

Flight of the Centaurus

by Ruchard Elam

Spacemaster Brigger came into the navigation compartment of the *Centaurus*, which was thrusting into the starry night of space far beyond Saturn. Rob Allison, junior officer, looked up from the desk where he sat, wondering at the frown on the skipper's face.

"It's just as I feared, Allison," Mr. Brigger said gravely. "The men are sorry they signed on for Titania and are grumbling already. They think they'll be ridiculed when they get back."

"Because of Dr. Franz's being discredited by all the scientists, I suppose?"

The skipper nodded. "They're sure they're on a wild-goose chase. I'm afraid I'm inclined to agree with them."

"I guess you and the crew, sir, are only reflecting the opinion of almost everyone else on Earth," Rob mused bitterly.

The spacemaster of the *Centaurus* dropped onto a plastic bench beside a port that overlooked the star fields of the outer solar system. "Exactly why did your brother Grant authorize this expedition, Allison? Does he really believe we'll find animal life on Uranus' satellite or is it something else?"

Grant Allison, an illustrious front-rank explorer of several years before, was now president of Interplanet Exploration, which controlled research space travel.

Rob relaxed as he prepared to answer. "You probably didn't know, sir, that Dr. Franz put my brother through space school when our father couldn't afford it. He was Grant's teacher in space mechanics in high school and thought he showed unusual promise."

"That would explain President Allison's interest in Dr. Franz," Mr. Brigger agreed, "but I can't understand an intelligent man like your brother falling for a harebrained story such as Dr. Franz told."

The facts of Dr. Franz's amazing discovery were known to the whole world. While studying the planet Uranus a distance of two and a half years before, the research ship blew a rocket tube and was forced down on Titania, Uranus' largest moon. While the crewmen repaired the craft, Dr. Franz went prospecting. After he returned, he reported that he saw fish life swimming beneath Titania's solid ice sheet, where the temperature was 300 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. The crewmen were too interested in their work and, not having a scientific curiosity anyhow, did not bother to verify the scientist's claim.

Upon returning to Earth, Dr. Franz, who was in the early stage of a fatal illness, told the scientific world of his remarkable discovery. He was totally unprepared for the rebuff he received from all quarters. No scientist on Earth would admit that Dr. Franz's preposterous tale could possibly be true. Those people who would not go as far as calling Dr. Franz a dishonest publicity seeker (as some did) were nevertheless agreed that the ordeal he had gone through must have been too much for him. Dr. Franz died six months later of his illness—a brokenhearted man.

"Grant truly believed Dr. Franz found life on Titania," Rob said to the skipper of the *Centaurus*.

“He’s so sure of it that he has risked his own career on this expedition. If this fails, he says public sentiment will force him out of office.”

“Your brother must have a lot of confidence in you, Allison,” Mr. Brigger said, “making you head of this research trip which is so important to him. But from what I hear of your exploits on other planets, he has reason to trust you.”

“Thank you,” Rob murmured. “I couldn’t do a good job, though, if I didn’t believe as wholeheartedly in this as Grant does. I believe, as Grant does, that Dr. Franz spoke the truth.”

“It will certainly be a revolutionary discovery for science if you find and bring back evidence of that,” the skipper admitted.

Before leaving the compartment, Mr. Brigger added, “Let’s hope we don’t have a mutiny on our hands before this thing is over.”

Alone, Rob got up and stared out of the port into the perpetual black deeps where the star points glowed like polished gems.

Some minutes later a young spaceman with sandy, disordered hair that even space regulations could do nothing with, came into the compartment. Jim Hawley was Rob’s best friend and had flighted a number of expeditions with him. There was a sober look on Jim’s customarily jovial face.

“The men are complaining like babies, Rob,” Jim said. “Do you think they’ll be any good to us?”

“They’ll have to be, Jim,” Rob answered grimly. “They’re all we have.”

Jim looked at his stalwart young friend in admiration. “You and Grant are all right, Rob. Not many men would risk their careers on an old man’s whims. Aren’t you scared—just a little bit?”

“I’m plenty scared,” Rob told him, with a nervous smile. “I’m only a subofficer of five months, and here I am in charge of an expedition. Don’t think that isn’t frightening. In a sense, the lives of all men aboard the ship will be in my hands after we land.”

“If you need me,” Jim assured him, “here’s one buddy you can count on.”

Two days later the *Centaurus* had intercepted the orbit of Titania and was beginning to barrel surfaceward. Rob, looking outside from the officer’s platform up forward, saw a huge rocky world filling the port, its mantle of ice shimmering in the reflected light of the unseen primary body.

The *Centaurus* dropped lower over a plateau that Rob had pointed out to Mr. Brigger as the spot where Dr. Franz had visited. The underjets threw out pencils of braking power to check the plunge of the space ship.

Finally the *Centaurus* touched down on its tail fins and then Spacemaster Brigger said to Rob, “It’s all yours now, Allison.”

