be life on it. The sun, Yellow Rose, I mean, will thaw the ice one day: that's obvious. But we don't know how many millennia that will take. Should we melt the ice ourselves?"

He suggested firing four artificial suns above the Snow Planet in line with Vorontsov's system. This was an old and fairly simple system, which had been used to create atomic suns above Earth in the first decades after men, having destroyed all weapons, had been able to apply nuclear energy to peaceful uses. It was then that the ice of Greenland and the coastal regions of the Antarctic had been melted.

"But why four?" asked George.

"That is the minimum. You can't have fewer than four—otherwise all the ice will not be melted and eternal winter will once again spread over the whole planet."

But four suns would use up two-thirds of their remaining stellar fuel. That meant the cosmonauts would be unable to accelerate sufficiently and that they would not get back to Earth before two hundred and fifty years. They would have to spend the major part of the flight in a state of anabiosis—two hundred and fifty years. But they would have given men a planet which could become a new outpost of mankind in space. Their distant search would not have been fruitless.

"What do we need for this?" asked Larsen.

"Agreement," said Kar, looking round at everybody.

"Yes," said Larsen.

"Of course!" exclaimed Thael.

George nodded, without saying a word.

"No!" rapped out Sneg suddenly, standing up.

A few seconds of surprised silence passed before he began to speak.

He said that it would be stupid to turn the planet into an

incubator. Men must not be afraid of bleak ice, of the fight with Nature in the unknown planet. Without struggle life lost its meaning. And then — what if the artificial suns burned out before all the ice had been melted? What would happen to the first inhabitants of the Snow Planet if eternal winter returned? But supposing the suns did not burn out. Supposing the ice did all melt. What would men see then? Bare mountains, treeless plains, grey deserts.

They listened to him, and there were moments when each one was on the point of agreeing with him. Not so much because his actual words were convincing but because his fervour and persistence were so persuasive. Sneg always argued in this manner when he was firmly convinced he was right. It was with the same fervour that he had insisted on Earth on his right to fly to "his star".

III

His friends remembered how he had stood before a pale, dry man in a large room in the Palace of Stars and said with fierce directness: "I am surprised that the Union of Astronauts could leave the decision on such a question to you alone, a man incapable of believing in legends."

The man had grown even paler, but his irritation was manifested only in the slight hesitancy of his quiet responses: "Every youth who has been beyond the orbit of Jupiter considers himself fit for independent search and ready to fly to the centre of the Galaxy. It's ridiculous. Your head has been turned with fairy tales about the planets of Yellow Rose. Yellow Rose is an insidious star. It's tempting, of course; but it's an eternal truth—the fairy tales are fascinating."

"You pretend to know eternal truths, but you've forgotten one: in every legend there is a grain of truth. We believe there are planets...."

Rotais bent his head.

"I shall permit myself to terminate this useless conversation. I see no foundation for your claim for an independent expedition of discovery. ... And in any case I am very upset and it is difficult for me to speak. An hour ago Valentine Amber crashed in a hydroflier. He is at home now and I am in a hurry to see him."

But he was not in such a great hurry, apparently, because when

Alexander arrived at the old astronaut's house, he found only the doctors there. They told him that Amber had refused an operation.

"I shan't be able to fly any more, and my life.... Well, it's been long enough, as it is," he had declared.

Silently Sneg entered the room where Amber was lying. The astronaut said to the embarrassed doctor, "Please go."

The room was in semi-darkness. The windows were not curtained, but were covered with masses of apple-blossom. Alexander approached the bed. Amber was covered to the chin with a white coverlet. Over it lay his matted white beard. A bloody gash ran right across his wrinkled forehead.

"No one can understand me except you," began Alexander. "Other people may accuse me of callousness, obsession, egoism. But you and I can speak the truth to one another. You will never fly again." "Well."

"They won't let our crew go exploring," said Alexander quietly. "Give us your right to a second flight, and we will go."

"To Leda? To my planet?" Amber moved neither his hands nor his head, but his eyes lit up with joy. "Is it settled?"

