


# **World-let Secret**

**By Phil Smith**





## *The World-Let – Chapter One*

The air was sultry; clothes clung to the body making every movement a chore. A captivating stillness existed in the murky twilight. The quiet was absolute, no wind, no birds, no people, void of any noise, nothing. That and the excessive heat sent shivers down my spine. An eerie place indeed I thought.

The small world-let hung in space several thousand kilometres above its dead and airless parent. All were orbiting a near and dangerous reddish orange G star giving off unusual amounts of electromagnetic radiation.

Crates were being dropped off on a newly discovered planetoid out some ways from the regular traffic lanes. A science team was to follow within a couple of months.

Turning back to the cargo area, the captain watched the crew go about their work, silently aware of the depressiveness of their surroundings. A lack of enthusiasm permeated them. Attributing to the stifling atmosphere lacking in enough oxygen to require a re-breather, a colourless grey vegetation ruled the landscape dictating where everyone could and could not go.

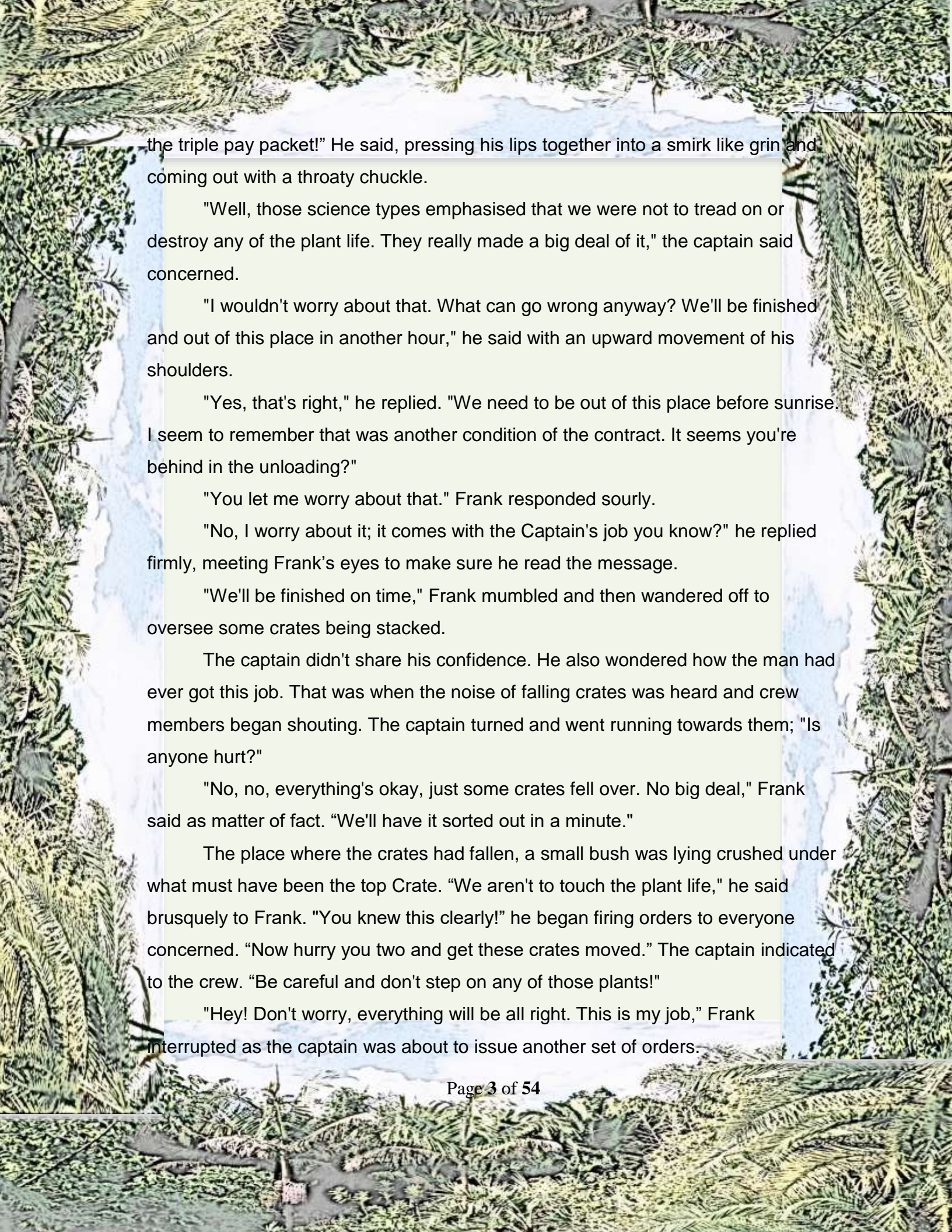
"This place gives me the willies," Frank said raising his head nervously viewing his surroundings. "If it hadn't been for the triple pay packet, I wouldn't have signed on for this job."

Frank was a company freight officer assigned by some pharmaceutical company. He was supposedly a specialist of some sorts. They wanted someone to oversee everything, making sure nothing went wrong. Well, can't say much for their choice of people, the captain set his eyes upon the man. The more the captain was around him; the more he questioned the freight officer's abilities.

"Certainly not a place to holiday on," the captain raised his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "What is so special about this place anyway?"

"It has to do with the plant life, special somehow, is all I know." Frank responded adjusting his re-breather on his face. "Really didn't pay much attention when they explained the planet's flora. Didn't really care, what interested me was





the triple pay packet!" He said, pressing his lips together into a smirk like grin and coming out with a throaty chuckle.

"Well, those science types emphasised that we were not to tread on or destroy any of the plant life. They really made a big deal of it," the captain said concerned.

"I wouldn't worry about that. What can go wrong anyway? We'll be finished and out of this place in another hour," he said with an upward movement of his shoulders.

"Yes, that's right," he replied. "We need to be out of this place before sunrise. I seem to remember that was another condition of the contract. It seems you're behind in the unloading?"

"You let me worry about that." Frank responded sourly.

"No, I worry about it; it comes with the Captain's job you know?" he replied firmly, meeting Frank's eyes to make sure he read the message.

"We'll be finished on time," Frank mumbled and then wandered off to oversee some crates being stacked.

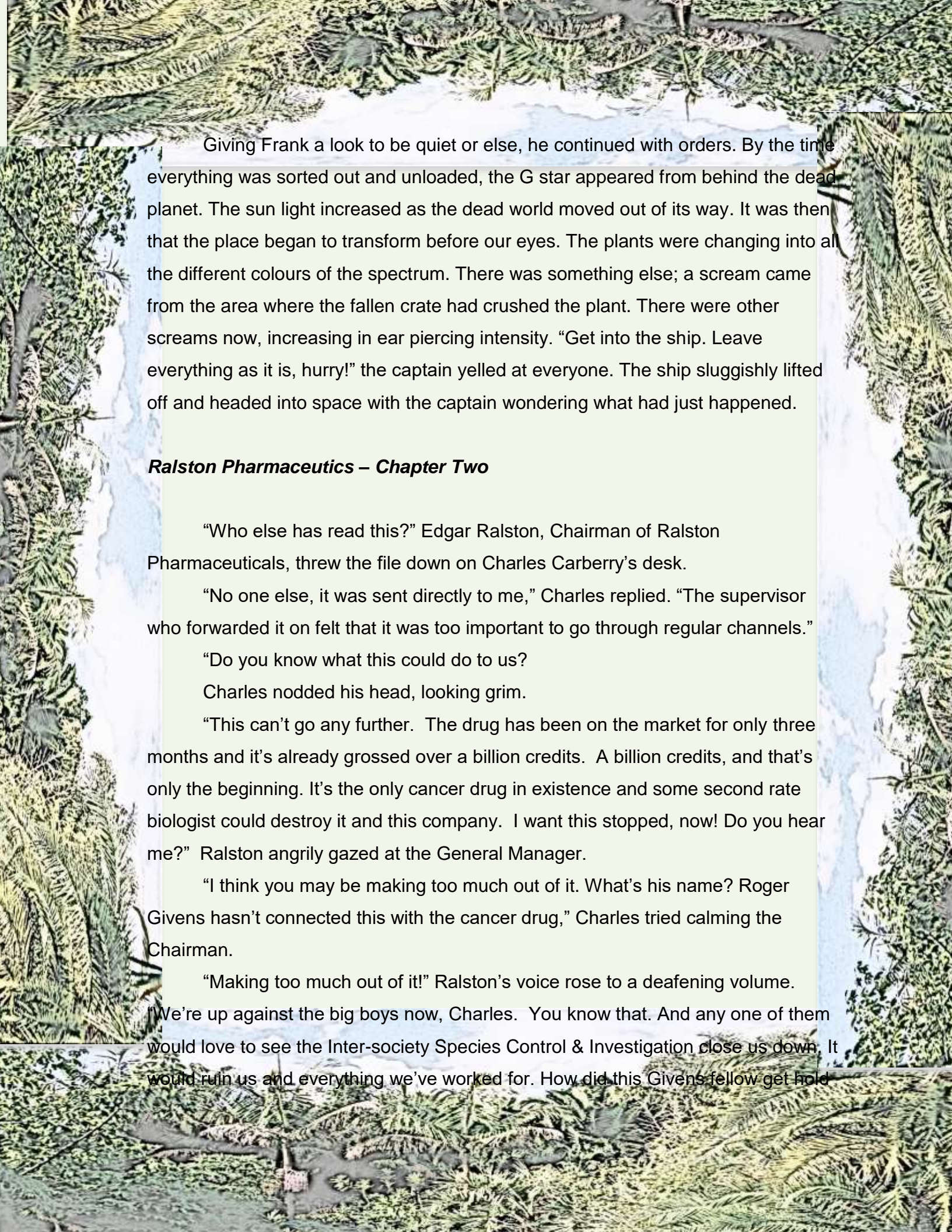
The captain didn't share his confidence. He also wondered how the man had ever got this job. That was when the noise of falling crates was heard and crew members began shouting. The captain turned and went running towards them; "Is anyone hurt?"

"No, no, everything's okay, just some crates fell over. No big deal," Frank said as matter of fact. "We'll have it sorted out in a minute."

The place where the crates had fallen, a small bush was lying crushed under what must have been the top Crate. "We aren't to touch the plant life," he said brusquely to Frank. "You knew this clearly!" he began firing orders to everyone concerned. "Now hurry you two and get these crates moved." The captain indicated to the crew. "Be careful and don't step on any of those plants!"

"Hey! Don't worry, everything will be all right. This is my job," Frank interrupted as the captain was about to issue another set of orders.





Giving Frank a look to be quiet or else, he continued with orders. By the time everything was sorted out and unloaded, the G star appeared from behind the dead planet. The sun light increased as the dead world moved out of its way. It was then that the place began to transform before our eyes. The plants were changing into all the different colours of the spectrum. There was something else; a scream came from the area where the fallen crate had crushed the plant. There were other screams now, increasing in ear piercing intensity. "Get into the ship. Leave everything as it is, hurry!" the captain yelled at everyone. The ship sluggishly lifted off and headed into space with the captain wondering what had just happened.

### ***Ralston Pharmaceuticals – Chapter Two***

"Who else has read this?" Edgar Ralston, Chairman of Ralston Pharmaceuticals, threw the file down on Charles Carberry's desk.

"No one else, it was sent directly to me," Charles replied. "The supervisor who forwarded it on felt that it was too important to go through regular channels."

"Do you know what this could do to us?"


Charles nodded his head, looking grim.

"This can't go any further. The drug has been on the market for only three months and it's already grossed over a billion credits. A billion credits, and that's only the beginning. It's the only cancer drug in existence and some second rate biologist could destroy it and this company. I want this stopped, now! Do you hear me?" Ralston angrily gazed at the General Manager.

"I think you may be making too much out of it. What's his name? Roger Givens hasn't connected this with the cancer drug," Charles tried calming the Chairman.

"Making too much out of it!" Ralston's voice rose to a deafening volume. "We're up against the big boys now, Charles. You know that. And any one of them would love to see the Inter-society Species Control & Investigation close us down. It would ruin us and everything we've worked for. How did this Givens fellow get hold



The background of the page is a vibrant, detailed illustration of a tropical jungle. A river flows through the center, surrounded by dense, green foliage, including palm trees and various tropical plants. The scene is bright and sunny, with light filtering through the leaves.

of those extracts anyway? I thought they were being processed at a secure location."

"The raw ingredients are transhipped via the Betarrouse Installation. Givens was hired recently as a quality controller for the Installation. He must have found the extracts there and did some lab work on them," Charles answered.

"Sticking his nose into something he shouldn't have," Ralston gestured. "Do something about it."

"What exactly do you want me to do?" Charles asked while raising himself out of his seat.

"Look, we both knew something was strange about that moon-let and those plants but we kept quiet about it." Ralston stopped and thought. "As Mr. Givens is so interested in our plants, have him pay a visit to the planet to do a little research for us," Ralston smiled, "Let him stay for a week and make sure that he is well equipped. Everything should look normal," Ralston finished.

"Are you sure?" Charles said.

"What other choice do we have? Can you arrange it?" Ralston asked.

"Of course, he did say that he was returning with his fiancée, an Elaine Rikes. She also works at the installation in some administrative department I believe. They plan on getting married."

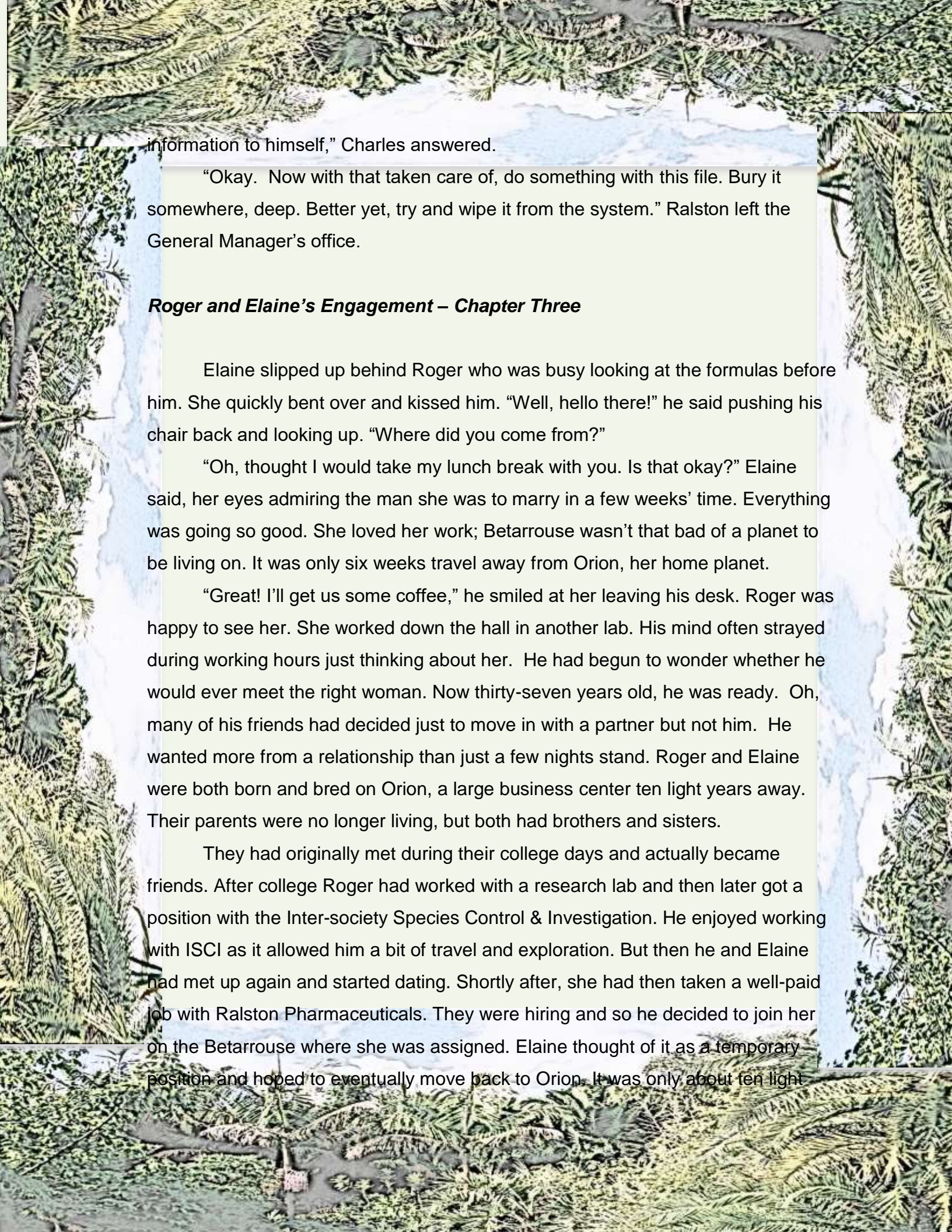
"Good, then arrange for a side trip, for both of them. Remember; make it official, nature will take care of the rest. List it as research and training," Ralston said. "It will be a nice wedding present for them."

"Okay. I'll inform them immediately and get our freight manager on Betarrouse to make all the necessary arrangements and even escort them personally to the planet," Charles said.

"Can he be trusted?" Ralston asked.

"No, but he'll do anything for money. He knows little about the moon except for the location and that it's dangerous to stay there. He knows that none of the science team we sent there made it out alive. But, he gets well paid to keep that





information to himself,” Charles answered.

“Okay. Now with that taken care of, do something with this file. Bury it somewhere, deep. Better yet, try and wipe it from the system.” Ralston left the General Manager’s office.

### ***Roger and Elaine’s Engagement – Chapter Three***

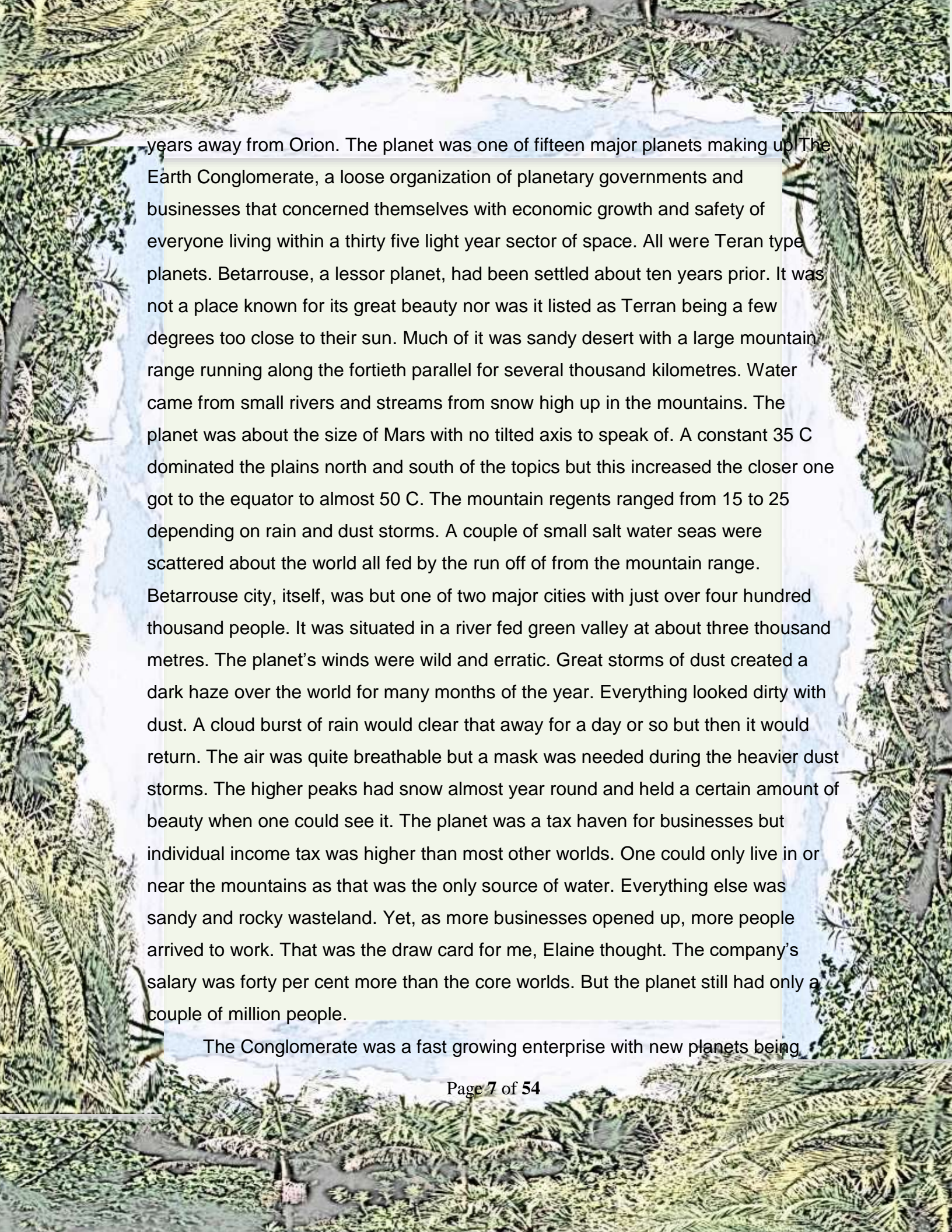
Elaine slipped up behind Roger who was busy looking at the formulas before him. She quickly bent over and kissed him. “Well, hello there!” he said pushing his chair back and looking up. “Where did you come from?”