Looking out over the hoary wilderness, completely airless because of the little world’s inability

to retain an atmosphere, Rob felt suddenly incompetent. Only now did he realize fully his youthful inexperience. It was one thing to be an idle witness on a journey; it was another to be in charge of a crew of men.

Rob heard footsteps on the platform and turned to see Jim Hawley walking up. Jim grinned in his engaging fashion, and it was like a tonic to Rob's spirits.

"What do you say we get started, Rob?" he said. "We've got a lot to do."

Rob had the skipper round up the crew in the orientation compartment as soon as he had made his own plans. Then he laid before them the order of procedure. On a flannel board he tacked an enlarged map he had copied from one owned by Dr. Franz.

"Here's a sketch of this area," Rob explained. "Dr. Franz neglected to mark where he had seen the fishlike animal swimming beneath the ice. He did report that he was only able to find one after days of searching. They must be very scarce."

"So scarce there probably aren't any at all," retorted one of the subofficers in a low voice.

Rob ignored the remark and went on with his explanation. "We'll scatter out over the area and begin searching. It won't be an easy job because the ice isn't completely clear but is streaked through with ammonia and other opaque solubles."

"Just how long will we have to keep up this search?" another crewman demanded. "I don't want to spend Christmas in this forsaken place."

Spacemaster Brigger spoke up then. "We can spend seven days on searching and still have enough supplies and fuel to get us home again. If we don't find anything in that time, we start back just the same. Is that clear, Mr. Allison?"

"Yes, sir," Rob said. Seven days sounded like ample time, but the area they had to cover was several square miles. From Dr. Franz's description of the place, the liquid medium beneath the ice was wide and deep, a veritable ocean. Beneath this solution the ice began again and extended into the core of the small planet.

Explanations over, the majority of the crew, about twenty spacemen, climbed into their space gear, Rob and Jim with them. Mr. Brigger and a few key personnel would remain aboard to attend the operational facilities of the ship. The suits were triple-reinforced against the exceeding cold and were electrically heated. The helmets, with inside radio sets, were frost-free types, and the shoes were doubly weighted and spike-soled for navigating over the icy, low-gravity surface.

The men descended to the ground on an escalator dropped from the side of the *Centaurus*. Rob had the men spread out, two by two, as safety buddies. He concentrated on the farther corners of the ice field to begin with, intending to bring the searchers closer and closer to the ship each day.

As the men began hiking over the glacier, Rob and Jim talked together through their helmet radio sets.

"I don't understand how the water under the ice flows without freezing in this superlow

temperature,” Jim remarked.

“It can’t be water,” Rob answered. “It’s something else, probably a liquefied gas with an extremely low freezing point. Wherever it is, it must contain all the elements needed to support its strange life forms.”

“Let’s start looking too, Jim,” Rob suggested.

The first “day” passed without success. Then the second. Night was only a relative term, for Uranus, Titania’s main source of light, was never out of the sky. On the third day, some of the men complained about having to spend ten hours at a time in biting cold weather searching for something they were sure did not even exist. Despite the men’s heavily insulated suits, the ultralow temperature that frosted the suits like mold could not be entirely kept out. Rob sympathized with the men, but there was no other way to do the job.

It was on the fifth day that one of the searchers spotted a small thick-bodied shape several feet beneath the ice. The cordon of searchers had closed in more than halfway to the ship by now.

“Jim, will you supervise operation of the ice saw?” Rob asked, when they had joined the men who had made the discovery.

Jim nodded and left.

“Has it moved yet?” Rob asked one of the crewmen, trying to curb the almost overpowering excitement he felt.

“No,” one of them replied. “It seems to be dead and embedded in the ice.”

Presently the ice saw came trundling up on its ski runners, being pushed along by Jim and two others. It was a boxlike machine, heavily insulated against the cold. Jim dropped the blade and turned on the machine, guiding it along an invisible outline around the imprisoned thing. He went over the cuts several times, lowering the blade each time until a depth of several feet was reached. Then he gave the saw a side-to-side motion, and there was a sharp crack as the block of ice was snapped off beneath the surface.

By now all the searchers had come over. Jim worked the lifters on the machine and the block of ice, containing its inanimate prisoner, was raised and set down. The men crowded close and looked. Then Rob looked, and Jim. Rob felt a sickening disappointment as he realized their failure. There was no creature inside the ice at all. It was nothing but a slab of rock.

One of the men snorted contemptuously. Another laughed openly in scorn.

Rob bit his lips and regretfully ordered the ice saw back to the ship. Then he sent the men back to their positions of search.

The young officer felt little hope. The ring was closing in toward the *Centaurus*. There wasn’t much more area that hadn’t already been examined. Rob, realizing the attitude of the men, knew they hadn’t probed as diligently as they were supposed to have. Very likely large areas had been only carelessly examined. But that couldn’t be helped.

Rob went through the last day with the slow resignation of defeat settling within him. In only a few hours the searchers would have covered the entire area, and their own moment of victory would be at hand.