At that moment perhaps he saw the blue world of Leda, a planet whose mysteries have still not been entirely solved—with its ruins of turquoise cities, and white mountains rising above the purple masses of dense forests shrouded in clouds of poisonous blue-grey mist. But the marvellous vision vanished. Before him he saw once more the stern, tense face of Alexander.

"No, of course not. Not to my planet," muttered Amber in a hollow voice.

"Everyone has his own star," said Sneg. He sat down by the bed and told his story briefly: about the latest despatch from the "Globe", the mystery of Yellow Rose, the plan for independent exploration that the five young astronauts had conceived, and his last conversation with Rotais.

"Leda needs archaeologists. But we are explorers. We want to discover a planet where the air is like that on Earth. Men need such planets."

Amber closed his eyes.

"Good... the right is yours."

"He won't believe me," objected Alexander, recalling Rotais' pale impassive face.

"Take my badge. In the blue shell on the table."

In this shell, which had been found on Leda, lay a gold badge with blue stars and the inscription "Search".

Alexander glanced at the badge, and then at the injured astronaut. For the first time his resolution failed him. He clenched his teeth and let his outstretched hand fall.

"Take it," repeated Amber. "You're right."

"Break the window," he said, when Alexander had picked up the badge.

"No, don't open it—break the glass. It's old and very fragile.... Good," he said, when he heard the crack of the shattered pane.

Alexander broke off a large branch outside the window and a ray of sun penetrated the room.

"A happy start!" said Valentine Amber, endeavouring by sheer willpower to suppress the growing pain in his chest. "May every one of you return to Earth!"

"That doesn't often happen."

"That's why I wish it."

Outside Sneg met Rotais and showed him the badge in his palm of his hand. Rotais shrugged his shoulder slightly and nodded his head, at once expressing veiled indignation at the young astronaut's behaviour and, forced assent. No one in the whole solar system could reject the right to a second flight: a cosmonaut who had discovered a new planet and had returned to Earth could set out again in any expedition he liked, at any time, and on any spaceship that was ready to take off. He could also cede his right to another captain. For one second Alexander had a flash of Amber's face, the face of the celebrated captain of the "Search", his wrinkled forehead with its bloody gash, and his deep-blue eyes that seemed to reflect the fantastic world of Leda. "To Leda? To my planet? Have you made up your mind?" The old astronaut had understood Alexander however. But Rotais?

Alexander turned and said in a cold voice to Rotais' back: "Inform East Cosmoport. We have chosen the 'Magellan'."

He did more than anybody for this flight. Yet it was more difficult for him than for any of the rest to set off. Each of them had relatives on Earth, but Sneg, alone, had a girl-friend besides.

To outsiders this silent friendship seemed odd. They were not often seen together, and they rarely talked about each other. Only their friends knew about their love.

A week before the start Alexander met her in a new sunny

garden—what is now the Golden Park of Konsata. The wind was tearing off the leaves, and the sun was dancing on the white sand of path. The girl was silent.

"You knew I was an astronaut," said Sneg.

He could be calm when necessary.

Before taking off he gave her the gold badge.

Once, happening to put his head into the mess-room of the "Magellan", George saw Sneg take a small stereophoto and put it in front of him, staring at it and saying nothing.

"I'd put that picture away for ever," said George.

Alexander glanced up at him with a mixed expression of mockery and astonishment.

"You think everything will be forgotten?"

He covered his eyes with his hand and with a few bold strokes of his pencil dashed off a sketch of the girl with remarkable fidelity on a piece of cardboard.

"There."

Over seven years had passed, reckoning by "Magellan" time, since the start of the flight.

IV

And now Alexander Sneg, the most eager to go on this expedition, was fighting for the icy planet, as if destruction, and not rebirth, were awaiting it.

"A grey desert! Stunted shrubs! If there's no ice, what will be left? A dead land, dead rocks."

"Men will do everything!" returned Thael. "Men will do everything that has to be done."

"And there's something else," continued Sneg. "We have no right to deprive people of the world we have discovered here, because it is beautiful. Don't you understand that?"