“Oh, thought I would take my lunch break with you. Is that okay?” Elaine said, her eyes admiring the man she was to marry in a few weeks’ time. Everything was going so good. She loved her work; Betarrouse wasn’t that bad of a planet to be living on. It was only six weeks travel away from Orion, her home planet.

“Great! I’ll get us some coffee,” he smiled at her leaving his desk. Roger was happy to see her. She worked down the hall in another lab. His mind often strayed during working hours just thinking about her. He had begun to wonder whether he would ever meet the right woman. Now thirty-seven years old, he was ready. Oh, many of his friends had decided just to move in with a partner but not him. He wanted more from a relationship than just a few nights stand. Roger and Elaine were both born and bred on Orion, a large business center ten light years away. Their parents were no longer living, but both had brothers and sisters.

They had originally met during their college days and actually became friends. After college Roger had worked with a research lab and then later got a position with the Inter-society Species Control & Investigation. He enjoyed working with ISCI as it allowed him a bit of travel and exploration. But then he and Elaine had met up again and started dating. Shortly after, she had then taken a well-paid job with Ralston Pharmaceuticals. They were hiring and so he decided to join her on the Betarrouse where she was assigned. Elaine thought of it as a temporary position and hoped to eventually move back to Orion. It was only about ten light

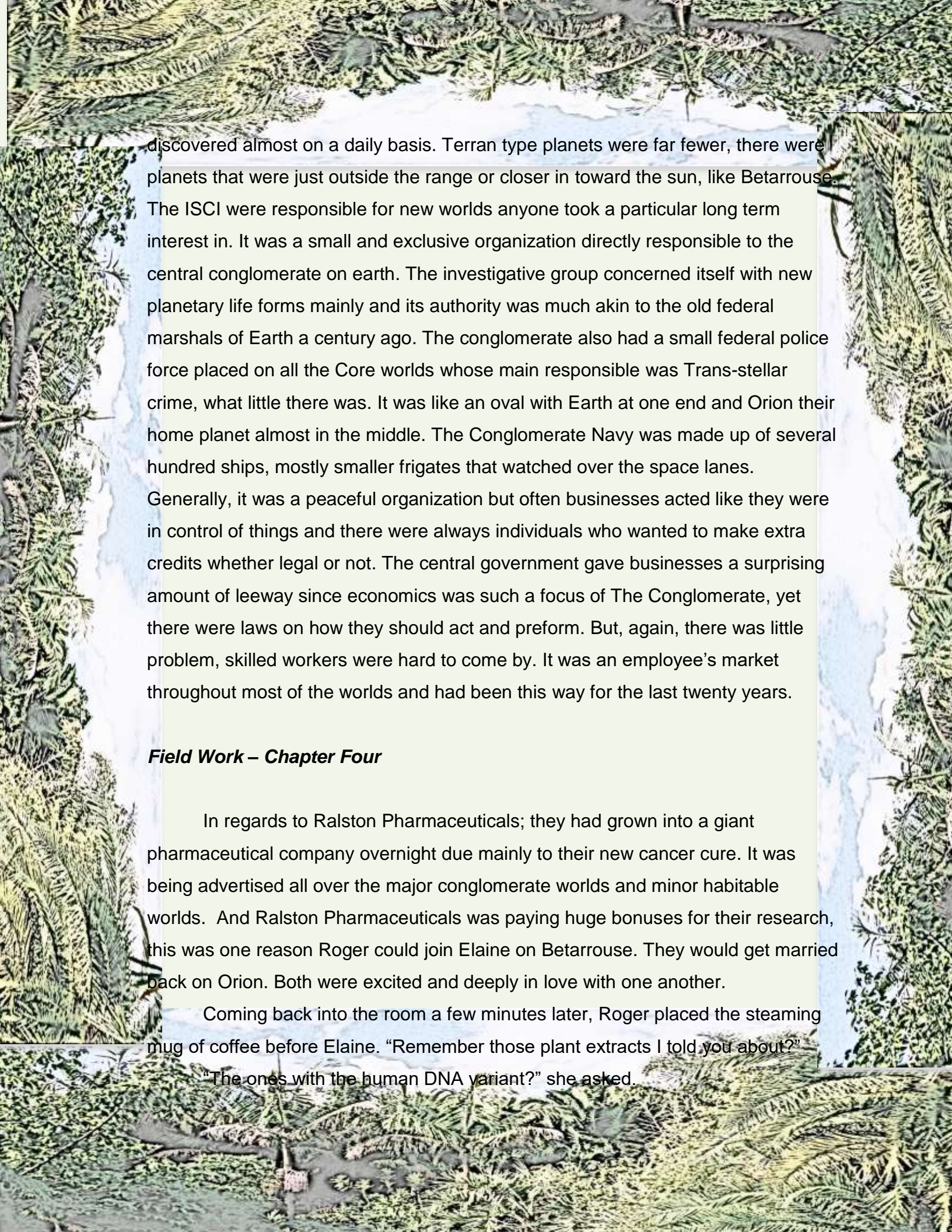




years away from Orion. The planet was one of fifteen major planets making up The Earth Conglomerate, a loose organization of planetary governments and businesses that concerned themselves with economic growth and safety of everyone living within a thirty five light year sector of space. All were Teran type planets. Betarrouse, a lessor planet, had been settled about ten years prior. It was not a place known for its great beauty nor was it listed as Terran being a few degrees too close to their sun. Much of it was sandy desert with a large mountain range running along the fortieth parallel for several thousand kilometres. Water came from small rivers and streams from snow high up in the mountains. The planet was about the size of Mars with no tilted axis to speak of. A constant 35 C dominated the plains north and south of the topics but this increased the closer one got to the equator to almost 50 C. The mountain regents ranged from 15 to 25 depending on rain and dust storms. A couple of small salt water seas were scattered about the world all fed by the run off of from the mountain range. Betarrouse city, itself, was but one of two major cities with just over four hundred thousand people. It was situated in a river fed green valley at about three thousand metres. The planet's winds were wild and erratic. Great storms of dust created a dark haze over the world for many months of the year. Everything looked dirty with dust. A cloud burst of rain would clear that away for a day or so but then it would return. The air was quite breathable but a mask was needed during the heavier dust storms. The higher peaks had snow almost year round and held a certain amount of beauty when one could see it. The planet was a tax haven for businesses but individual income tax was higher than most other worlds. One could only live in or near the mountains as that was the only source of water. Everything else was sandy and rocky wasteland. Yet, as more businesses opened up, more people arrived to work. That was the draw card for me, Elaine thought. The company's salary was forty per cent more than the core worlds. But the planet still had only a couple of million people.

The Conglomerate was a fast growing enterprise with new planets being





discovered almost on a daily basis. Terran type planets were far fewer, there were planets that were just outside the range or closer in toward the sun, like Betarrouse. The ISCI were responsible for new worlds anyone took a particular long term interest in. It was a small and exclusive organization directly responsible to the central conglomerate on earth. The investigative group concerned itself with new planetary life forms mainly and its authority was much akin to the old federal marshals of Earth a century ago. The conglomerate also had a small federal police force placed on all the Core worlds whose main responsibility was Trans-stellar crime, what little there was. It was like an oval with Earth at one end and Orion their home planet almost in the middle. The Conglomerate Navy was made up of several hundred ships, mostly smaller frigates that watched over the space lanes. Generally, it was a peaceful organization but often businesses acted like they were in control of things and there were always individuals who wanted to make extra credits whether legal or not. The central government gave businesses a surprising amount of leeway since economics was such a focus of The Conglomerate, yet there were laws on how they should act and perform. But, again, there was little problem, skilled workers were hard to come by. It was an employee's market throughout most of the worlds and had been this way for the last twenty years.

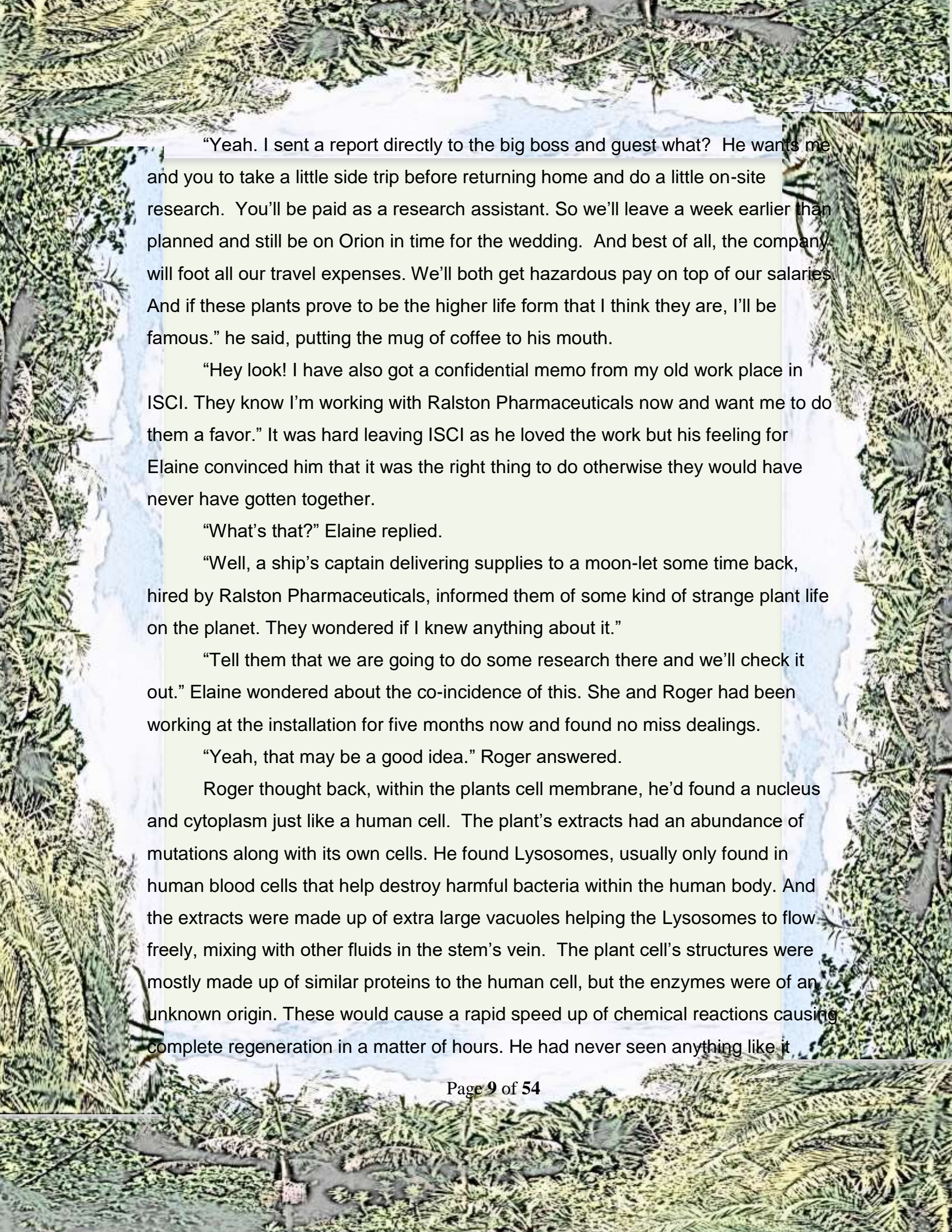
#### ***Field Work – Chapter Four***

In regards to Ralston Pharmaceuticals; they had grown into a giant pharmaceutical company overnight due mainly to their new cancer cure. It was being advertised all over the major conglomerate worlds and minor habitable worlds. And Ralston Pharmaceuticals was paying huge bonuses for their research, this was one reason Roger could join Elaine on Betarrouse. They would get married back on Orion. Both were excited and deeply in love with one another.

Coming back into the room a few minutes later, Roger placed the steaming mug of coffee before Elaine. "Remember those plant extracts I told you about?"

"The ones with the human DNA variant?" she asked.





"Yeah. I sent a report directly to the big boss and guess what? He wants me and you to take a little side trip before returning home and do a little on-site research. You'll be paid as a research assistant. So we'll leave a week earlier than planned and still be on Orion in time for the wedding. And best of all, the company will foot all our travel expenses. We'll both get hazardous pay on top of our salaries. And if these plants prove to be the higher life form that I think they are, I'll be famous." he said, putting the mug of coffee to his mouth.

"Hey look! I have also got a confidential memo from my old work place in ISCI. They know I'm working with Ralston Pharmaceuticals now and want me to do them a favor." It was hard leaving ISCI as he loved the work but his feeling for Elaine convinced him that it was the right thing to do otherwise they would have never have gotten together.

"What's that?" Elaine replied.


"Well, a ship's captain delivering supplies to a moon-let some time back, hired by Ralston Pharmaceuticals, informed them of some kind of strange plant life on the planet. They wondered if I knew anything about it."

"Tell them that we are going to do some research there and we'll check it out." Elaine wondered about the co-incidence of this. She and Roger had been working at the installation for five months now and found no miss dealings.

"Yeah, that may be a good idea." Roger answered.

Roger thought back, within the plants cell membrane, he'd found a nucleus and cytoplasm just like a human cell. The plant's extracts had an abundance of mutations along with its own cells. He found Lysosomes, usually only found in human blood cells that help destroy harmful bacteria within the human body. And the extracts were made up of extra large vacuoles helping the Lysosomes to flow freely, mixing with other fluids in the stem's vein. The plant cell's structures were mostly made up of similar proteins to the human cell, but the enzymes were of an unknown origin. These would cause a rapid speed up of chemical reactions causing complete regeneration in a matter of hours. He had never seen anything like it.





before. Maybe this had something to do with the memo from ISCI.

Elaine looked concerned. "Doesn't the company have experts to do this sort of thing?" she asked. "Yes, but we as much of an expert as anyone else," Roger said excited. "Not having to put the bill on traveling and getting the additional hazardous pay will be a big help after arriving back."

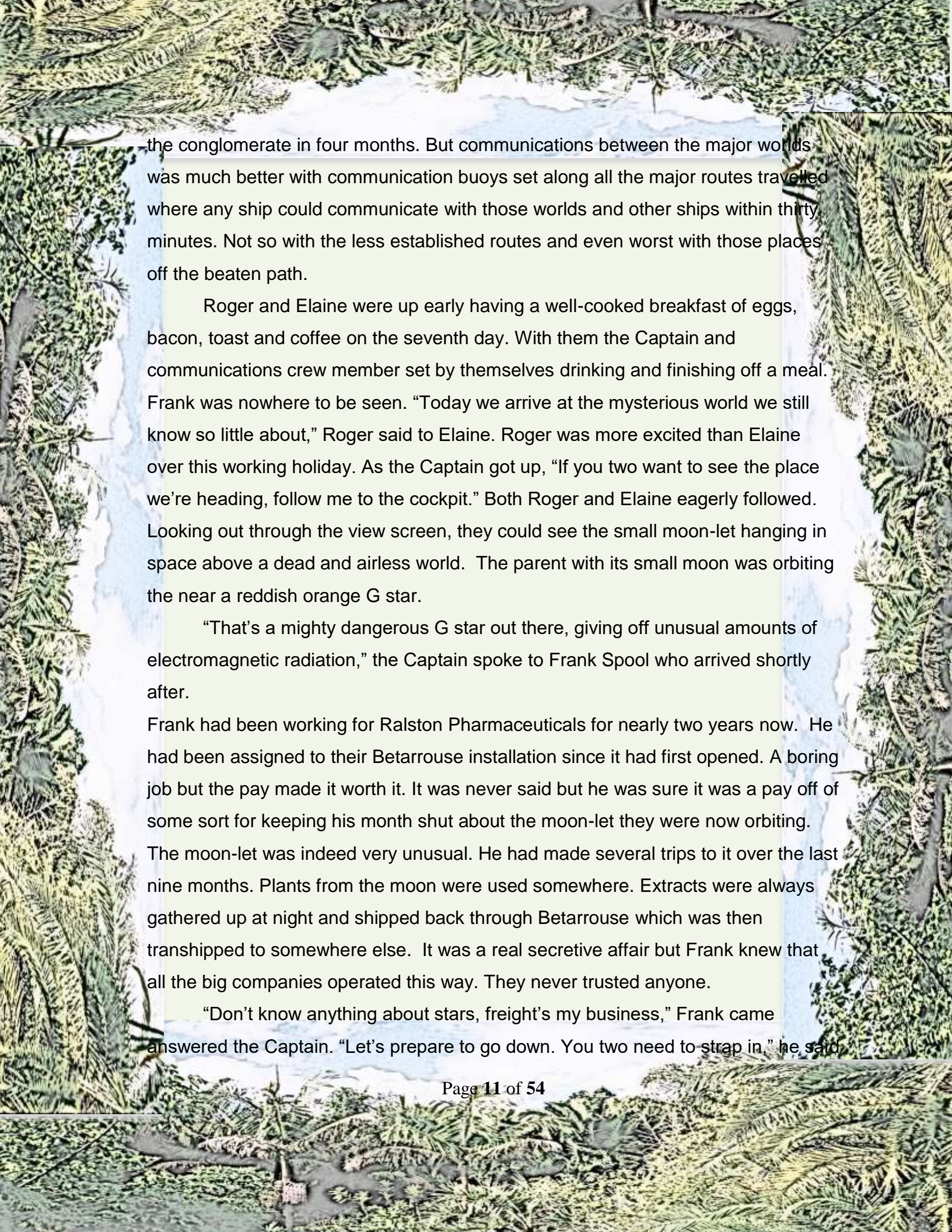
"But there was never anything about field work in either of our contracts." However, seeing Roger's excitement, Elaine decided not to put a dampener on things for she knew that Roger loved this sort of thing, "So, where is this place we are to spend a week together before our wedding! Seems to me that this is the sort of thing a couple should do after their wedding!" she eyed him.

"Oh, strictly business," he said smiling. "It'll be great, tramping through some out of the way planet. It's a very small moon with an atmosphere out on the rim worlds somewhere. Who knows what we might find."

"Well, as long as you know what you're doing. You know that I've never done much of this tramping business but perhaps I should try to get used to it," she gazed up on him sipping at his coffee.

The trip out to the planet took only a week. It was out toward the rim from the Betarrouse installation. The ship was a freighter with ten small individual rooms. Each room had a small viewer with multiple channels and audio. Roger and Elaine each took a room each but spent most of the time in the galley where more comfortable seats and tables were provided. They did their work reading what little information they had gathered on the planet they were to spend a week on. Some of the time was spent planning their wedding. They had already sent invitations and plans off to their friends and family but expected no reply as they were now out of the range of the communications buoys. Their freight officer stayed in his own room most of the time while the captain and two others, a co-pilote and communications person stood eight hours on, eight hours of watches. The ship smelled with a lack of cleanliness. There was a metallic taste in the circulated air. There was no such thing as faster than light travel but the ship's slip stream drive pushed the ship along at a good speed. A ship could easily cross the fifty lights over





the conglomerate in four months. But communications between the major worlds was much better with communication buoys set along all the major routes travelled where any ship could communicate with those worlds and other ships within thirty minutes. Not so with the less established routes and even worst with those places off the beaten path.