When the search was finally over and still no one had found anything moving beneath the ice, Rob knew how it felt to taste defeat.

Jim clapped Rob sympathetically on the shoulder. "I'm sorry, Rob," he said. "Perhaps later on there will be another expedition."

"There won't be any more to this place, you can be sure of that!" Rob blurted. "After this failure, the Space Command certainly won't send any more good money after bad!"

Later, as all on board the *Centaurus* slept, Rob tossed restlessly on his cot. He heard the quiet breathing of the crewmen in the adjoining compartments. They were happy; their reluctant job was done and they were going home. The blast-off was scheduled for 0600 the next morning.

Rob could not stand his plaguing thoughts. He got out of bed and pulled on his clothes. He looked across the room at Jim Hawley, breathing deeply in sound slumber. Rob walked down the corridor to the garb room and began tugging on space gear. He realized only then how bone-weary he was, how his head ached from the tension of the past weeks, how heavily his heart throbbed in his breast. He couldn't relax any place now, he knew, but it would be easier outside, continuing the search to the very end.

Rob tucked an electron gun in the holster of his suit, then left the *Centaurus*. He struck out over the glacier pack, his head lowered. It came to him then how difficult it would have been for the men to detect any moving object in the murky maze below.

Hours passed and Rob found himself far from the ship. He was shivering from the stubborn cold. He turned the heat in his suit to full strength and pushed his aching legs faster to speed up the circulation. His eyes never left the ground, searching, searching....

If he were the only one involved in the failure, it wouldn't matter so much, but it was his brother's problem too. Grant hadn't made many mistakes on research expeditions—that was why he held the highest office in the organization. After this, though, it would go hard with him. Then there was the misunderstood Dr. Franz, who deserved a better fate than being labeled an old man who in his final days seemed to have lost his clear, scientific outlook.

"Maybe, though, the public was right," Rob thought. "Maybe it was a hoax Dr. Franz pulled in order to gain public recognition he had never quite made." But even now, in the blackest moment, Rob couldn't really believe this of the dear friend who had launched his brother's career.

Rob's legs were beginning to feel like stumps as the time dragged on. He stumbled often on burls of ice that cluttered the wasteland. Finally he tripped and fell heavily, and it seemed that he did not even have the strength to rise again. His helmet was flat on the ice and his eyes, misted over with sleeplessness, were still looking downward.

Then he caught a sign of movement in the depths. He blinked his eyes to clear the glaze out of

them.

“There it is again!” he said aloud. “It’s no hallucination either!” It was a long dark shape threading its way sluggishly down below. Now the thing was rising to the surface. Cold, bulging eyes peered into his own.

With numb fingers Rob uncached his electron gun and pressed the barrel against the ice. A moment later the creature was hanging buoyant and lifeless under the submerged edge of the ice layer. Rob struggled to his feet, astounded at the renewed energy he now had. He memorized the spot as best his dazed faculties would allow. Then he laid the pistol on the ice for an additional marker. He began running toward the ship.

From that moment on, Rob’s mind seemed to be in a dream world. He vaguely remembered the long way back to the space ship and then nearly collapsing before reaching it. He dimly remembered Jim, who had missed him, coming outside and assisting him into the warmth of the vessel. And he barely recalled pouring out the story of his find.

Now, much later, he was fully awake and the nightmare was over. He found himself on his cot, fully dressed. Jim Hawley was looking down on him. Rob was aware that the ship was moving. He knew the *Centaurus* had already blasted off for home.

“Did you find—!” he exclaimed.

Jim soothed him with a smile. “Yeah, we dug out your monster and we’ve got him aboard. If you’re through being a sleepyhead, I’ll take you to see him.”

“How long have I been under?”

“Twelve hours.”

“Wow!”

“Feel rested?”

“Good as new,” Rob answered.

They went down the corridor to one of the cold-storage compartments. Several of the crew were inside, as well as the skipper. But Rob wasn’t noticing the men. He was looking at a dark alien form lying on the floor. Rob went over closer and knelt down. The creature was fishlike, and the strangest thing about it was the glistening dark skin, similar to metal. Rob touched it and it was like stroking cold steel.

“No wonder it can live in such frigid temperatures,” Rob murmured, “with a metallic covering like that! Won’t the scientists back home have a picnic dissecting him?”

He stood up and found his gaze level with Mr. Brigger’s.

“I never believed in your fantastic theory,” the chief officer said, “and I still doubt it after I’ve seen it. But I admired your spirit from the first, Allison. I believe you would have been as good a loser

as a winner and I'm proud to have flighted with you."

He smiled and offered his hand to Rob, who shook it. Then the others came forward, and they too offered congratulations. But Rob's thoughts weren't for his own success this day. They were reaching ahead to when Grant Allison would be even more of a fabulous figure in the field of space science, and Dr. Franz would at last have claimed his well-deserved victory.

Source:

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