He threw his sketches on the table. They all fell silent, when they saw once more what they had seen before, but had begun to forget oppressed by the domain of ice. The colours were extraordinarily true to life: the black-and-orange sun-sets; the blue ravines with their luminous mists; the morning kindled golden sparks on the broken ice; the yellow sky with its great masses of grey cloud.

The pictures rustled slowly. At last Kar said. "Very well. But it's

not right—cold and death for beauty's sake. What use is dead ice?"

"It's not dead," said Alexander, shaking his head. "It has its own life. Wind, streams, bushes. Everything here is awakening gradually. But there must be no hurry. Otherwise it will be a desert."

"There'll be no desert. There'll be an ocean, boundless and blue, as on Earth. There'll be enough melted ice for that. Waterfalls will roar. Just imagine, Alexander—thousands of silvery waterfalls cascading down the rocks in iridescent mist. Nature will still be severe, it will still have its own beauty, but there will be life as well. Surely that is the kind of planet we were looking for." -

"There'll be an ocean and islands covered with forests," said Thael softly.

"Where will the forests come from? Will the black shrubs grow into trees?" "Men will plant forests." "On the rocks?"

"You're wrong, Sasha," quietly said George, who had hitherto been silent. "Remember Antarctica."

Sneg was going to reply, but suddenly sat down wearily, and said, "All right. I'm not arguing." "You'll help with the calculations?" "With the work, yes, but not with the calculations. What sort of mathematician am I?"

V

They worked a long time, using robots and pneumatic spanners. Then they put four landing rockets, surrounded by a network of magnetic regulators, into orbit. The rockets had no autopilots, so Kar and Larsen got into the cabins themselves and then baled out in life-suits. They did that twice. The four rockets, with stellar fuel RE-202-esane formed the points of a trihedral pyramid, within which hung the Snow Planet.

No one recalled the argument. Alexander worked with a will, and even made some calculations concerning one of the artificial suns. Each had his own sun, except Kar, who had taken on the general calculations and control.

When work was finished on the last day the crew of the "Magellan" gathered in a gorge, where the control station had been set up.

"Well... ye Gods creating spring," said Kar, rather too seriously.

"Go ahead," said Thael, and sighed audibly.

"Go?"

"Go on."

The signal was given. Three screens were lit by a blinding flash. Then mountains and masses of ice, illumined by two or three suns, appeared on them. But the opaque surface of the fourth screen remained white and impassive.

"Mine," said Sneg.

The fourth sun had not fired.

No one knew what had happened. Possibly, the system of magnetic regulators had gone wrong. The slightest jarring or impact with a meteorite no bigger than a grain of sand might be all that was needed for the sun to blaze up in a few moments. But what were the chances that a meteorite would strike the rocket?

"What's it matter? There'll be an ice-cap, like there used to be in the Antarctic. What the devil, it'll be fine—the Sneg snow plateau!" exclaimed the ingenuous Larsen.

"Oh yes, it'll be marvellous," said Alexander dryly.

An embarrassed silence followed. No one imagined of course that Sneg had deliberately miscalculated. He knew that himself. But why did it have to be his that should fail?

"I'll go up in a rocket and neutralize the system of regulators with a jet stream," said Sneg quietly and firmly when they had returned to the "Magellan".

"Let's go to bed," he added. "I'll prove it's possible."

^What, to go to bed?"

"To smash the controlling system of regulators and get away in time from the flash."

Larsen obediently sat down at the keyboard of the electronic brain. Alexander dictated.

"It's possible in principle, you see," he declared, when he had finished his calculations.

"In principle," grumbled Larsen. "Don't be a fool—you'll be burned up."

"Let's go to bed, Sasha," said George. "It's not all that bad." But everyone knew it was bad—very bad.