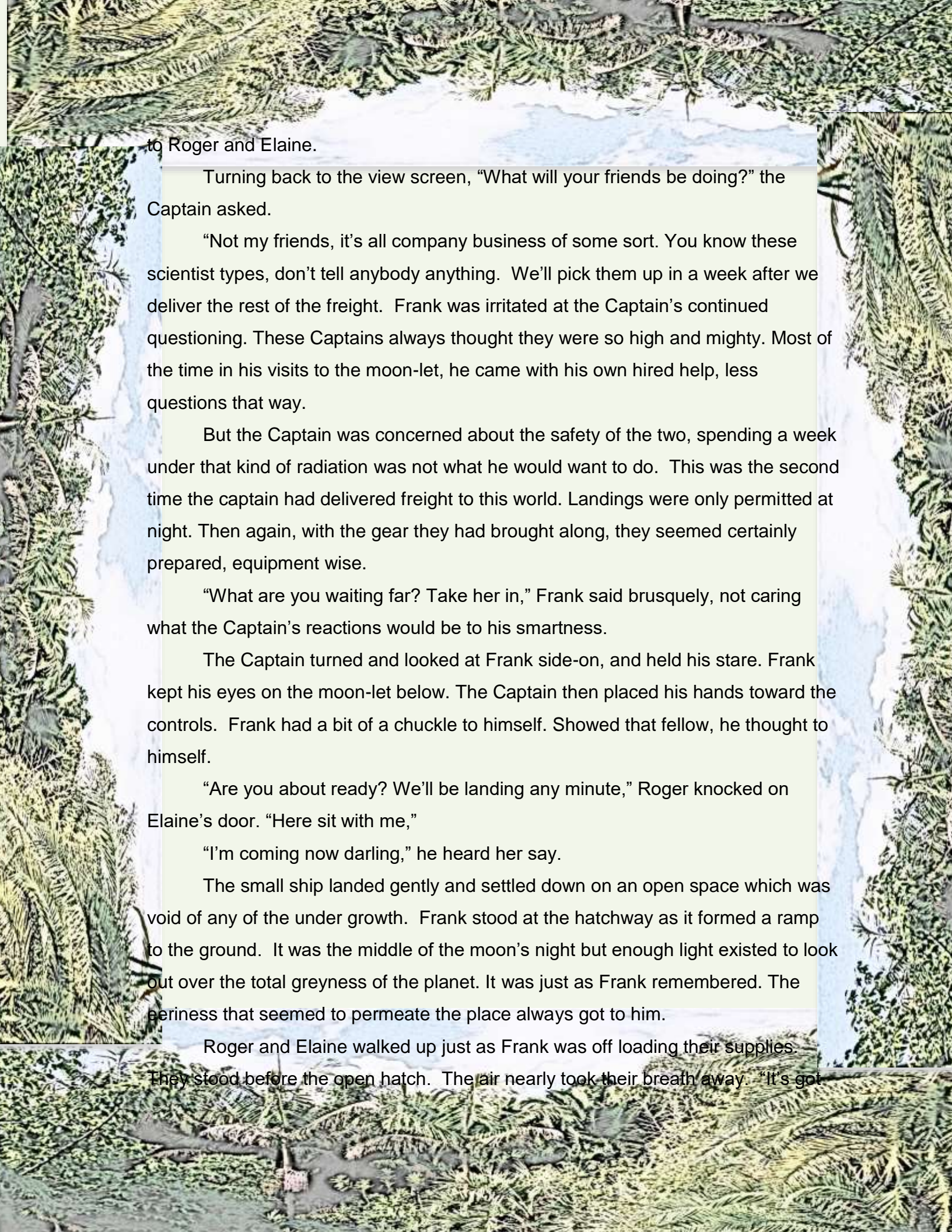
Roger and Elaine were up early having a well-cooked breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee on the seventh day. With them the Captain and communications crew member set by themselves drinking and finishing off a meal. Frank was nowhere to be seen. "Today we arrive at the mysterious world we still know so little about," Roger said to Elaine. Roger was more excited than Elaine over this working holiday. As the Captain got up, "If you two want to see the place we're heading, follow me to the cockpit." Both Roger and Elaine eagerly followed. Looking out through the view screen, they could see the small moon-let hanging in space above a dead and airless world. The parent with its small moon was orbiting the near a reddish orange G star.

"That's a mighty dangerous G star out there, giving off unusual amounts of electromagnetic radiation," the Captain spoke to Frank Spool who arrived shortly after.

Frank had been working for Ralston Pharmaceuticals for nearly two years now. He had been assigned to their Betarrouse installation since it had first opened. A boring job but the pay made it worth it. It was never said but he was sure it was a pay off of some sort for keeping his mouth shut about the moon-let they were now orbiting. The moon-let was indeed very unusual. He had made several trips to it over the last nine months. Plants from the moon were used somewhere. Extracts were always gathered up at night and shipped back through Betarrouse which was then transhipped to somewhere else. It was a real secretive affair but Frank knew that all the big companies operated this way. They never trusted anyone.

"Don't know anything about stars, freight's my business," Frank came answered the Captain. "Let's prepare to go down. You two need to strap in," he said.





to Roger and Elaine.

Turning back to the view screen, "What will your friends be doing?" the Captain asked.

"Not my friends, it's all company business of some sort. You know these scientist types, don't tell anybody anything. We'll pick them up in a week after we deliver the rest of the freight. Frank was irritated at the Captain's continued questioning. These Captains always thought they were so high and mighty. Most of the time in his visits to the moon-let, he came with his own hired help, less questions that way.

But the Captain was concerned about the safety of the two, spending a week under that kind of radiation was not what he would want to do. This was the second time the captain had delivered freight to this world. Landings were only permitted at night. Then again, with the gear they had brought along, they seemed certainly prepared, equipment wise.

"What are you waiting for? Take her in," Frank said brusquely, not caring what the Captain's reactions would be to his smartness.

The Captain turned and looked at Frank side-on, and held his stare. Frank kept his eyes on the moon-let below. The Captain then placed his hands toward the controls. Frank had a bit of a chuckle to himself. Showed that fellow, he thought to himself.

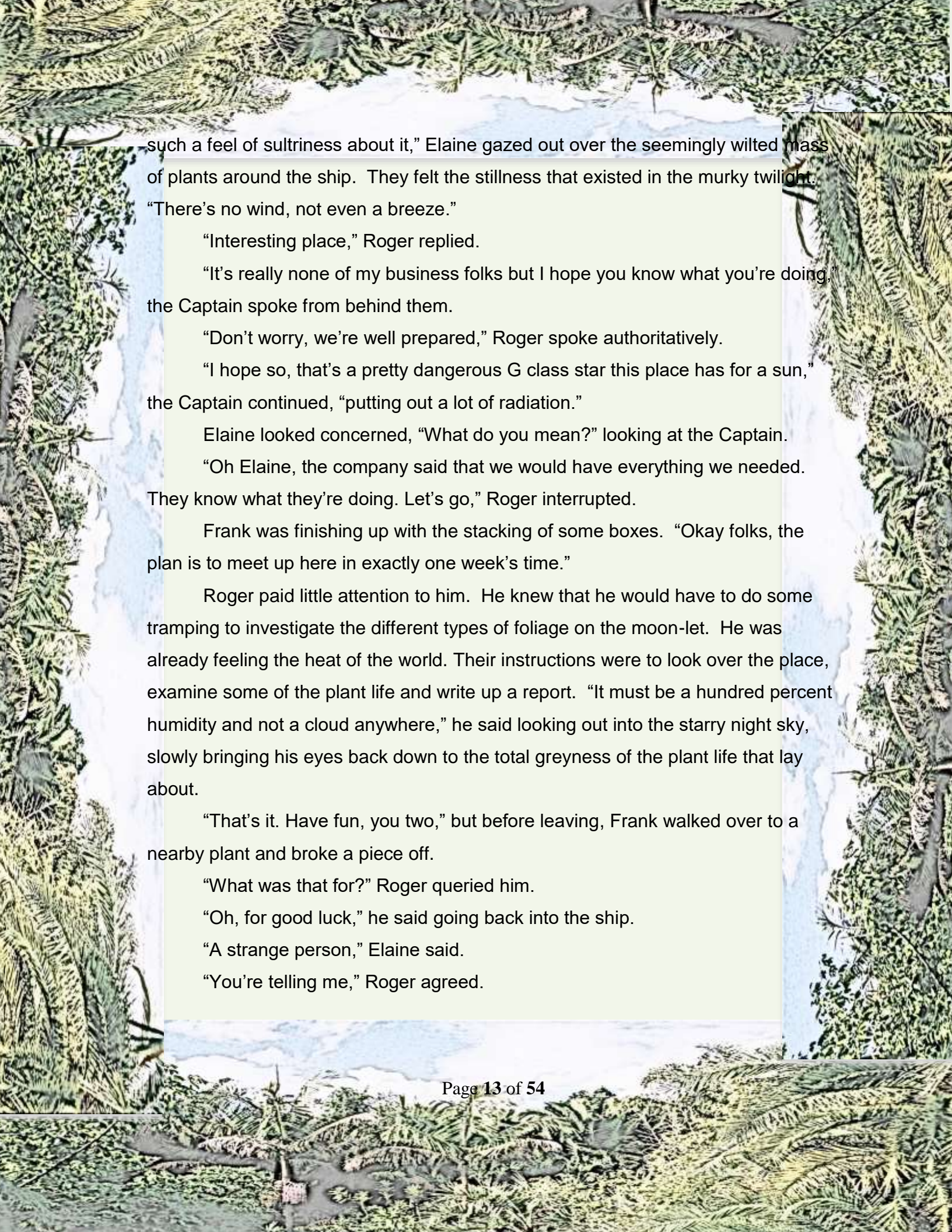
"Are you about ready? We'll be landing any minute," Roger knocked on Elaine's door. "Here sit with me,"

"I'm coming now darling," he heard her say.

The small ship landed gently and settled down on an open space which was void of any of the under growth. Frank stood at the hatchway as it formed a ramp to the ground. It was the middle of the moon's night but enough light existed to look out over the total greyness of the planet. It was just as Frank remembered. The eeriness that seemed to permeate the place always got to him.

Roger and Elaine walked up just as Frank was off loading their supplies. They stood before the open hatch. The air nearly took their breath away. "It's got





such a feel of sultriness about it," Elaine gazed out over the seemingly wilted mass of plants around the ship. They felt the stillness that existed in the murky twilight.

"There's no wind, not even a breeze."

"Interesting place," Roger replied.

"It's really none of my business folks but I hope you know what you're doing," the Captain spoke from behind them.

"Don't worry, we're well prepared," Roger spoke authoritatively.

"I hope so, that's a pretty dangerous G class star this place has for a sun," the Captain continued, "putting out a lot of radiation."

Elaine looked concerned, "What do you mean?" looking at the Captain.

"Oh Elaine, the company said that we would have everything we needed. They know what they're doing. Let's go," Roger interrupted.

Frank was finishing up with the stacking of some boxes. "Okay folks, the plan is to meet up here in exactly one week's time."

Roger paid little attention to him. He knew that he would have to do some tramping to investigate the different types of foliage on the moon-let. He was already feeling the heat of the world. Their instructions were to look over the place, examine some of the plant life and write up a report. "It must be a hundred percent humidity and not a cloud anywhere," he said looking out into the starry night sky, slowly bringing his eyes back down to the total greyness of the plant life that lay about.

"That's it. Have fun, you two," but before leaving, Frank walked over to a nearby plant and broke a piece off.

"What was that for?" Roger queried him.

"Oh, for good luck," he said going back into the ship.

"A strange person," Elaine said.

"You're telling me," Roger agreed.



The background of the page is a lush tropical jungle. A river flows through the center, with a small boat visible in the distance. The banks are covered in dense vegetation, including palm trees and various tropical plants. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

## ***Revenge of the Plant People – Chapter Five***

The ship slowly rose. Once it was completely clear of them, it picked up speed and quickly left the two behind.

“Well, we might as well make camp here until we get a better idea of what the place is like,” Roger said looking at the stacked crates. “Here’s the life support crate.”

Roger found that there were some missing parts to the tents and neither one of them were environmentally safe. Elaine began to unpack clothes and other basic essentials. She found the burner and started looking for the food. “Roger, I can only find a day’s ration of food,” she said taking out other boxes.

“It could be packed in one of the other crates, dear,” he replied still confused over the tents.

“Something’s not right here. Look at these things,” she held up some of the cooking utensils for him to see.

“What’s wrong?” he asked not really paying much attention.

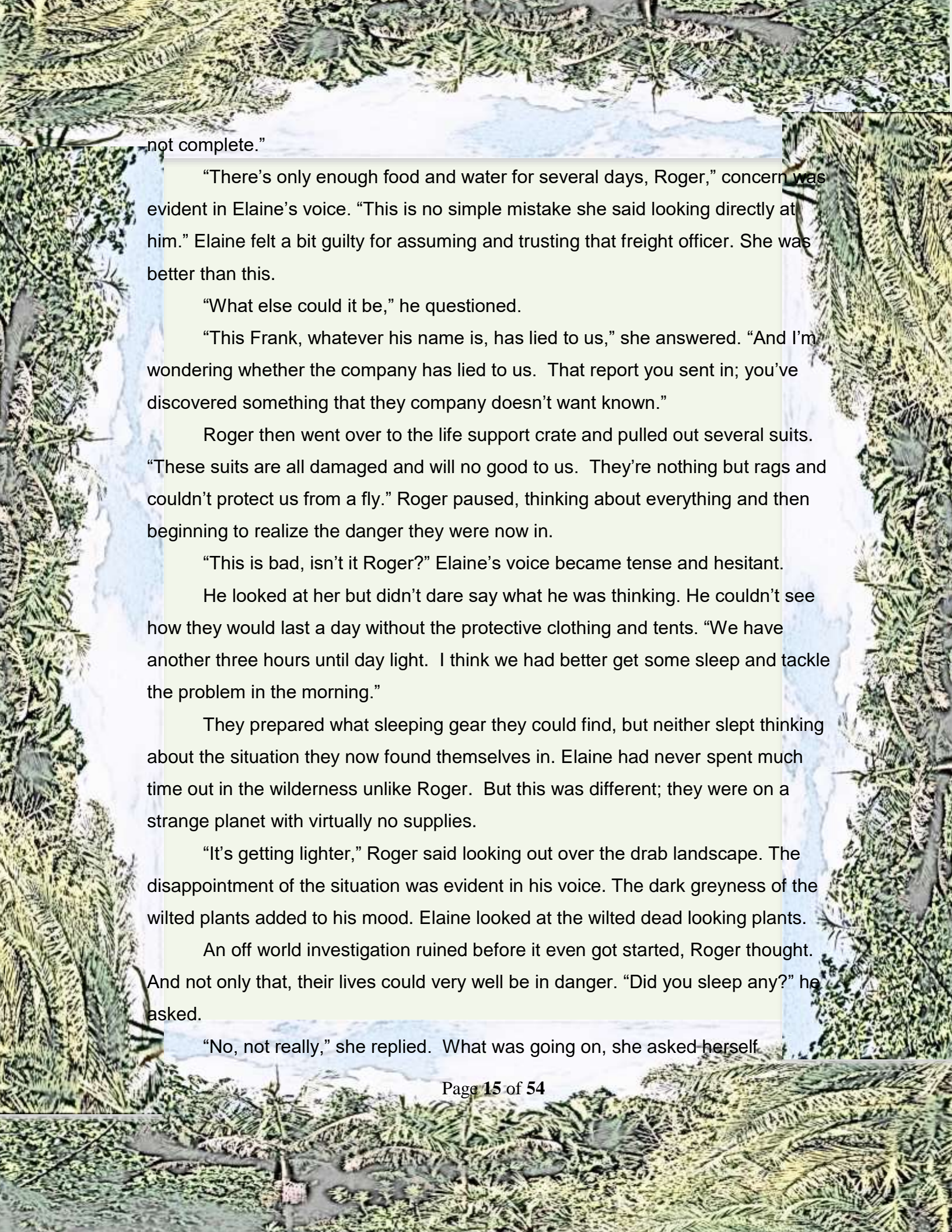
“This stuff is junk,” she said unpacking more and more of the supplies, laying each item on the ground. This doesn’t make any sense at all. Coming over, he rambled through the different items, “You’re right. The tents are old also. Neither of them is environmentally safe,” he said now looking at her. “There’s been some kind of mistake. That freight guy said that all the requested items were new and that he had packed everything himself. I even checked the list he gave me.”

Elaine continued to go through the items, “I sure hope there’s more food than this.” They were out of breath not only from the heat but also from the anxiety they were beginning to experience.

“I think we had better take an inventory of everything and check it against the freight list I was given,” Roger went over to another crate. He found some damaged but workable lighting equipment which they managed to set up around their camp. Several hours had passed and every crate had been opened and checked.

“Everything here matches the inventory list but all of it is old and either unusable or





not complete.”

“There’s only enough food and water for several days, Roger,” concern was evident in Elaine’s voice. “This is no simple mistake she said looking directly at him.” Elaine felt a bit guilty for assuming and trusting that freight officer. She was better than this.

“What else could it be,” he questioned.

“This Frank, whatever his name is, has lied to us,” she answered. “And I’m wondering whether the company has lied to us. That report you sent in; you’ve discovered something that they company doesn’t want known.”

Roger then went over to the life support crate and pulled out several suits. “These suits are all damaged and will no good to us. They’re nothing but rags and couldn’t protect us from a fly.” Roger paused, thinking about everything and then beginning to realize the danger they were now in.

“This is bad, isn’t it Roger?” Elaine’s voice became tense and hesitant.

He looked at her but didn’t dare say what he was thinking. He couldn’t see how they would last a day without the protective clothing and tents. “We have another three hours until day light. I think we had better get some sleep and tackle the problem in the morning.”

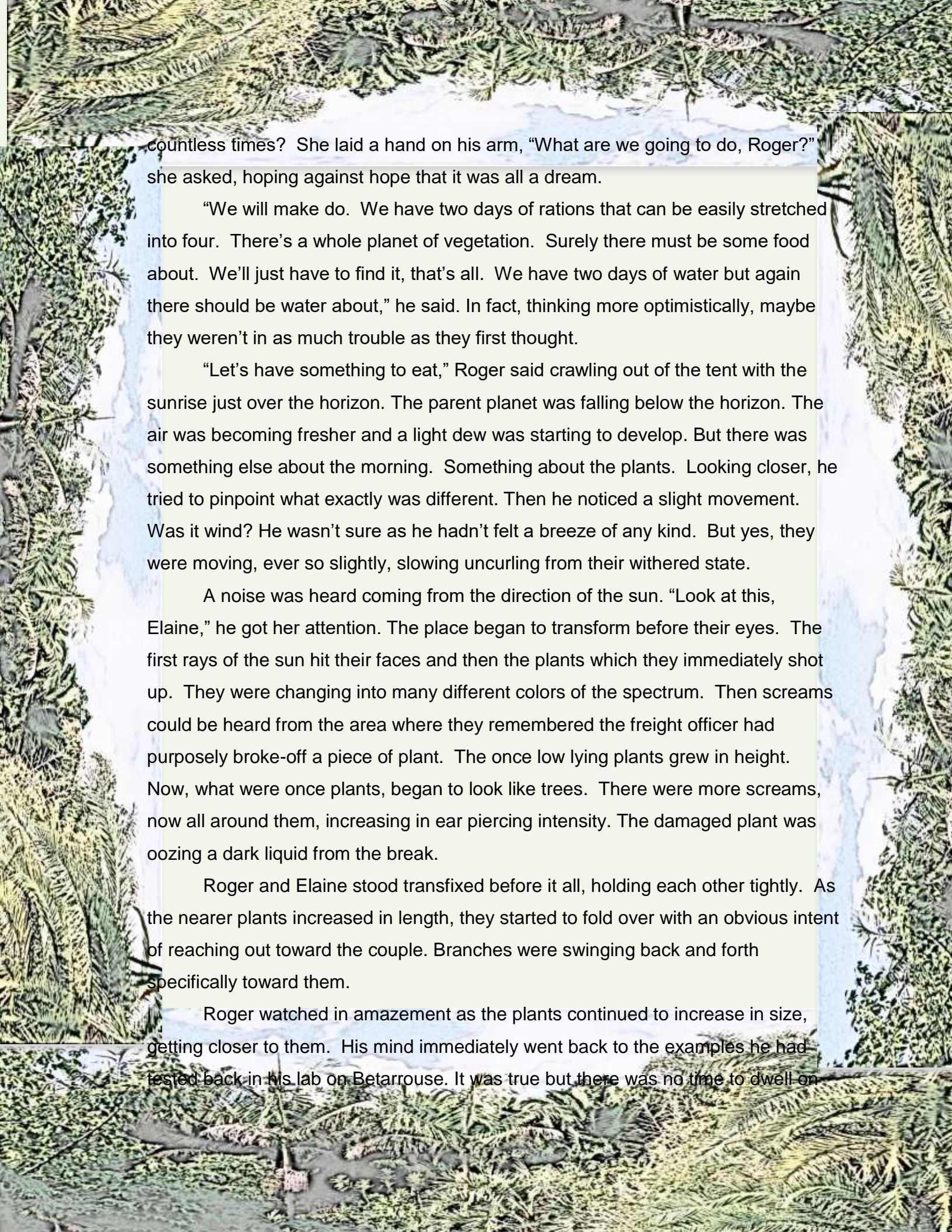
They prepared what sleeping gear they could find, but neither slept thinking about the situation they now found themselves in. Elaine had never spent much time out in the wilderness unlike Roger. But this was different; they were on a strange planet with virtually no supplies.

“It’s getting lighter,” Roger said looking out over the drab landscape. The disappointment of the situation was evident in his voice. The dark greyness of the wilted plants added to his mood. Elaine looked at the wilted dead looking plants.

An off world investigation ruined before it even got started, Roger thought. And not only that, their lives could very well be in danger. “Did you sleep any?” he asked.

“No, not really,” she replied. What was going on, she asked herself





countless times? She laid a hand on his arm, "What are we going to do, Roger?" she asked, hoping against hope that it was all a dream.

"We will make do. We have two days of rations that can be easily stretched into four. There's a whole planet of vegetation. Surely there must be some food about. We'll just have to find it, that's all. We have two days of water but again there should be water about," he said. In fact, thinking more optimistically, maybe they weren't in as much trouble as they first thought.

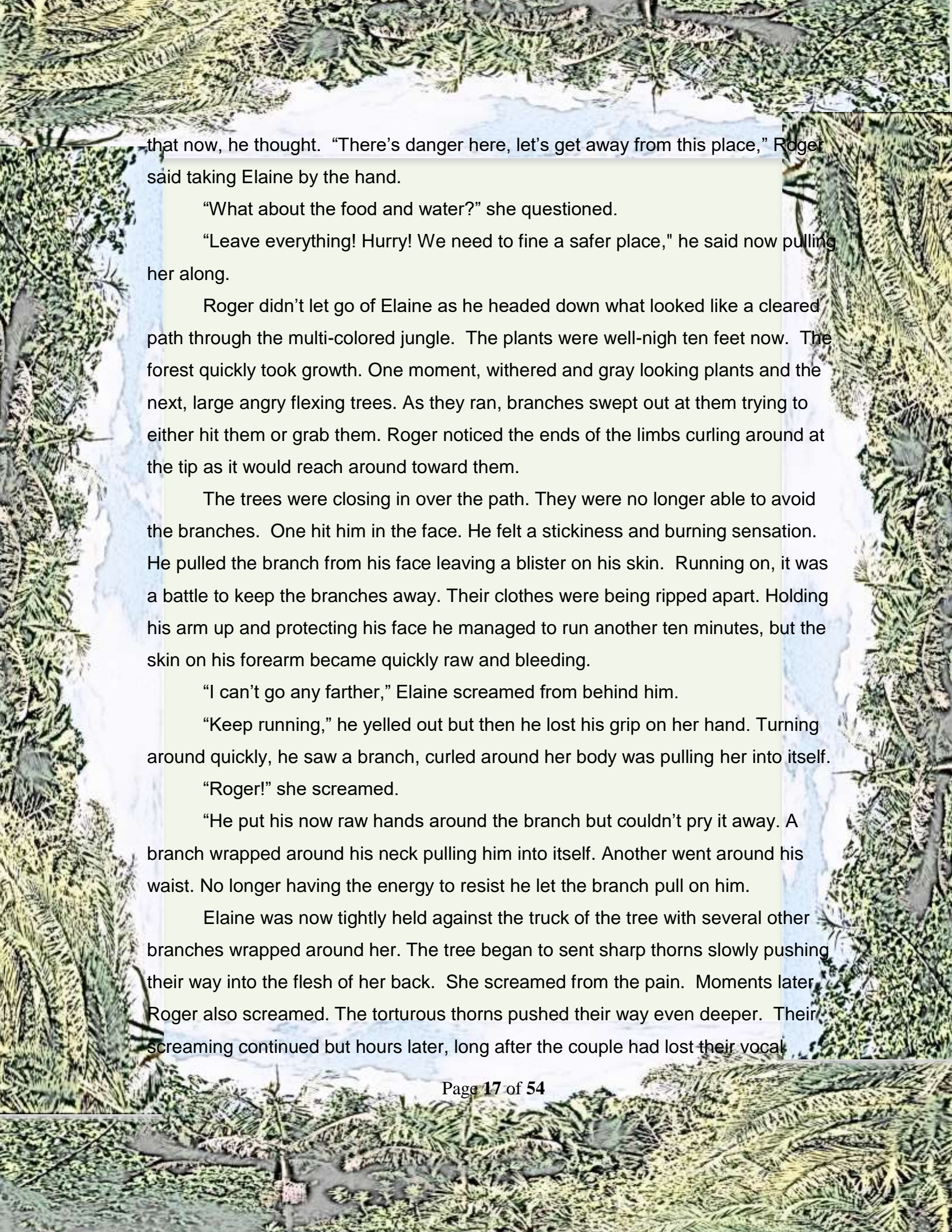
"Let's have something to eat," Roger said crawling out of the tent with the sunrise just over the horizon. The parent planet was falling below the horizon. The air was becoming fresher and a light dew was starting to develop. But there was something else about the morning. Something about the plants. Looking closer, he tried to pinpoint what exactly was different. Then he noticed a slight movement. Was it wind? He wasn't sure as he hadn't felt a breeze of any kind. But yes, they were moving, ever so slightly, slowing uncurling from their withered state.

A noise was heard coming from the direction of the sun. "Look at this, Elaine," he got her attention. The place began to transform before their eyes. The first rays of the sun hit their faces and then the plants which they immediately shot up. They were changing into many different colors of the spectrum. Then screams could be heard from the area where they remembered the freight officer had purposely broke-off a piece of plant. The once low lying plants grew in height. Now, what were once plants, began to look like trees. There were more screams, now all around them, increasing in ear piercing intensity. The damaged plant was oozing a dark liquid from the break.

Roger and Elaine stood transfixed before it all, holding each other tightly. As the nearer plants increased in length, they started to fold over with an obvious intent of reaching out toward the couple. Branches were swinging back and forth specifically toward them.

Roger watched in amazement as the plants continued to increase in size, getting closer to them. His mind immediately went back to the examples he had tested back in his lab on Betarrouse. It was true but there was no time to dwell on





that now, he thought. "There's danger here, let's get away from this place," Roger said taking Elaine by the hand.

"What about the food and water?" she questioned.

"Leave everything! Hurry! We need to find a safer place," he said now pulling her along.

Roger didn't let go of Elaine as he headed down what looked like a cleared path through the multi-colored jungle. The plants were well-nigh ten feet now. The forest quickly took growth. One moment, withered and gray looking plants and the next, large angry flexing trees. As they ran, branches swept out at them trying to either hit them or grab them. Roger noticed the ends of the limbs curling around at the tip as it would reach around toward them.

The trees were closing in over the path. They were no longer able to avoid the branches. One hit him in the face. He felt a stickiness and burning sensation. He pulled the branch from his face leaving a blister on his skin. Running on, it was a battle to keep the branches away. Their clothes were being ripped apart. Holding his arm up and protecting his face he managed to run another ten minutes, but the skin on his forearm became quickly raw and bleeding.

"I can't go any farther," Elaine screamed from behind him.

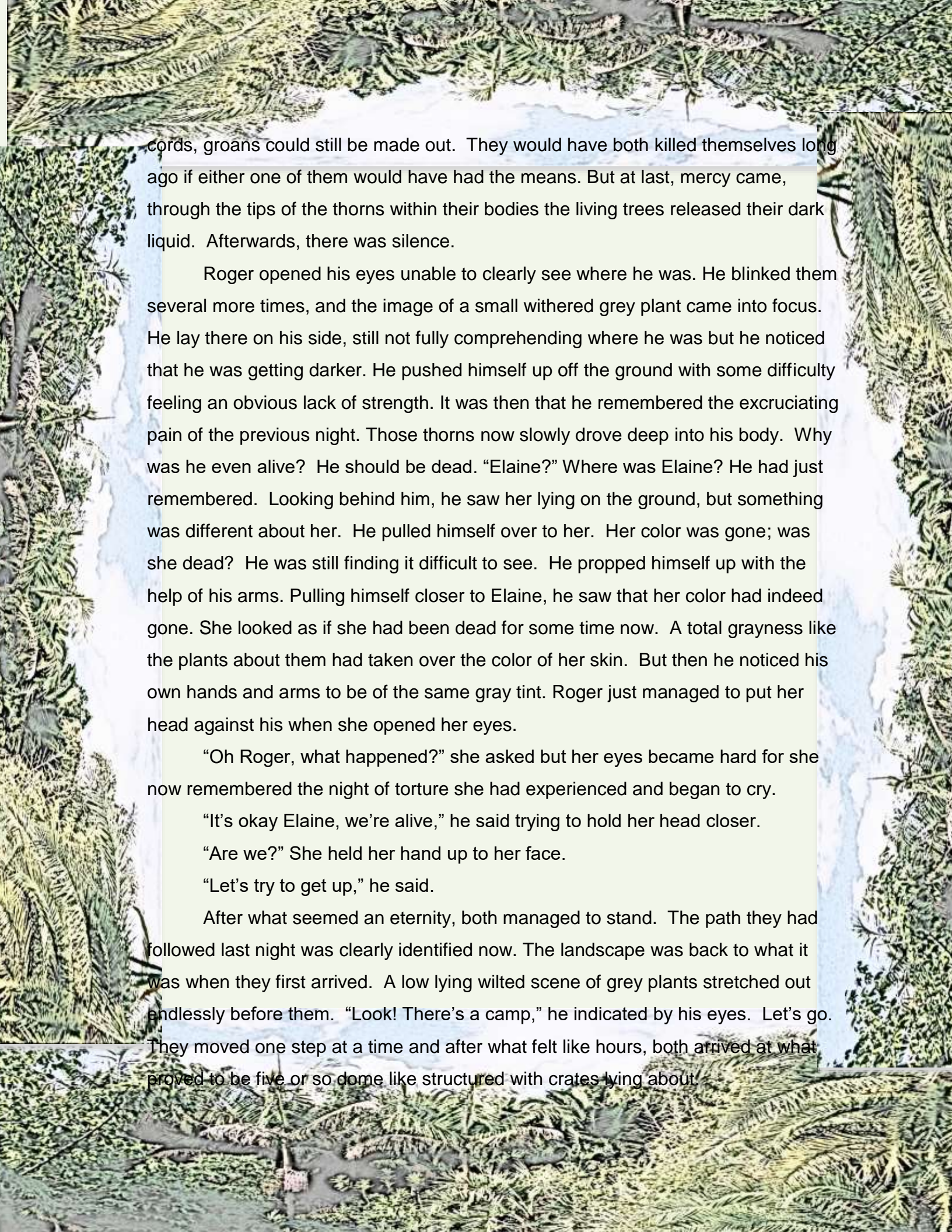
"Keep running," he yelled out but then he lost his grip on her hand. Turning around quickly, he saw a branch, curled around her body was pulling her into itself.

"Roger!" she screamed.

"He put his now raw hands around the branch but couldn't pry it away. A branch wrapped around his neck pulling him into itself. Another went around his waist. No longer having the energy to resist he let the branch pull on him.

Elaine was now tightly held against the trunk of the tree with several other branches wrapped around her. The tree began to send sharp thorns slowly pushing their way into the flesh of her back. She screamed from the pain. Moments later Roger also screamed. The torturous thorns pushed their way even deeper. Their screaming continued but hours later, long after the couple had lost their vocal





cords, groans could still be made out. They would have both killed themselves long ago if either one of them would have had the means. But at last, mercy came, through the tips of the thorns within their bodies the living trees released their dark liquid. Afterwards, there was silence.

Roger opened his eyes unable to clearly see where he was. He blinked them several more times, and the image of a small withered grey plant came into focus. He lay there on his side, still not fully comprehending where he was but he noticed that he was getting darker. He pushed himself up off the ground with some difficulty feeling an obvious lack of strength. It was then that he remembered the excruciating pain of the previous night. Those thorns now slowly drove deep into his body. Why was he even alive? He should be dead. "Elaine?" Where was Elaine? He had just remembered. Looking behind him, he saw her lying on the ground, but something was different about her. He pulled himself over to her. Her color was gone; was she dead? He was still finding it difficult to see. He propped himself up with the help of his arms. Pulling himself closer to Elaine, he saw that her color had indeed gone. She looked as if she had been dead for some time now. A total grayness like the plants about them had taken over the color of her skin. But then he noticed his own hands and arms to be of the same gray tint. Roger just managed to put her head against his when she opened her eyes.

"Oh Roger, what happened?" she asked but her eyes became hard for she now remembered the night of torture she had experienced and began to cry.

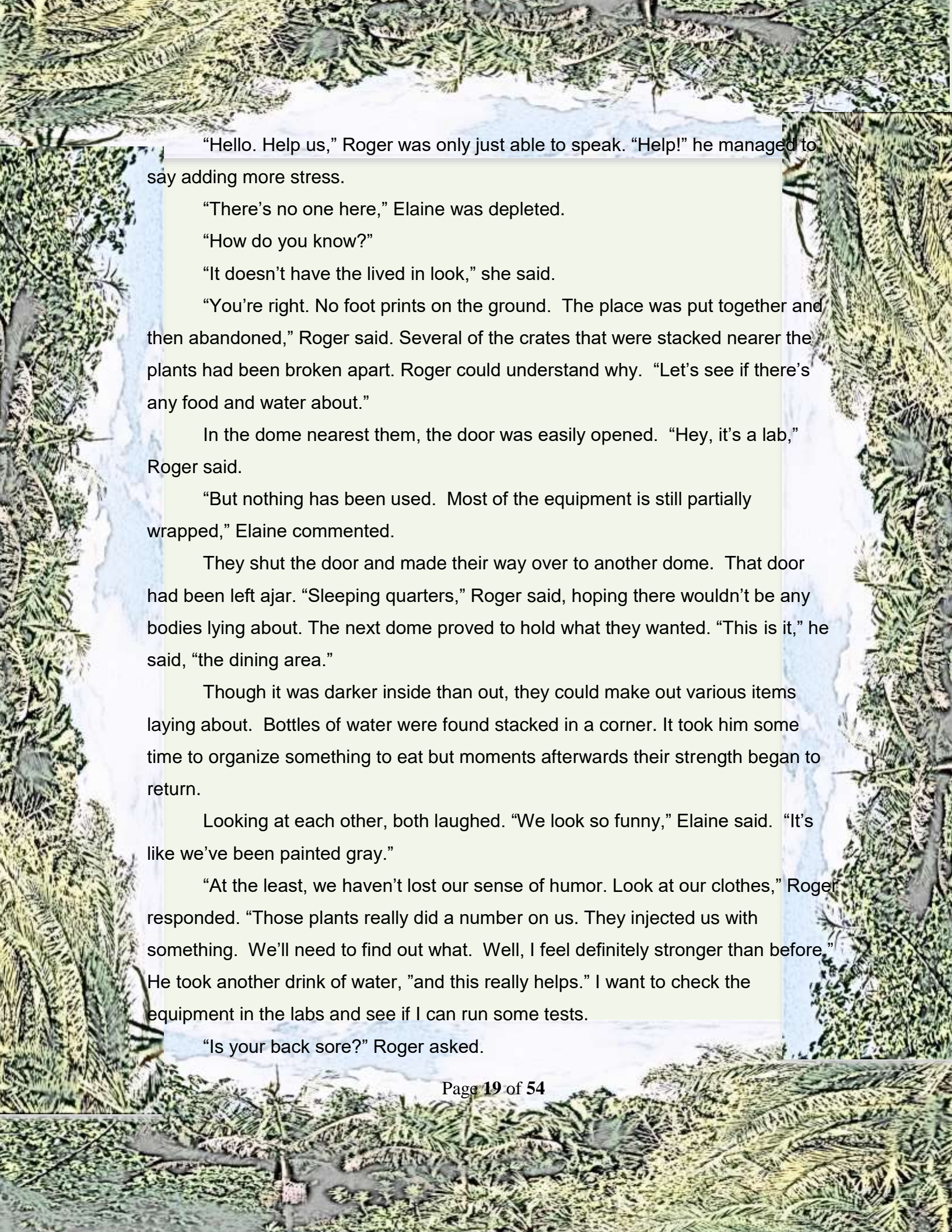
"It's okay Elaine, we're alive," he said trying to hold her head closer.

"Are we?" She held her hand up to her face.

"Let's try to get up," he said.

After what seemed an eternity, both managed to stand. The path they had followed last night was clearly identified now. The landscape was back to what it was when they first arrived. A low lying wilted scene of grey plants stretched out endlessly before them. "Look! There's a camp," he indicated by his eyes. Let's go. They moved one step at a time and after what felt like hours, both arrived at what proved to be five or so dome like structured with crates lying about.





"Hello. Help us," Roger was only just able to speak. "Help!" he managed to say adding more stress.

"There's no one here," Elaine was depleted.

"How do you know?"

"It doesn't have the lived in look," she said.

"You're right. No foot prints on the ground. The place was put together and then abandoned," Roger said. Several of the crates that were stacked nearer the plants had been broken apart. Roger could understand why. "Let's see if there's any food and water about."

In the dome nearest them, the door was easily opened. "Hey, it's a lab," Roger said.

"But nothing has been used. Most of the equipment is still partially wrapped," Elaine commented.

They shut the door and made their way over to another dome. That door had been left ajar. "Sleeping quarters," Roger said, hoping there wouldn't be any bodies lying about. The next dome proved to hold what they wanted. "This is it," he said, "the dining area."


Though it was darker inside than out, they could make out various items laying about. Bottles of water were found stacked in a corner. It took him some time to organize something to eat but moments afterwards their strength began to return.

Looking at each other, both laughed. "We look so funny," Elaine said. "It's like we've been painted gray."

"At the least, we haven't lost our sense of humor. Look at our clothes," Roger responded. "Those plants really did a number on us. They injected us with something. We'll need to find out what. Well, I feel definitely stronger than before." He took another drink of water, "and this really helps." I want to check the equipment in the labs and see if I can run some tests.

"Is your back sore?" Roger asked.





"It still hunts some, yes," she replied.

"We'd better check each other as soon as we find some light," Roger suggested. "And I think we need a change of clothes." He looked down at the rags he now wore.

"What are those plants, Roger? I can't stop thinking about last night. I thought at one point that I was losing my mind," Elaine said, a quiver in her voice.

"I know," Roger agreed. "Well, they aren't ordinary barn yard plants for sure. What they did to us yesterday was premeditating. But first things first, "We need some light," he said looking about the dining area.

"There," Elaine pointed to what looked like a lantern.

"Yeah, small, but it should do." He pushed the small button to light it. But beside the light working, Roger and Elaine felt a huge rush of adrenaline in their bodies. Roger cut the light and the weakness returned. He looked over at Elaine, "Remember what happened yesterday when the system's sun light touched the plants?"

Elaine nodded her head.

"I'd better find out what's going on with us. I'll see if I can take some blood samples." He got up and headed toward the door.

"I'll take an inventory of the food and water and see if there's anything else in the camp that can be of use to us," Elaine said.

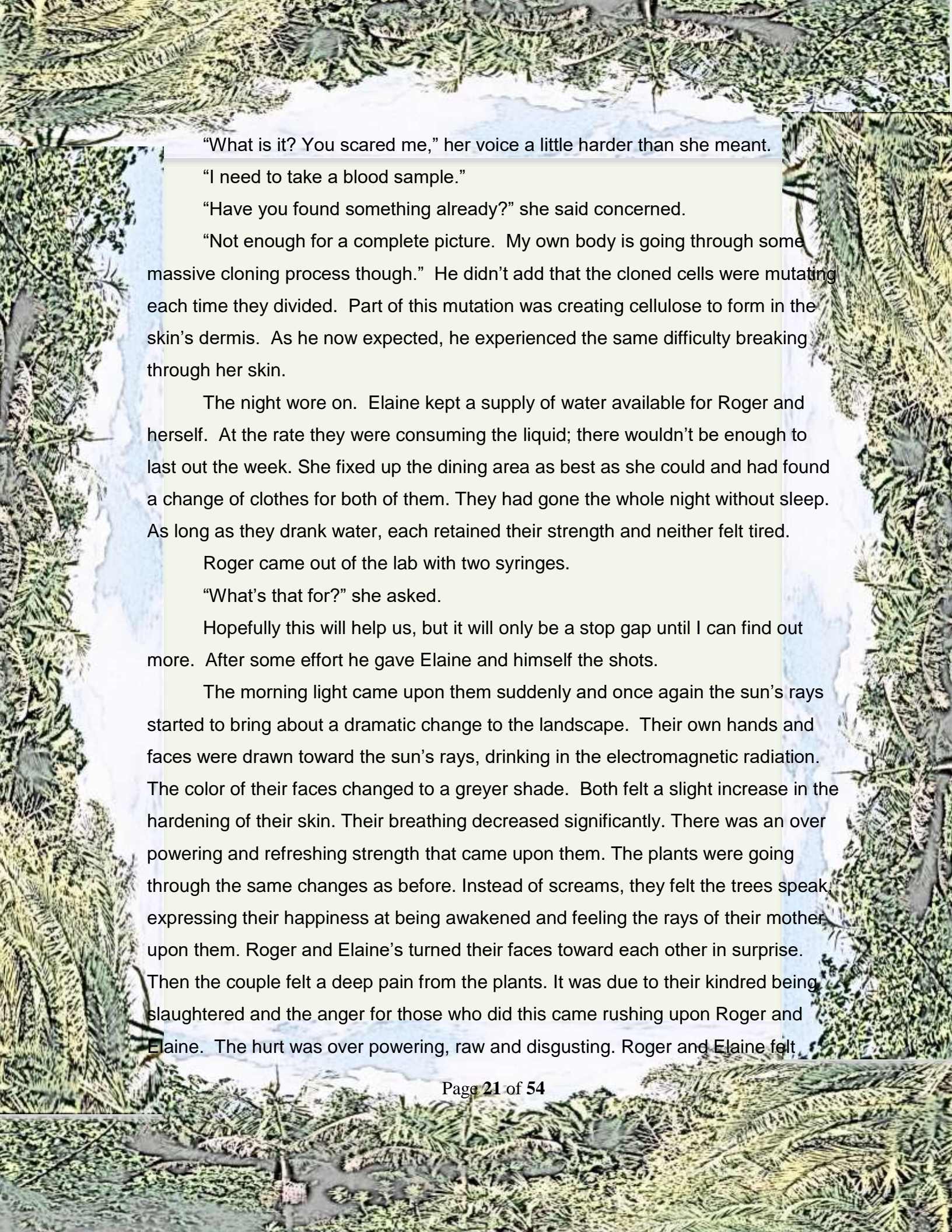
She found another lamp but first dampened its light with a cloth. But even with that, she felt things going on in her body that worried her. An adrenaline flow that wasn't at all normal.

Roger entered the lab. Looking around, "Wow, everything I need," he said to himself. Electron Scopes and test slides, you name it, he thought. Even more up to date than his own work shop on Batarouse. Getting a syringe, Roger tried to take a sample of his own blood but found the skin difficult to penetrate.