They had used up two-thirds of their esane. They could only get back to Earth in two hundred and fifty years. And they would return empty-handed. By that time the cold would have the Snow

Planet once again in its icy grasp, and when would men come here again and light atomic suns? Yet everything had been almost ready. Without that mistake, the crew of the "Magellan" would have brought news to Earth of a planet suitable for normal life. Men needed such planets—outposts of mankind in the boundless universe, jumping-off grounds for new, even more distant, leaps.

They were awakened in the night by a loud call signal. Alexander's voice, amplified by the receiver, said "I'm in the rocket. Don't be angry, lads, it's got to be tried."

"Sasha," said George. "We all beg you—don't do it. Damn the planet. Think of Earth."

"Nothing will happen."

"You're arguing again."

"No."

"Sneg! I order you to return!" cried Kar.

"Don't be angry, Kar.... But I'm the captain, after all."

"But you yourself wanted the planet to remain ice-bound," said Larsen timidly.

There was a sound like Alexander laughing.

"That's Kar's fault. He described the ocean, and waterfalls, and islands so well. And I'm an artist. I wanted to paint it all."

Kar swore softly.

"Switch on the videophone," said Thael.

Sneg did so. Everyone saw his face on the screen. He was whistling as he bent over the controls and seemed to be quite calm.

"Be careful," said George.

Sneg nodded, still whistling.

"Just before returning to Earth! Why are you doing it?" cried Kar in despair. "What if it blazes up right away?"

"You know what. But it's got to be finished."

The whine of the engine interrupted the conversation. The image on the screen jerked and then they saw Alexander's face, strained and distorted. Then acceleration stopped and the speed began to fall. At high speed, Alexander would not be able to turn the rocket and strike the regulators with a jet stream. They were all silent and saw nothing but his tense face. And then the moment came when a blinding white flash lit up the screen....

VI

"How did you manage to escape?" I asked Alexander.

He looked gloomily at me.

"That's the point. My name is George Rogov. Sneg perished. Can you understand what we all felt when the pilot sent us the message about the boy? A little chap on Earth was eagerly awaiting for his brother. Perhaps it's difficult for you to understand. But we who had not seen Earth or people for so many years knew this feeling of longing and expectation very well. It's particularly hard when you know you won't meet a single familiar face. Three hundred years. You can't even trace the old names. And here was a brother! We understood the boy and his yearning for someone near and dear. It was very difficult to tell the truth. Impossible, in fact."

Thael showed himself the most resourceful of us all. The reply he sent to the station helped us to gain time.

"But that's no solution," said Larsen. "What'll we say to him afterwards?"

"What's the boy called?" I asked.

Kar told me. Then he looked at me with an odd expression in his eyes, but said nothing at the time.

The engine of the landing rocket gave out just above Earth, and we baled out in our life-suits.

It was still dark. The first blue of dawn was just beginning to show. I can't remember everything. There was a smell of damp leaves and earth. Thael stood pressing his dark face against a birch-tree, its stem showing white in the half-light. Larsen lay on the ground, exclaiming "Look! Grass!"

I was watching the sky. Suddenly, the bright yellow dawn began to blaze up, and the zenith became a pure deep blue, and it seemed to me that the sky was singing. I never knew that it could sing like millions of finely tuned strings. A light cloud above my head slowly took on a rosy glow. And then a sudden horror seized me. I thought that this was all another agonizing dream about the Earth, the dream that each one of us had suffered from when we were on the Snow Planet. This fear was like an electric shock. I lay down on the grass and closed my eyes. I clutched the root of a bush. It was rough and wet.

A moment later I loosened by fingers and opened my eyes. Once more the blue sky was ringing above the forest. And mingled with this sound I could hear Larsen saying again "Look! Leaves!"

Then the sun rose.

Have you ever seen the sun rise out of the grass? You have to be lying down to see it. The grass looks like a fantastic forest above which a bright star rises. The dewdrops sparkle like coloured sparks.

Naal watched the sun through the grass. He remembered everything; he could even see the smashed "bee" out of the corner of his eye, but he felt no emotion, nor belated fear. Everything that had happened last night was like a confused dream, and the lad felt his dreams had been impractical.