Elaine found more food and water, enough for both of them for at least a month. Interestingly she noticed that her own water intake had increased.

"Elaine?" Roger frightened her as she came out of the dome.





"What is it? You scared me," her voice a little harder than she meant.

"I need to take a blood sample."

"Have you found something already?" she said concerned.

"Not enough for a complete picture. My own body is going through some massive cloning process though." He didn't add that the cloned cells were mutating each time they divided. Part of this mutation was creating cellulose to form in the skin's dermis. As he now expected, he experienced the same difficulty breaking through her skin.

The night wore on. Elaine kept a supply of water available for Roger and herself. At the rate they were consuming the liquid; there wouldn't be enough to last out the week. She fixed up the dining area as best as she could and had found a change of clothes for both of them. They had gone the whole night without sleep. As long as they drank water, each retained their strength and neither felt tired.

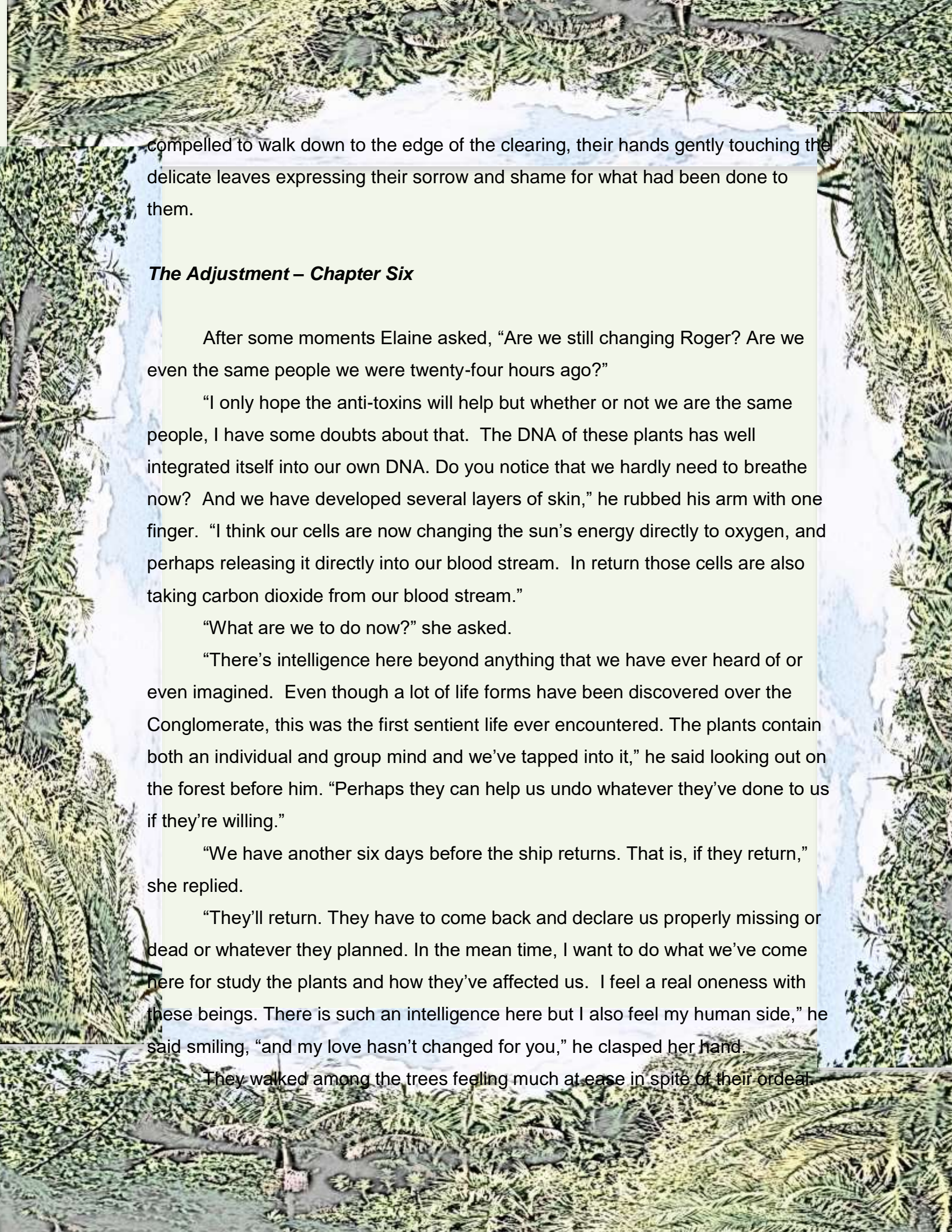
Roger came out of the lab with two syringes.

"What's that for?" she asked.

Hopefully this will help us, but it will only be a stop gap until I can find out more. After some effort he gave Elaine and himself the shots.

The morning light came upon them suddenly and once again the sun's rays started to bring about a dramatic change to the landscape. Their own hands and faces were drawn toward the sun's rays, drinking in the electromagnetic radiation. The color of their faces changed to a greyer shade. Both felt a slight increase in the hardening of their skin. Their breathing decreased significantly. There was an over powering and refreshing strength that came upon them. The plants were going through the same changes as before. Instead of screams, they felt the trees speak, expressing their happiness at being awakened and feeling the rays of their mother upon them. Roger and Elaine's turned their faces toward each other in surprise. Then the couple felt a deep pain from the plants. It was due to their kindred being slaughtered and the anger for those who did this came rushing upon Roger and Elaine. The hurt was over powering, raw and disgusting. Roger and Elaine felt





compelled to walk down to the edge of the clearing, their hands gently touching the delicate leaves expressing their sorrow and shame for what had been done to them.

### ***The Adjustment – Chapter Six***

After some moments Elaine asked, “Are we still changing Roger? Are we even the same people we were twenty-four hours ago?”

“I only hope the anti-toxins will help but whether or not we are the same people, I have some doubts about that. The DNA of these plants has well integrated itself into our own DNA. Do you notice that we hardly need to breathe now? And we have developed several layers of skin,” he rubbed his arm with one finger. “I think our cells are now changing the sun’s energy directly to oxygen, and perhaps releasing it directly into our blood stream. In return those cells are also taking carbon dioxide from our blood stream.”

“What are we to do now?” she asked.

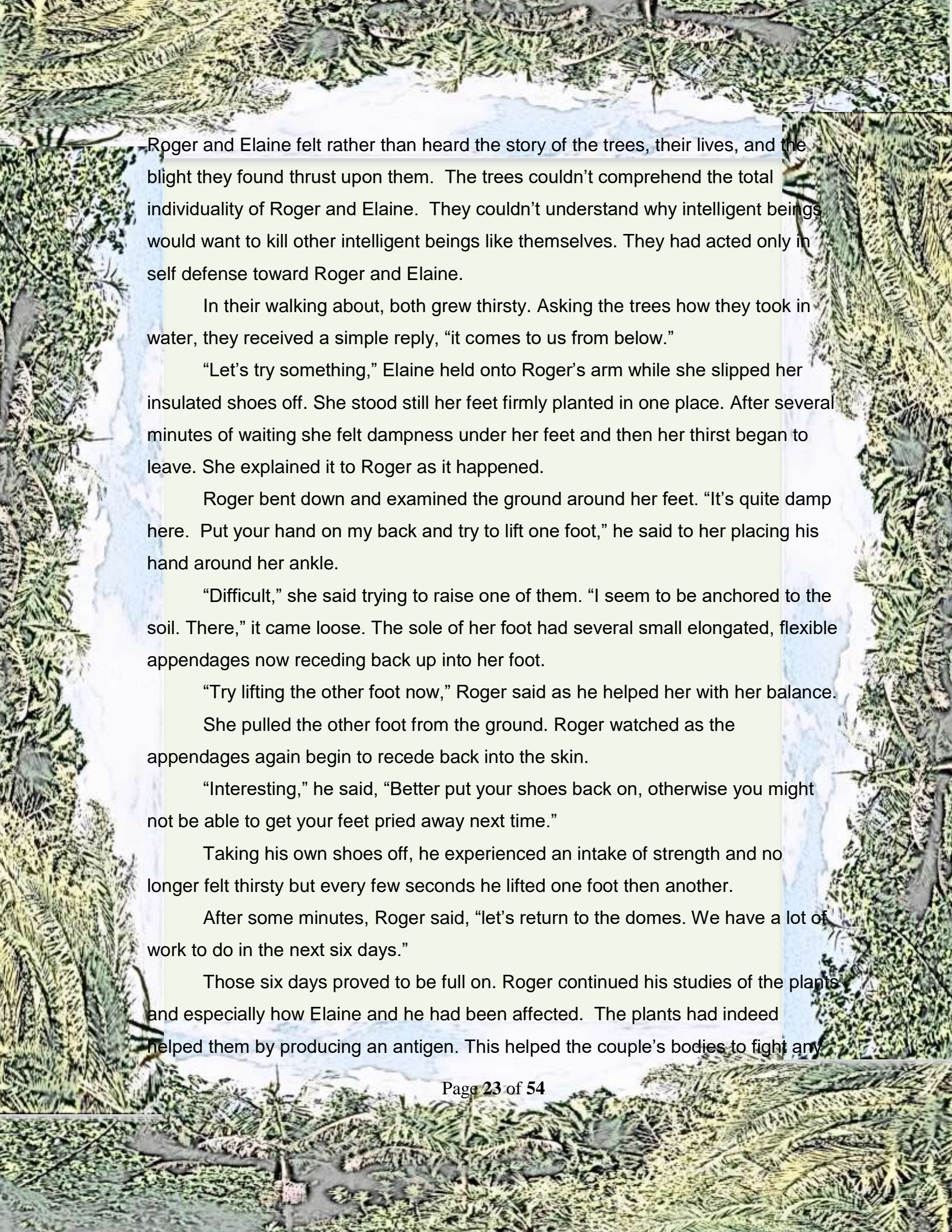
“There’s intelligence here beyond anything that we have ever heard of or even imagined. Even though a lot of life forms have been discovered over the Conglomerate, this was the first sentient life ever encountered. The plants contain both an individual and group mind and we’ve tapped into it,” he said looking out on the forest before him. “Perhaps they can help us undo whatever they’ve done to us if they’re willing.”

“We have another six days before the ship returns. That is, if they return,” she replied.

“They’ll return. They have to come back and declare us properly missing or dead or whatever they planned. In the mean time, I want to do what we’ve come here for study the plants and how they’ve affected us. I feel a real oneness with these beings. There is such an intelligence here but I also feel my human side,” he said smiling, “and my love hasn’t changed for you,” he clasped her hand.

They walked among the trees feeling much at ease in spite of their ordeal.





Roger and Elaine felt rather than heard the story of the trees, their lives, and the blight they found thrust upon them. The trees couldn't comprehend the total individuality of Roger and Elaine. They couldn't understand why intelligent beings would want to kill other intelligent beings like themselves. They had acted only in self defense toward Roger and Elaine.

In their walking about, both grew thirsty. Asking the trees how they took in water, they received a simple reply, "it comes to us from below."

"Let's try something," Elaine held onto Roger's arm while she slipped her insulated shoes off. She stood still her feet firmly planted in one place. After several minutes of waiting she felt dampness under her feet and then her thirst began to leave. She explained it to Roger as it happened.

Roger bent down and examined the ground around her feet. "It's quite damp here. Put your hand on my back and try to lift one foot," he said to her placing his hand around her ankle.

"Difficult," she said trying to raise one of them. "I seem to be anchored to the soil. There," it came loose. The sole of her foot had several small elongated, flexible appendages now receding back up into her foot.

"Try lifting the other foot now," Roger said as he helped her with her balance.

She pulled the other foot from the ground. Roger watched as the appendages again begin to recede back into the skin.

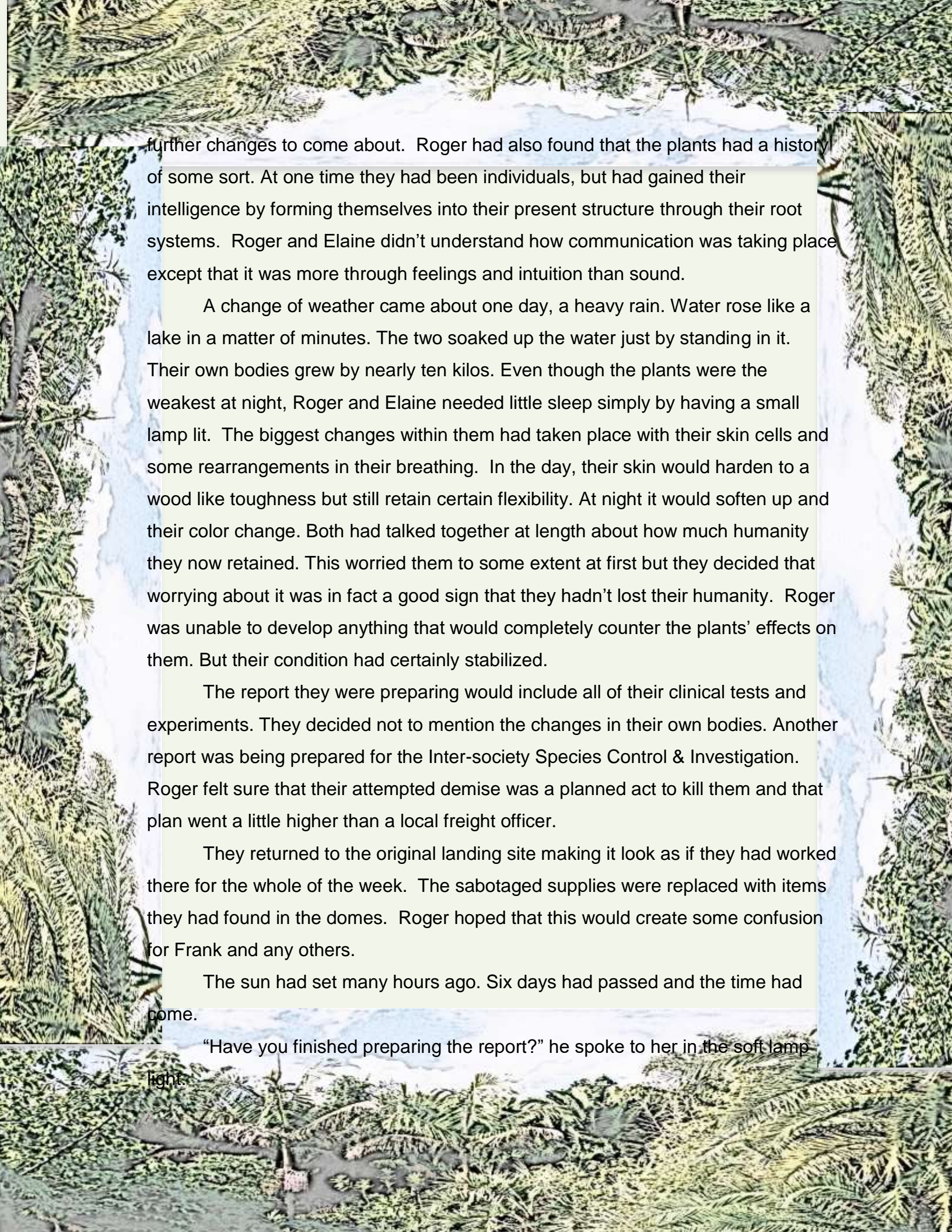
"Interesting," he said, "Better put your shoes back on, otherwise you might not be able to get your feet pried away next time."

Taking his own shoes off, he experienced an intake of strength and no longer felt thirsty but every few seconds he lifted one foot then another.

After some minutes, Roger said, "let's return to the domes. We have a lot of work to do in the next six days."

Those six days proved to be full on. Roger continued his studies of the plants and especially how Elaine and he had been affected. The plants had indeed helped them by producing an antigen. This helped the couple's bodies to fight any





further changes to come about. Roger had also found that the plants had a history of some sort. At one time they had been individuals, but had gained their intelligence by forming themselves into their present structure through their root systems. Roger and Elaine didn't understand how communication was taking place except that it was more through feelings and intuition than sound.

A change of weather came about one day, a heavy rain. Water rose like a lake in a matter of minutes. The two soaked up the water just by standing in it. Their own bodies grew by nearly ten kilos. Even though the plants were the weakest at night, Roger and Elaine needed little sleep simply by having a small lamp lit. The biggest changes within them had taken place with their skin cells and some rearrangements in their breathing. In the day, their skin would harden to a wood like toughness but still retain certain flexibility. At night it would soften up and their color change. Both had talked together at length about how much humanity they now retained. This worried them to some extent at first but they decided that worrying about it was in fact a good sign that they hadn't lost their humanity. Roger was unable to develop anything that would completely counter the plants' effects on them. But their condition had certainly stabilized.

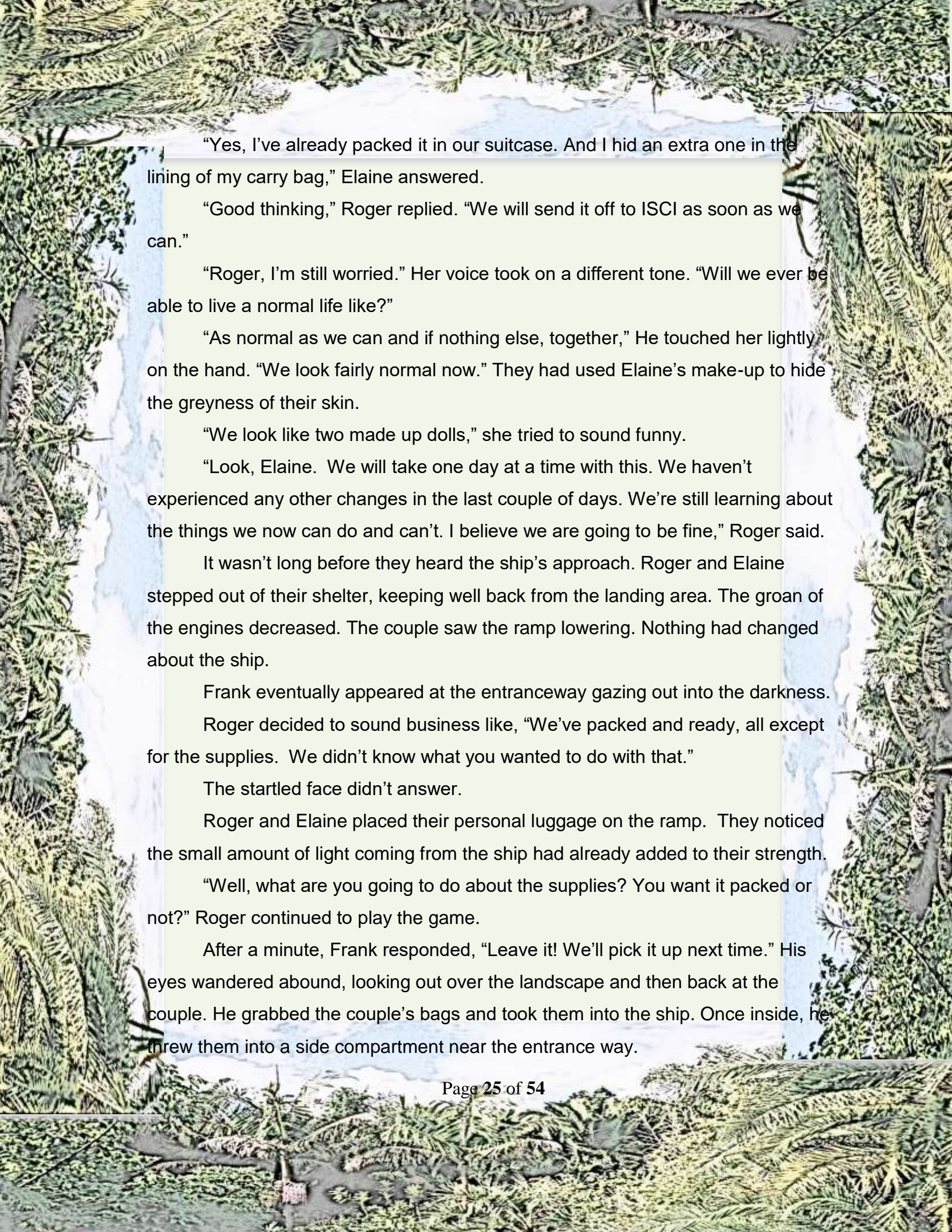
The report they were preparing would include all of their clinical tests and experiments. They decided not to mention the changes in their own bodies. Another report was being prepared for the Inter-society Species Control & Investigation. Roger felt sure that their attempted demise was a planned act to kill them and that plan went a little higher than a local freight officer.

They returned to the original landing site making it look as if they had worked there for the whole of the week. The sabotaged supplies were replaced with items they had found in the domes. Roger hoped that this would create some confusion for Frank and any others.

The sun had set many hours ago. Six days had passed and the time had come.

"Have you finished preparing the report?" he spoke to her in the soft lamp light.





"Yes, I've already packed it in our suitcase. And I hid an extra one in the lining of my carry bag," Elaine answered.

"Good thinking," Roger replied. "We will send it off to ISCI as soon as we can."

"Roger, I'm still worried." Her voice took on a different tone. "Will we ever be able to live a normal life like?"

"As normal as we can and if nothing else, together," He touched her lightly on the hand. "We look fairly normal now." They had used Elaine's make-up to hide the greyness of their skin.

"We look like two made up dolls," she tried to sound funny.

"Look, Elaine. We will take one day at a time with this. We haven't experienced any other changes in the last couple of days. We're still learning about the things we now can do and can't. I believe we are going to be fine," Roger said.

It wasn't long before they heard the ship's approach. Roger and Elaine stepped out of their shelter, keeping well back from the landing area. The groan of the engines decreased. The couple saw the ramp lowering. Nothing had changed about the ship.

Frank eventually appeared at the entranceway gazing out into the darkness.

Roger decided to sound business like, "We've packed and ready, all except for the supplies. We didn't know what you wanted to do with that."

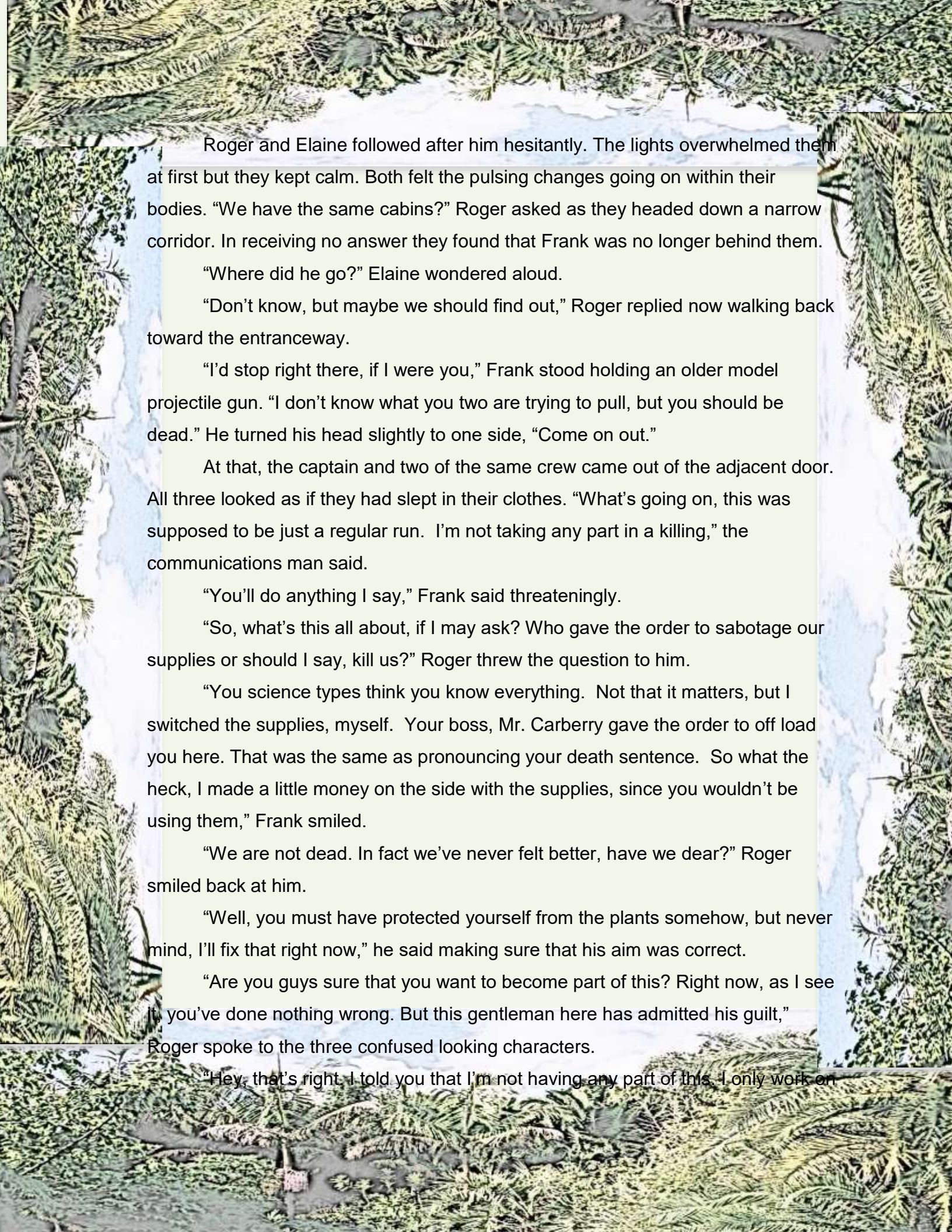
The startled face didn't answer.

Roger and Elaine placed their personal luggage on the ramp. They noticed the small amount of light coming from the ship had already added to their strength.

"Well, what are you going to do about the supplies? You want it packed or not?" Roger continued to play the game.

After a minute, Frank responded, "Leave it! We'll pick it up next time." His eyes wandered around, looking out over the landscape and then back at the couple. He grabbed the couple's bags and took them into the ship. Once inside, he threw them into a side compartment near the entrance way.





Roger and Elaine followed after him hesitantly. The lights overwhelmed them at first but they kept calm. Both felt the pulsing changes going on within their bodies. "We have the same cabins?" Roger asked as they headed down a narrow corridor. In receiving no answer they found that Frank was no longer behind them.

"Where did he go?" Elaine wondered aloud.

"Don't know, but maybe we should find out," Roger replied now walking back toward the entranceway.

"I'd stop right there, if I were you," Frank stood holding an older model projectile gun. "I don't know what you two are trying to pull, but you should be dead." He turned his head slightly to one side, "Come on out."

At that, the captain and two of the same crew came out of the adjacent door. All three looked as if they had slept in their clothes. "What's going on, this was supposed to be just a regular run. I'm not taking any part in a killing," the communications man said.

"You'll do anything I say," Frank said threateningly.

"So, what's this all about, if I may ask? Who gave the order to sabotage our supplies or should I say, kill us?" Roger threw the question to him.

"You science types think you know everything. Not that it matters, but I switched the supplies, myself. Your boss, Mr. Carberry gave the order to off load you here. That was the same as pronouncing your death sentence. So what the heck, I made a little money on the side with the supplies, since you wouldn't be using them," Frank smiled.

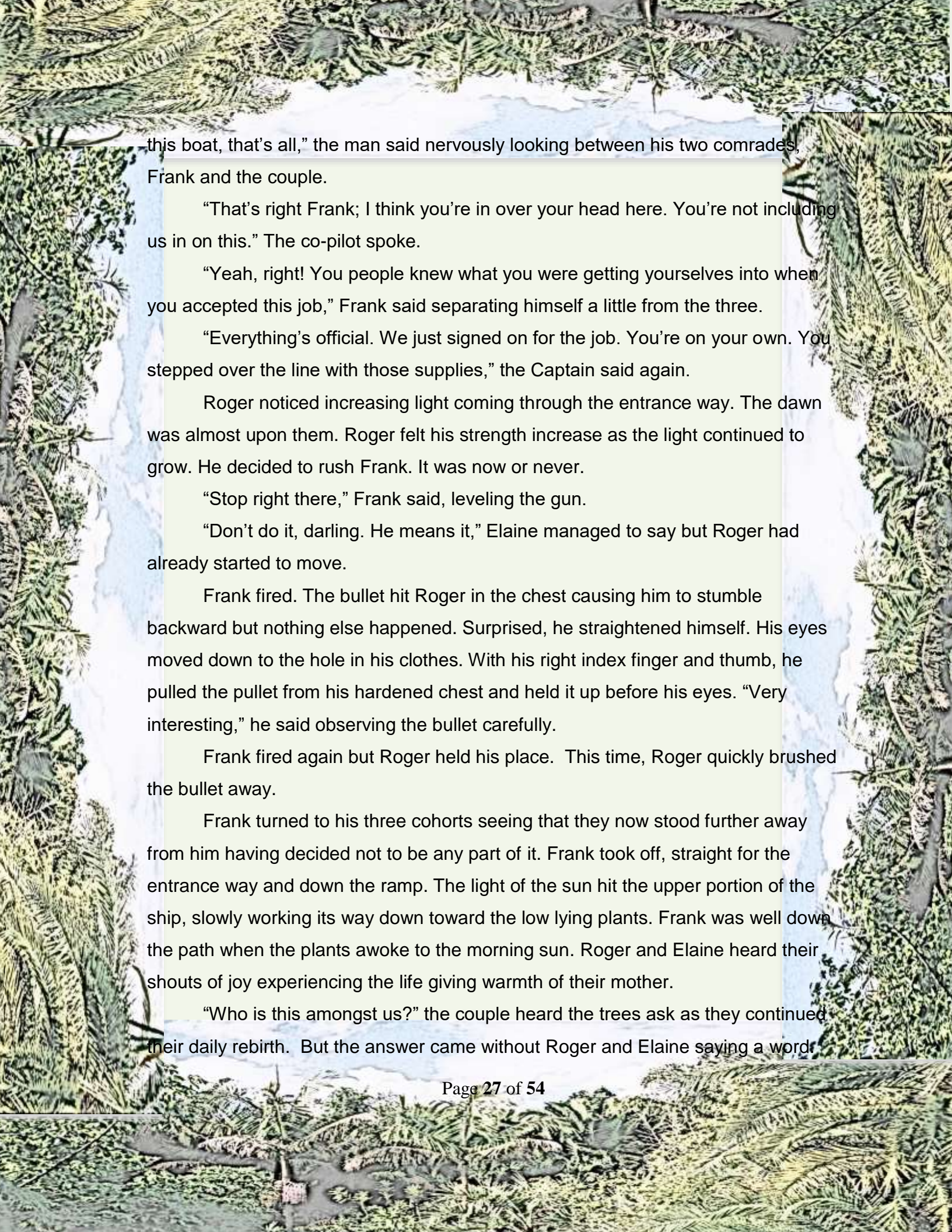
"We are not dead. In fact we've never felt better, have we dear?" Roger smiled back at him.

"Well, you must have protected yourself from the plants somehow, but never mind, I'll fix that right now," he said making sure that his aim was correct.

"Are you guys sure that you want to become part of this? Right now, as I see it, you've done nothing wrong. But this gentleman here has admitted his guilt," Roger spoke to the three confused looking characters.

"Hey, that's right. I told you that I'm not having any part of this. I only work on





this boat, that's all," the man said nervously looking between his two comrades, Frank and the couple.

"That's right Frank; I think you're in over your head here. You're not including us in on this." The co-pilot spoke.

"Yeah, right! You people knew what you were getting yourselves into when you accepted this job," Frank said separating himself a little from the three.

"Everything's official. We just signed on for the job. You're on your own. You stepped over the line with those supplies," the Captain said again.

Roger noticed increasing light coming through the entrance way. The dawn was almost upon them. Roger felt his strength increase as the light continued to grow. He decided to rush Frank. It was now or never.

"Stop right there," Frank said, leveling the gun.

"Don't do it, darling. He means it," Elaine managed to say but Roger had already started to move.

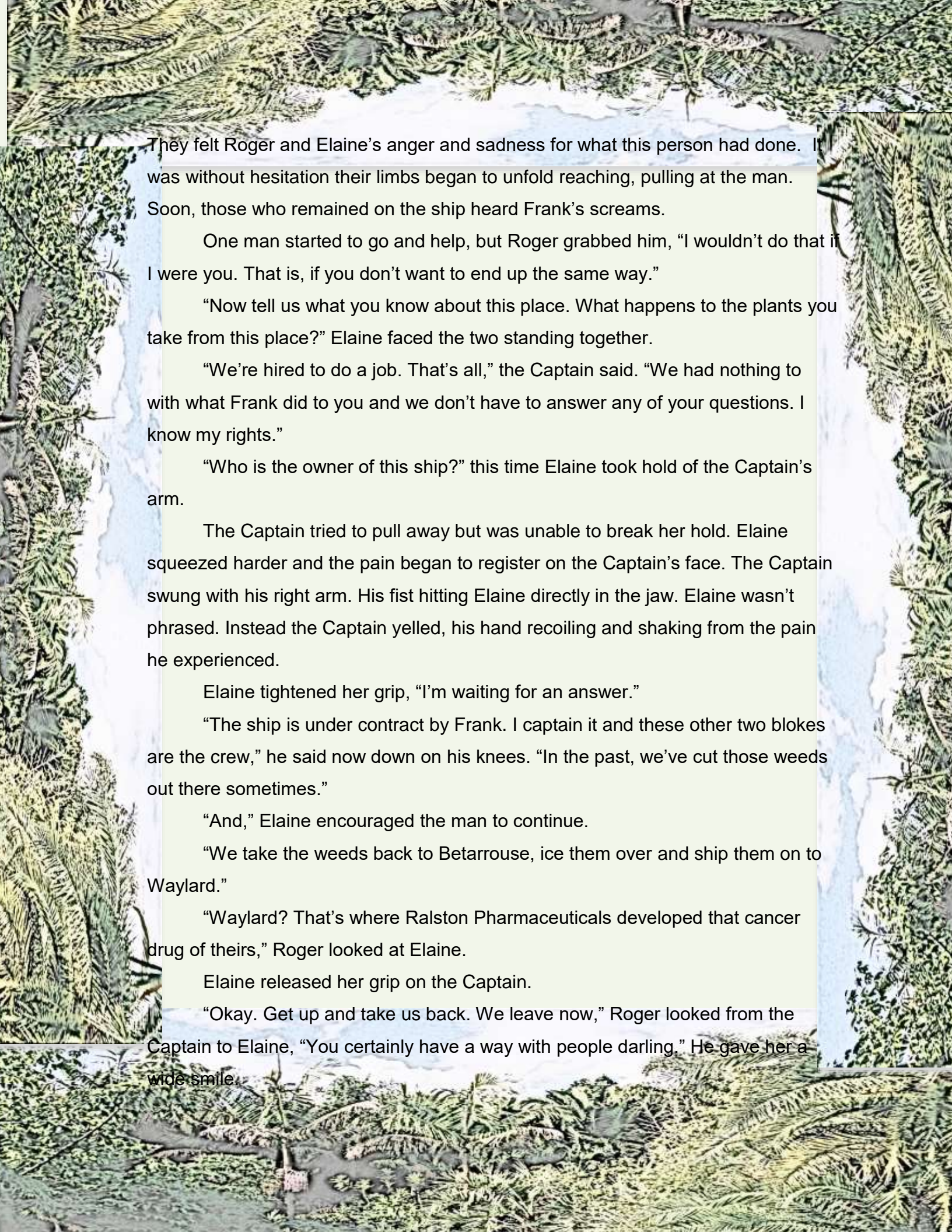
Frank fired. The bullet hit Roger in the chest causing him to stumble backward but nothing else happened. Surprised, he straightened himself. His eyes moved down to the hole in his clothes. With his right index finger and thumb, he pulled the pullet from his hardened chest and held it up before his eyes. "Very interesting," he said observing the bullet carefully.

Frank fired again but Roger held his place. This time, Roger quickly brushed the bullet away.

Frank turned to his three cohorts seeing that they now stood further away from him having decided not to be any part of it. Frank took off, straight for the entrance way and down the ramp. The light of the sun hit the upper portion of the ship, slowly working its way down toward the low lying plants. Frank was well down the path when the plants awoke to the morning sun. Roger and Elaine heard their shouts of joy experiencing the life giving warmth of their mother.

"Who is this amongst us?" the couple heard the trees ask as they continued their daily rebirth. But the answer came without Roger and Elaine saying a word.





They felt Roger and Elaine's anger and sadness for what this person had done. It was without hesitation their limbs began to unfold reaching, pulling at the man. Soon, those who remained on the ship heard Frank's screams.

One man started to go and help, but Roger grabbed him, "I wouldn't do that if I were you. That is, if you don't want to end up the same way."

"Now tell us what you know about this place. What happens to the plants you take from this place?" Elaine faced the two standing together.

"We're hired to do a job. That's all," the Captain said. "We had nothing to do with what Frank did to you and we don't have to answer any of your questions. I know my rights."

"Who is the owner of this ship?" this time Elaine took hold of the Captain's arm.

The Captain tried to pull away but was unable to break her hold. Elaine squeezed harder and the pain began to register on the Captain's face. The Captain swung with his right arm. His fist hitting Elaine directly in the jaw. Elaine wasn't phased. Instead the Captain yelled, his hand recoiling and shaking from the pain he experienced.

Elaine tightened her grip, "I'm waiting for an answer."

"The ship is under contract by Frank. I captain it and these other two blokes are the crew," he said now down on his knees. "In the past, we've cut those weeds out there sometimes."

"And," Elaine encouraged the man to continue.


"We take the weeds back to Betarrouse, ice them over and ship them on to Waylard."

"Waylard? That's where Ralston Pharmaceuticals developed that cancer drug of theirs," Roger looked at Elaine.

Elaine released her grip on the Captain.

"Okay. Get up and take us back. We leave now," Roger looked from the Captain to Elaine, "You certainly have a way with people darling." He gave her a wide smile.





"We don't have enough food stuffs," the Captain replied.

"We can take the supplies that are here. All of you, out you go. Just don't get too close to the plants." The three looked to the entrance way nervously for Frank could still be heard screaming mindlessly.

The three cautiously moved down the ramp pausing only for a moment to look at the tree that held Frank. They noticed the trees bordering the camp. They were sweeping themselves back and forward ever reaching out toward the three.

"Can we get the plants to stop their torture of Frank?" Elaine asked as her eyes fell upon him in the distance.

"I don't think they would listen to us. They've obviously suffered greatly from the cuttings that have been going on. They're mad on revenge," Roger replied. "We need to get to the Inter-society Species Control & Investigation as soon as possible. The company must be using the healing properties from the plants as the main agent in that cancer drug of theirs. It all makes sense now. Charles Carberry and possibly Ralston himself knew that these plants were sentient." After the supplies were loaded, the ship lifted off. The Captain had set the ship on auto pilot. He and the two others went to their cabin and locked themselves in.

"Well, you think we can trust those three?" Elaine asked.

"Who knows? I assume we're headed home but I know nothing about navigation," Roger replied.

"I'm still afraid, Roger," Elaine said cautiously.

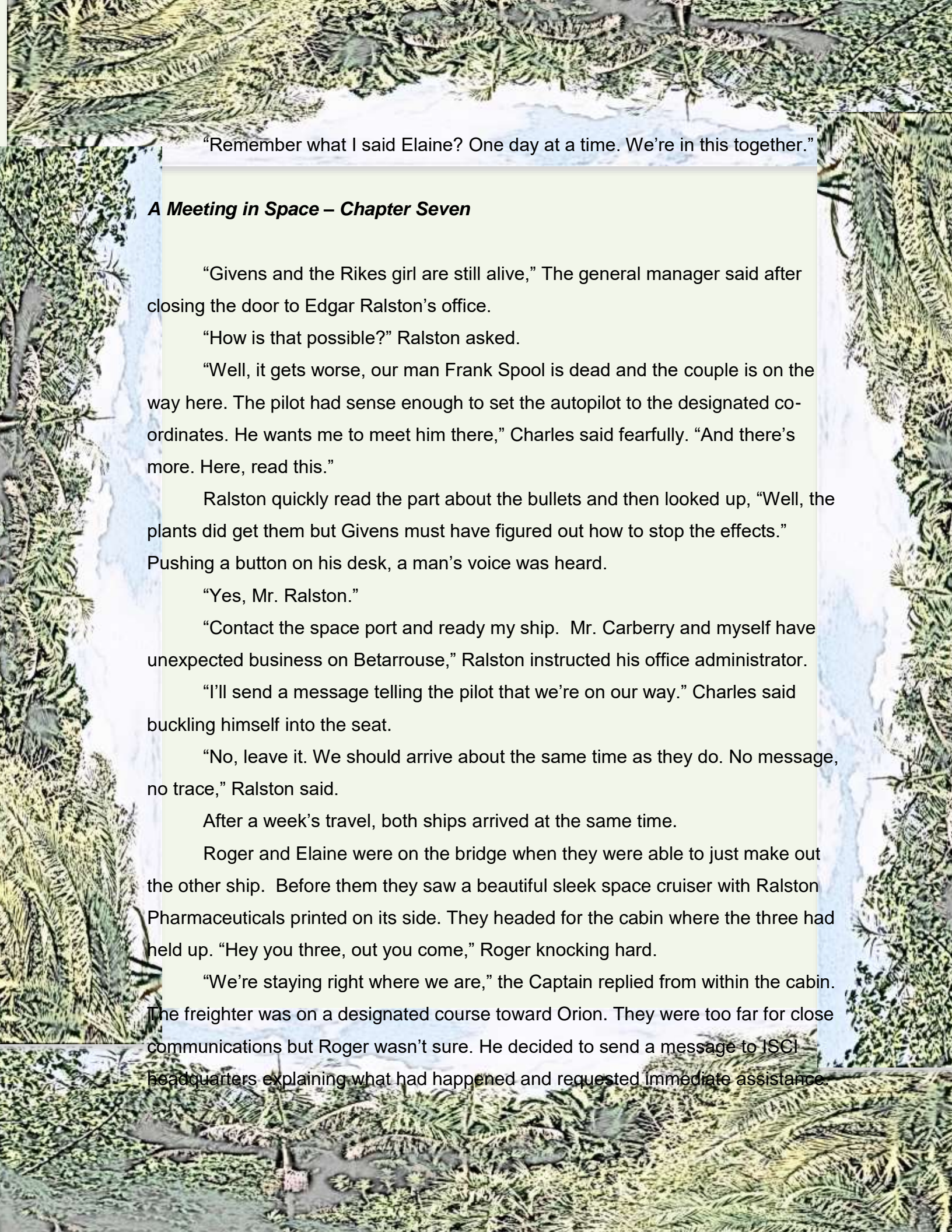
"Afraid of what; did you see the way those bullets bounced off me?" he replied.