When the sun was sufficiently high for its lower rim to touch the heads of the tallest flowers growing on the edge of the meadow, Naal got up. His head whirled a bit, and his injured shoulder hurt. But he had been lucky. The shock-absorbers had thrown him out on soft grass, and had fallen asleep without even trying to get up—he was so exhausted.

The boy looked slowly about him. There was no need to hurry. The forest stretched for hundreds of miles all round. The leaves were quivering in the wind.

Then he heard a voice full of joy and surprise exclaim behind him: "Look! A human being!"

Naal turned at the sound of the voice and was petrified. He saw men in blue space-suits with broad white straps crossing them.

With beating heart he cried: "Are you from the 'Magellan'!"

"Naal," said a swarthy fair-haired airman.

"I spotted him later than the others," said George. "And strangely enough, I seemed to know that boy. Perhaps I recognized myself as I was in my boyhood? There he was, turning eagerly towards us—a little fellow, fair-haired, his shirt torn on one of the shoulders, a bit of dry grass stuck to his cheek, his knee grazed. He stared at me with wide-open deep blue eyes. I think I called him by his name."

Suddenly Kar said in a loud voice, pushing me by the shoulder, 'Alexander, meet your brother.'

"Perhaps I acted selfishly," continued George. "But at that

moment I quite forgot Naal was not my brother. You have to understand what it means to meet someone near to you on Earth, when you are not expecting it at all. But gradually the thought has kept recurring more and more frequently: had I the right?"

I did not understand George. Then he said, "Alexander fired the sun, the last one, which made it possible to destroy the ice. Now there are islands, and oceans there. Had I the right to deprive the boy of such brother?"

"A dead one?"

"Even a dead one."

"George," I said. "It's difficult for me to judge. Perhaps Alexander had other reasons for risking his life? Did he want to return? That girl. ..."

George's lips curled in a slight smile. He obviously thought my question quite stupid.

"He did. He loved Earth. Who doesn't want to return to Earth?"

We were silent for a while.

"He was always whistling some old song," said George suddenly. "I only know a few words of it:

'Though the Earth is only a dot
In the impenetrable darkness of space,
It's good on Earth now, is it not?....'

"If everything remains as it is," he resumed, "it will be even worse, I expect. I haven't just deprived the boy of a brother. I've deprived Alexander of a heroic deed. And nobody will know how the fourth sun was kindled."

"You've deprived yourself of a name as well. George Rogov is thought to have perished, isn't he?"

"My name has no value".

"Now take my advice. You asked for it. Let everything remain as it is. The fourth sun won't go out as a result, will it? You have to think of Naal as well."

"I'm thinking of him all the time. But what about Sneg?"

"One day people will learn the whole truth. By the way, you only remember three lines of that song, I know more: don't forget I'm an historian. It's the song of the explorers of Venus. This is the last verse:

'Let those who follow us take heed—
If we create new stars,
No fame, nor glory do we need:
We kindle them for men.' "

"But Alexander's memory! The memory of his feat! What he did is an example to the living.

Perhaps Naal will have to kindle his own sun one day."

I glanced at George. He was waiting for my objections. He wanted to hear them, because they gave him back his brother. "Maybe," I said. "But above which planet will he kindle his sun? Teach him to be an explorer—that's your duty as a brother. He'll kindle the sun himself."

The sun had set long ago. A half-moon, bounded on one side by an arc of the Power Ring, hung low above the water.

A clatter of footsteps on the stone steps interrupted our conversation. But in fact, there was nothing more to discuss.

They nodded goodbye, and went off, the astronaut holding his brother's little hand firmly in his own.

Before me, on a page torn from an exercise-book, lies the gold badge, whose history nobody knows. Naal gave it to me before we took off.

We archaeologists are flying to Leda, to the planet whose secret Valentine Amber had not fully succeeded in unravelling. It will be a long time before we return.

Perhaps in eighty years I will be met on Earth by someone in the crowd, someone I don't know as yet—an adult or a child, it does not matter. And he will say to his friends: "I'M GOING TO MEET MY BROTHER!"