"That's just it. When I held that man's arm, I could have squeezed it in half. Are we still changing?" Tears had now formed in Elaine's eyes.

"No, we're not. I'm sure of that. We're only experiencing how those changes have affected us and there may be more surprises yet."

"Roger, I just want to be normal. I want you as my husband." Now crying, she put her head on his chest but instead of feeling comfort there was hardness.





"Remember what I said Elaine? One day at a time. We're in this together."

### ***A Meeting in Space – Chapter Seven***

"Givens and the Rikes girl are still alive," The general manager said after closing the door to Edgar Ralston's office.

"How is that possible?" Ralston asked.

"Well, it gets worse, our man Frank Spool is dead and the couple is on the way here. The pilot had sense enough to set the autopilot to the designated co-ordinates. He wants me to meet him there," Charles said fearfully. "And there's more. Here, read this."

Ralston quickly read the part about the bullets and then looked up, "Well, the plants did get them but Givens must have figured out how to stop the effects." Pushing a button on his desk, a man's voice was heard.

"Yes, Mr. Ralston."

"Contact the space port and ready my ship. Mr. Carberry and myself have unexpected business on Betarrouse," Ralston instructed his office administrator.

"I'll send a message telling the pilot that we're on our way." Charles said buckling himself into the seat.

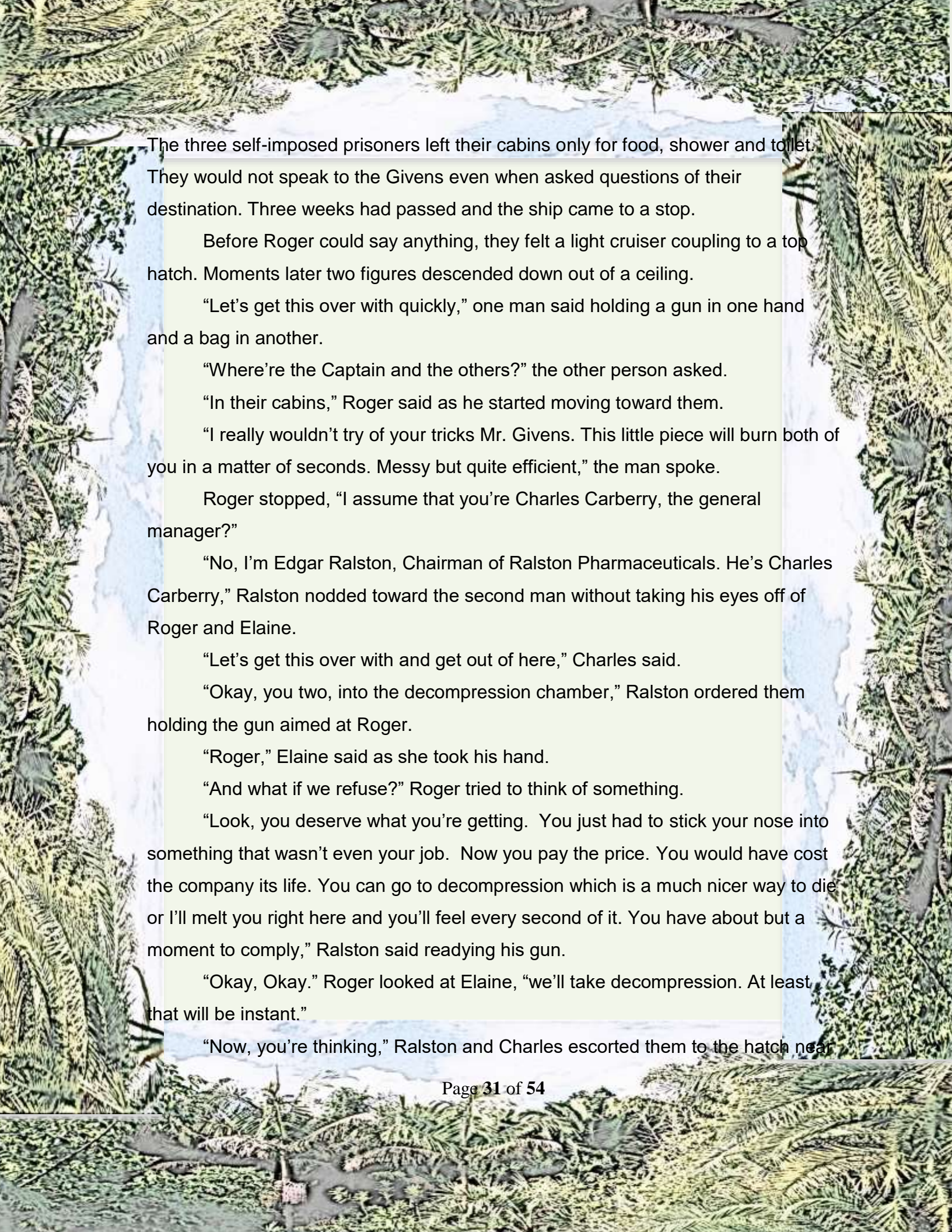
"No, leave it. We should arrive about the same time as they do. No message, no trace," Ralston said.

After a week's travel, both ships arrived at the same time.

Roger and Elaine were on the bridge when they were able to just make out the other ship. Before them they saw a beautiful sleek space cruiser with Ralston Pharmaceuticals printed on its side. They headed for the cabin where the three had held up. "Hey you three, out you come," Roger knocking hard.

"We're staying right where we are," the Captain replied from within the cabin. The freighter was on a designated course toward Orion. They were too far for close communications but Roger wasn't sure. He decided to send a message to ISCI headquarters explaining what had happened and requested immediate assistance.





The three self-imposed prisoners left their cabins only for food, shower and toilet. They would not speak to the Givens even when asked questions of their destination. Three weeks had passed and the ship came to a stop.

Before Roger could say anything, they felt a light cruiser coupling to a top hatch. Moments later two figures descended down out of a ceiling.

"Let's get this over with quickly," one man said holding a gun in one hand and a bag in another.

"Where're the Captain and the others?" the other person asked.

"In their cabins," Roger said as he started moving toward them.

"I really wouldn't try of your tricks Mr. Givens. This little piece will burn both of you in a matter of seconds. Messy but quite efficient," the man spoke.

Roger stopped, "I assume that you're Charles Carberry, the general manager?"

"No, I'm Edgar Ralston, Chairman of Ralston Pharmaceuticals. He's Charles Carberry," Ralston nodded toward the second man without taking his eyes off of Roger and Elaine.

"Let's get this over with and get out of here," Charles said.

"Okay, you two, into the decompression chamber," Ralston ordered them holding the gun aimed at Roger.

"Roger," Elaine said as she took his hand.

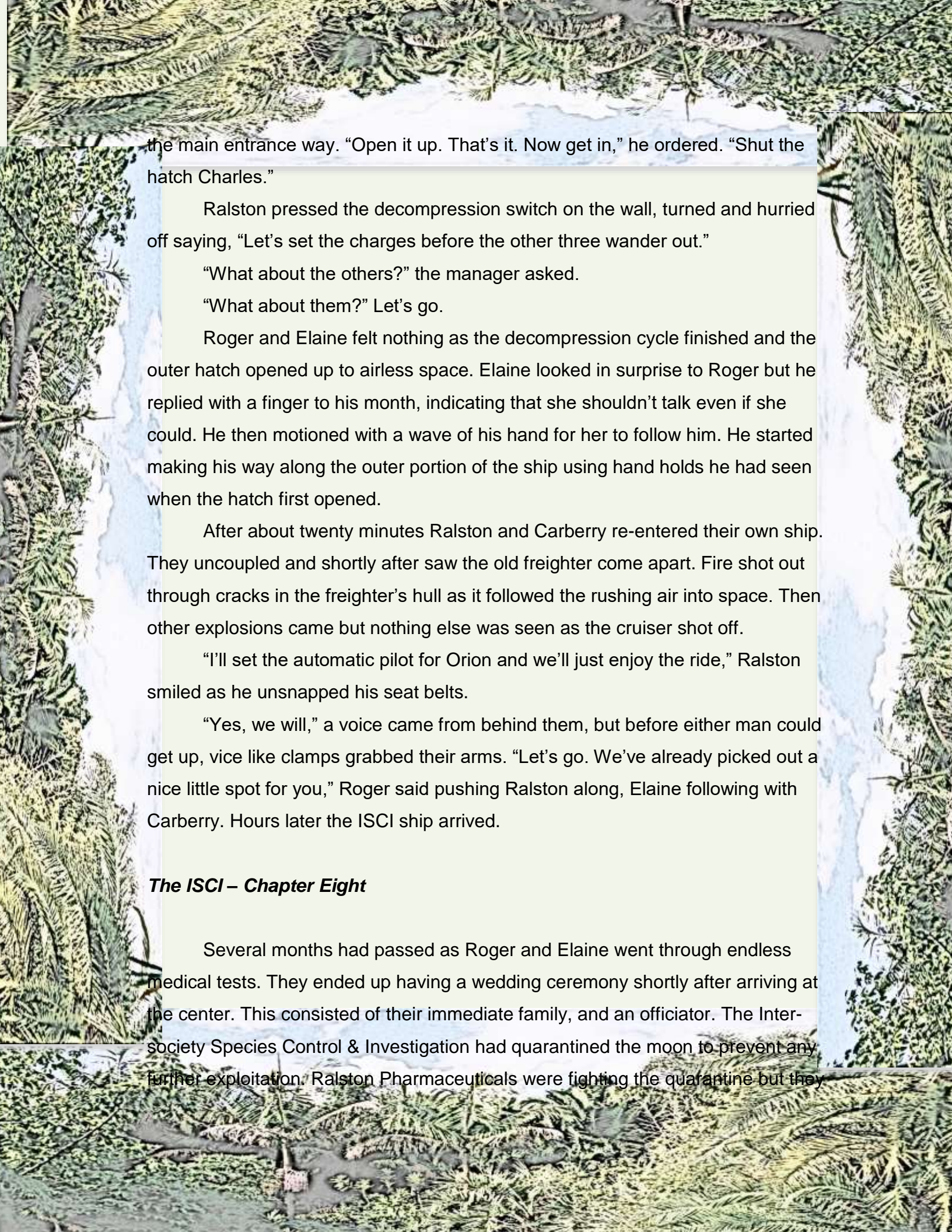
"And what if we refuse?" Roger tried to think of something.

"Look, you deserve what you're getting. You just had to stick your nose into something that wasn't even your job. Now you pay the price. You would have cost the company its life. You can go to decompression which is a much nicer way to die or I'll melt you right here and you'll feel every second of it. You have about but a moment to comply," Ralston said readying his gun.

"Okay, Okay." Roger looked at Elaine, "we'll take decompression. At least that will be instant."

"Now, you're thinking," Ralston and Charles escorted them to the hatch near





the main entrance way. "Open it up. That's it. Now get in," he ordered. "Shut the hatch Charles."

Ralston pressed the decompression switch on the wall, turned and hurried off saying, "Let's set the charges before the other three wander out."

"What about the others?" the manager asked.

"What about them?" Let's go.

Roger and Elaine felt nothing as the decompression cycle finished and the outer hatch opened up to airless space. Elaine looked in surprise to Roger but he replied with a finger to his month, indicating that she shouldn't talk even if she could. He then motioned with a wave of his hand for her to follow him. He started making his way along the outer portion of the ship using hand holds he had seen when the hatch first opened.

After about twenty minutes Ralston and Carberry re-entered their own ship. They uncoupled and shortly after saw the old freighter come apart. Fire shot out through cracks in the freighter's hull as it followed the rushing air into space. Then other explosions came but nothing else was seen as the cruiser shot off.

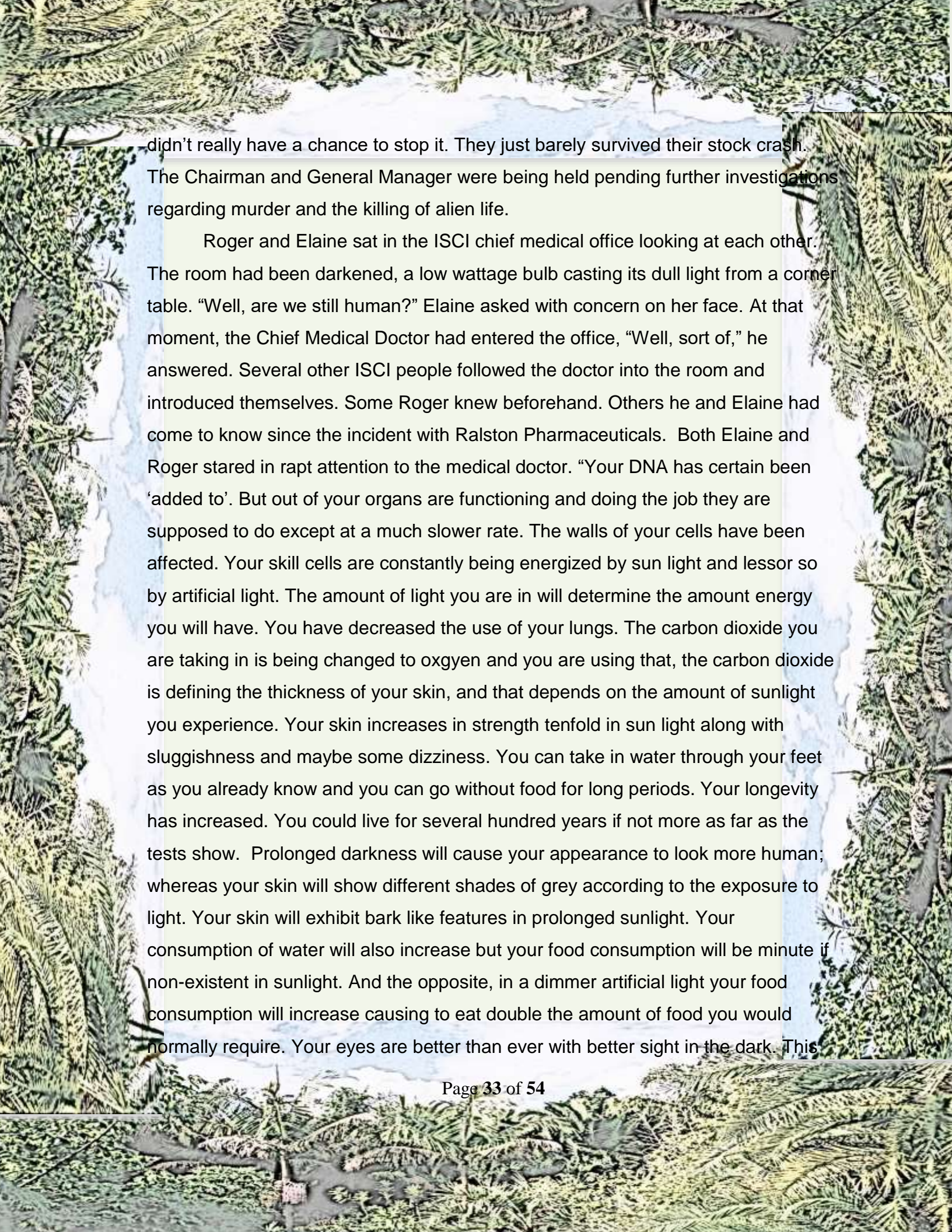
"I'll set the automatic pilot for Orion and we'll just enjoy the ride," Ralston smiled as he unsnapped his seat belts.

"Yes, we will," a voice came from behind them, but before either man could get up, vice like clamps grabbed their arms. "Let's go. We've already picked out a nice little spot for you," Roger said pushing Ralston along, Elaine following with Carberry. Hours later the ISCI ship arrived.

### ***The ISCI – Chapter Eight***

Several months had passed as Roger and Elaine went through endless medical tests. They ended up having a wedding ceremony shortly after arriving at the center. This consisted of their immediate family, and an officiator. The Inter-society Species Control & Investigation had quarantined the moon to prevent any further exploitation. Ralston Pharmaceuticals were fighting the quarantine but they

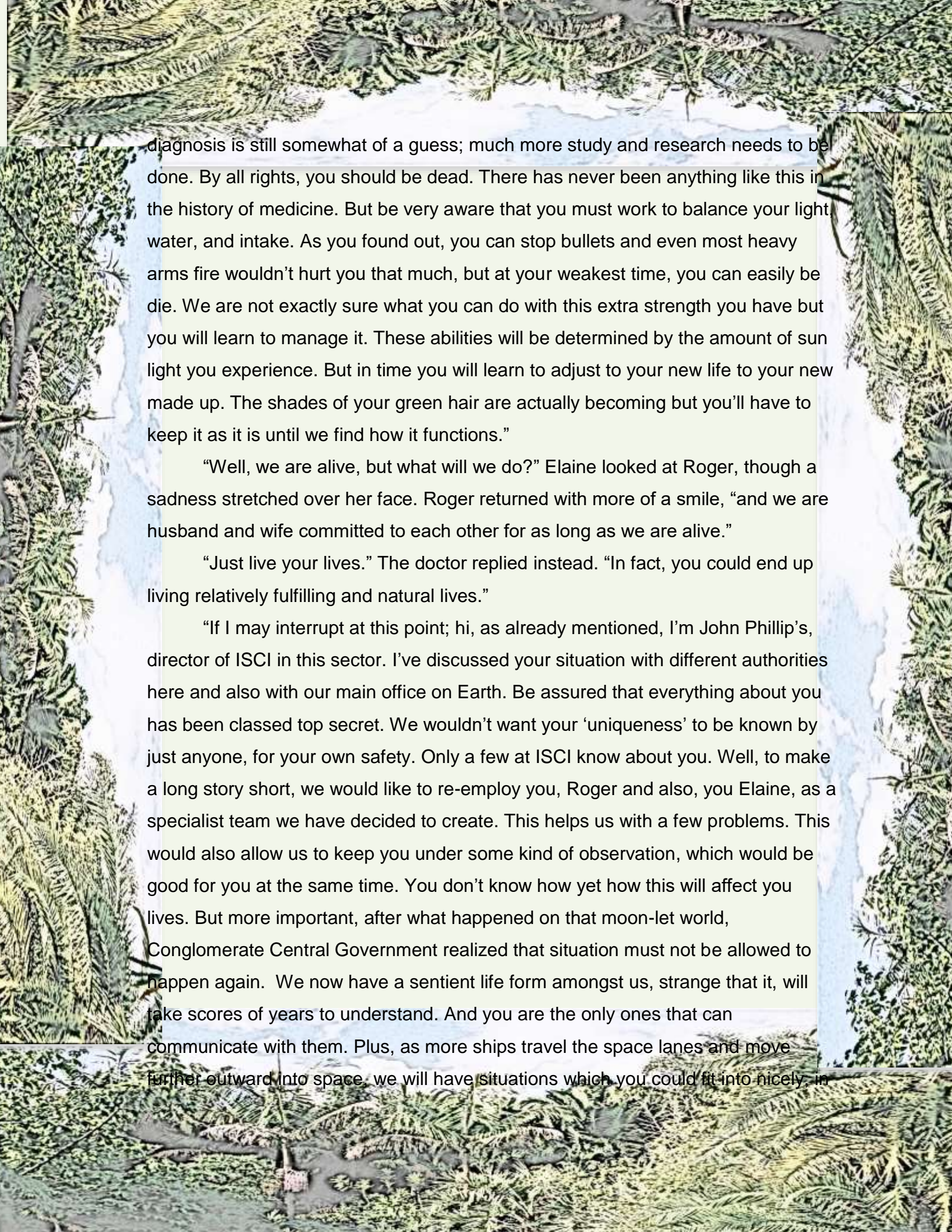


The background of the page is a vibrant, detailed illustration of a tropical jungle. A river flows through the center, surrounded by dense, green foliage, including various types of trees and large, feathery ferns. The scene is bright and sunny, with light filtering through the leaves.

didn't really have a chance to stop it. They just barely survived their stock crash. The Chairman and General Manager were being held pending further investigations regarding murder and the killing of alien life.

Roger and Elaine sat in the ISCI chief medical office looking at each other. The room had been darkened, a low wattage bulb casting its dull light from a corner table. "Well, are we still human?" Elaine asked with concern on her face. At that moment, the Chief Medical Doctor had entered the office, "Well, sort of," he answered. Several other ISCI people followed the doctor into the room and introduced themselves. Some Roger knew beforehand. Others he and Elaine had come to know since the incident with Ralston Pharmaceuticals. Both Elaine and Roger stared in rapt attention to the medical doctor. "Your DNA has certain been 'added to'. But out of your organs are functioning and doing the job they are supposed to do except at a much slower rate. The walls of your cells have been affected. Your skin cells are constantly being energized by sun light and lessor so by artificial light. The amount of light you are in will determine the amount energy you will have. You have decreased the use of your lungs. The carbon dioxide you are taking in is being changed to oxygen and you are using that, the carbon dioxide is defining the thickness of your skin, and that depends on the amount of sunlight you experience. Your skin increases in strength tenfold in sun light along with sluggishness and maybe some dizziness. You can take in water through your feet as you already know and you can go without food for long periods. Your longevity has increased. You could live for several hundred years if not more as far as the tests show. Prolonged darkness will cause your appearance to look more human; whereas your skin will show different shades of grey according to the exposure to light. Your skin will exhibit bark like features in prolonged sunlight. Your consumption of water will also increase but your food consumption will be minute if non-existent in sunlight. And the opposite, in a dimmer artificial light your food consumption will increase causing to eat double the amount of food you would normally require. Your eyes are better than ever with better sight in the dark. This





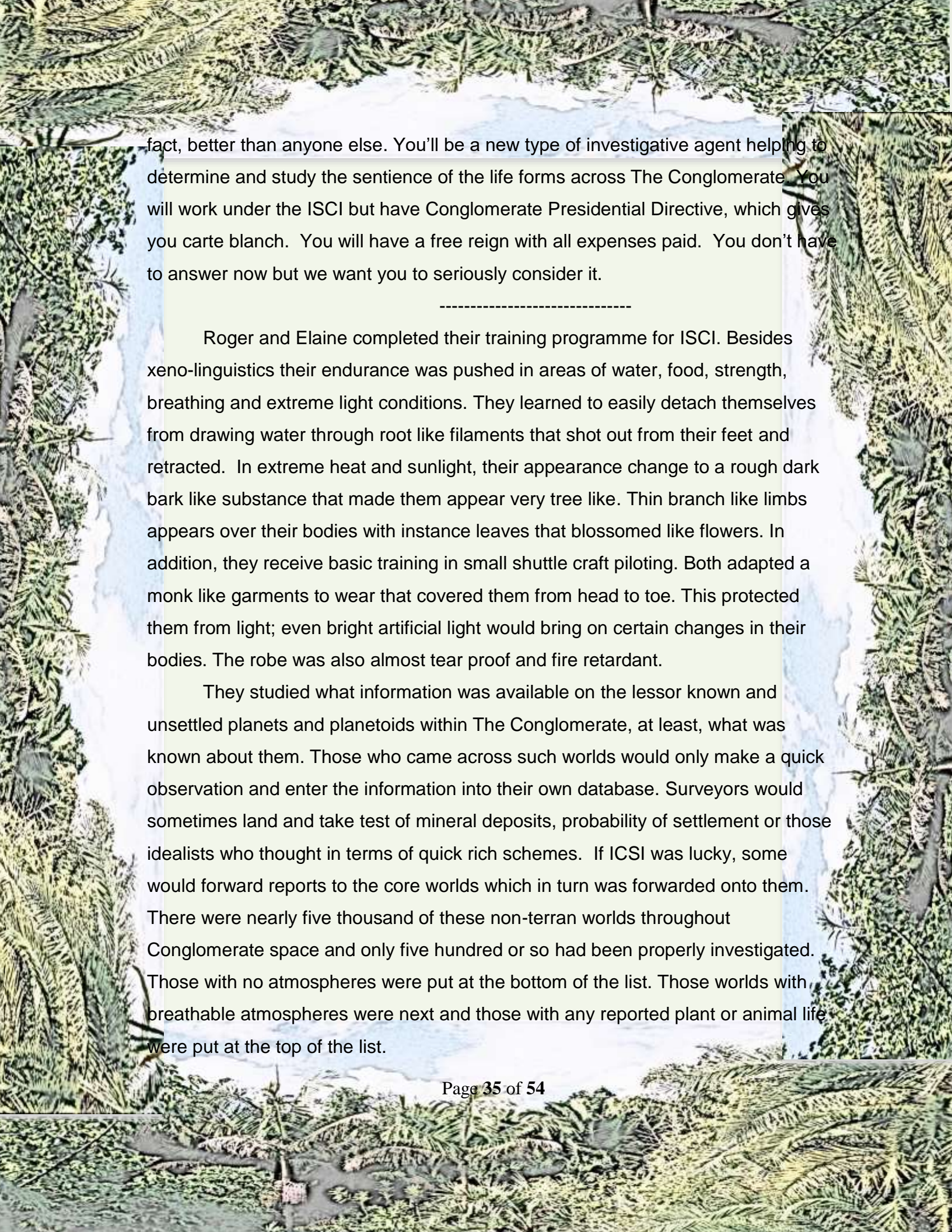
diagnosis is still somewhat of a guess; much more study and research needs to be done. By all rights, you should be dead. There has never been anything like this in the history of medicine. But be very aware that you must work to balance your light, water, and intake. As you found out, you can stop bullets and even most heavy arms fire wouldn't hurt you that much, but at your weakest time, you can easily be die. We are not exactly sure what you can do with this extra strength you have but you will learn to manage it. These abilities will be determined by the amount of sun light you experience. But in time you will learn to adjust to your new life to your new made up. The shades of your green hair are actually becoming but you'll have to keep it as it is until we find how it functions."

"Well, we are alive, but what will we do?" Elaine looked at Roger, though a sadness stretched over her face. Roger returned with more of a smile, "and we are husband and wife committed to each other for as long as we are alive."

"Just live your lives." The doctor replied instead. "In fact, you could end up living relatively fulfilling and natural lives."

"If I may interrupt at this point; hi, as already mentioned, I'm John Phillip's, director of ISCI in this sector. I've discussed your situation with different authorities here and also with our main office on Earth. Be assured that everything about you has been classed top secret. We wouldn't want your 'uniqueness' to be known by just anyone, for your own safety. Only a few at ISCI know about you. Well, to make a long story short, we would like to re-employ you, Roger and also, you Elaine, as a specialist team we have decided to create. This helps us with a few problems. This would also allow us to keep you under some kind of observation, which would be good for you at the same time. You don't know how yet how this will affect you lives. But more important, after what happened on that moon-let world, Conglomerate Central Government realized that situation must not be allowed to happen again. We now have a sentient life form amongst us, strange that it, will take scores of years to understand. And you are the only ones that can communicate with them. Plus, as more ships travel the space lanes and move further outward into space, we will have situations which you could fit into nicely, in





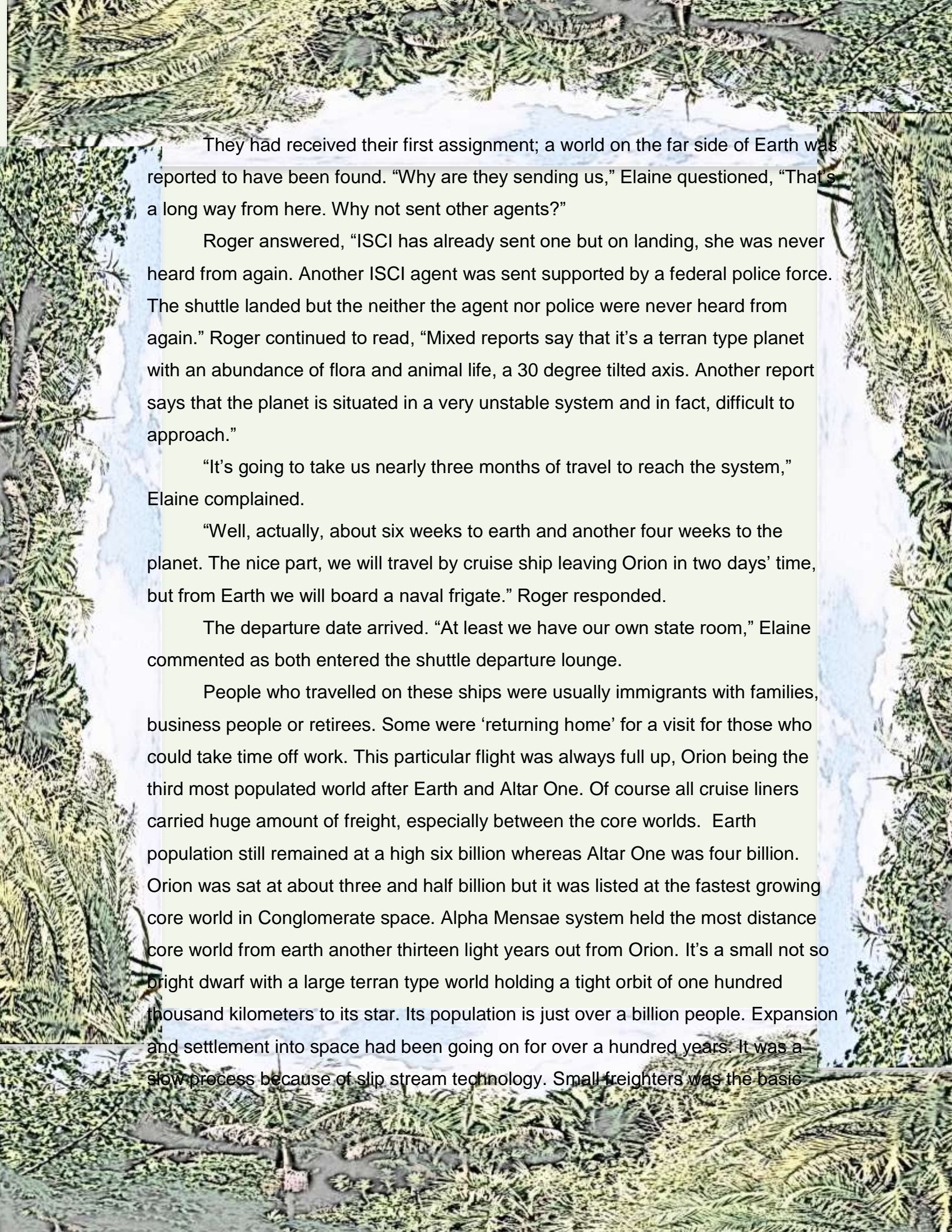
fact, better than anyone else. You'll be a new type of investigative agent helping to determine and study the sentence of the life forms across The Conglomerate. You will work under the ISCI but have Conglomerate Presidential Directive, which gives you carte blanche. You will have a free reign with all expenses paid. You don't have to answer now but we want you to seriously consider it.

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Roger and Elaine completed their training programme for ISCI. Besides xeno-linguistics their endurance was pushed in areas of water, food, strength, breathing and extreme light conditions. They learned to easily detach themselves from drawing water through root like filaments that shot out from their feet and retracted. In extreme heat and sunlight, their appearance change to a rough dark bark like substance that made them appear very tree like. Thin branch like limbs appears over their bodies with instance leaves that blossomed like flowers. In addition, they receive basic training in small shuttle craft piloting. Both adapted a monk like garments to wear that covered them from head to toe. This protected them from light; even bright artificial light would bring on certain changes in their bodies. The robe was also almost tear proof and fire retardant.

They studied what information was available on the lesser known and unsettled planets and planetoids within The Conglomerate, at least, what was known about them. Those who came across such worlds would only make a quick observation and enter the information into their own database. Surveyors would sometimes land and take test of mineral deposits, probability of settlement or those idealists who thought in terms of quick rich schemes. If ICSI was lucky, some would forward reports to the core worlds which in turn was forwarded onto them. There were nearly five thousand of these non-terran worlds throughout Conglomerate space and only five hundred or so had been properly investigated. Those with no atmospheres were put at the bottom of the list. Those worlds with breathable atmospheres were next and those with any reported plant or animal life were put at the top of the list.





They had received their first assignment; a world on the far side of Earth was reported to have been found. "Why are they sending us," Elaine questioned, "That's a long way from here. Why not sent other agents?"

Roger answered, "ISCI has already sent one but on landing, she was never heard from again. Another ISCI agent was sent supported by a federal police force. The shuttle landed but the neither the agent nor police were never heard from again." Roger continued to read, "Mixed reports say that it's a terran type planet with an abundance of flora and animal life, a 30 degree tilted axis. Another report says that the planet is situated in a very unstable system and in fact, difficult to approach."

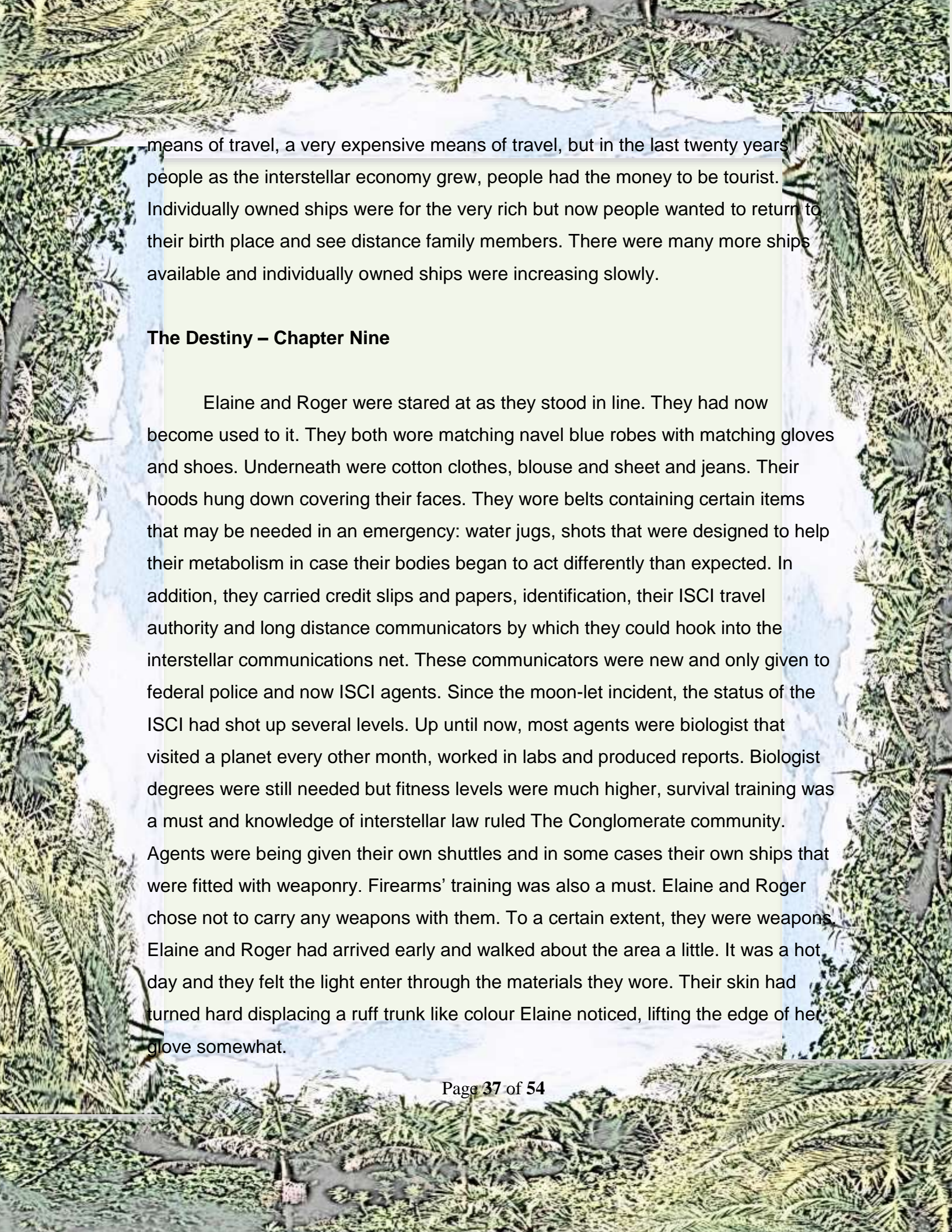
"It's going to take us nearly three months of travel to reach the system," Elaine complained.

"Well, actually, about six weeks to earth and another four weeks to the planet. The nice part, we will travel by cruise ship leaving Orion in two days' time, but from Earth we will board a naval frigate." Roger responded.

The departure date arrived. "At least we have our own state room," Elaine commented as both entered the shuttle departure lounge.

People who travelled on these ships were usually immigrants with families, business people or retirees. Some were 'returning home' for a visit for those who could take time off work. This particular flight was always full up, Orion being the third most populated world after Earth and Altar One. Of course all cruise liners carried huge amount of freight, especially between the core worlds. Earth population still remained at a high six billion whereas Altar One was four billion. Orion was sat at about three and half billion but it was listed at the fastest growing core world in Conglomerate space. Alpha Mensae system held the most distance core world from earth another thirteen light years out from Orion. It's a small not so bright dwarf with a large terran type world holding a tight orbit of one hundred thousand kilometers to its star. Its population is just over a billion people. Expansion and settlement into space had been going on for over a hundred years. It was a slow process because of slip stream technology. Small freighters was the basic



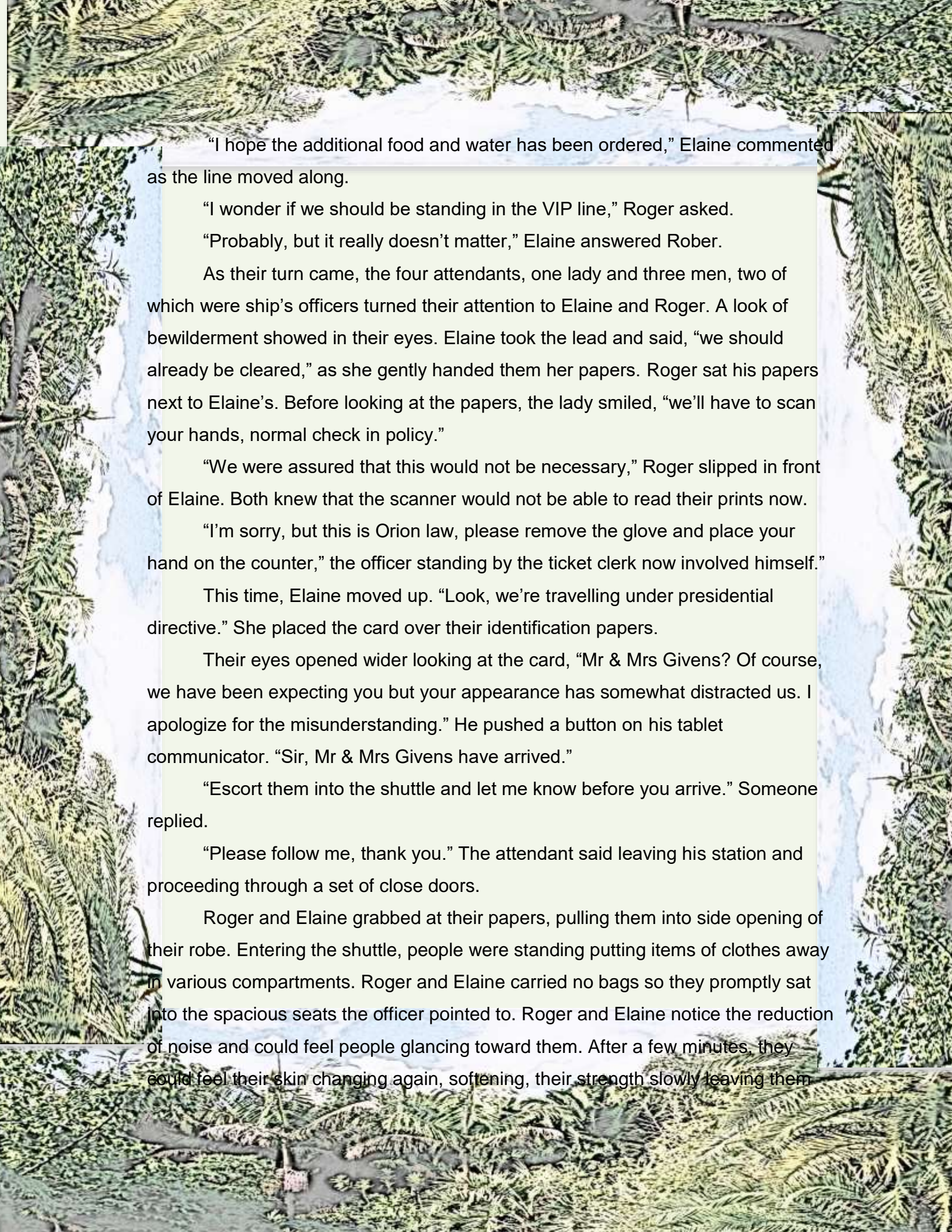


means of travel, a very expensive means of travel, but in the last twenty years people as the interstellar economy grew, people had the money to be tourist. Individually owned ships were for the very rich but now people wanted to return to their birth place and see distance family members. There were many more ships available and individually owned ships were increasing slowly.

## **The Destiny – Chapter Nine**

Elaine and Roger were stared at as they stood in line. They had now become used to it. They both wore matching navel blue robes with matching gloves and shoes. Underneath were cotton clothes, blouse and sheet and jeans. Their hoods hung down covering their faces. They wore belts containing certain items that may be needed in an emergency: water jugs, shots that were designed to help their metabolism in case their bodies began to act differently than expected. In addition, they carried credit slips and papers, identification, their ISCI travel authority and long distance communicators by which they could hook into the interstellar communications net. These communicators were new and only given to federal police and now ISCI agents. Since the moon-let incident, the status of the ISCI had shot up several levels. Up until now, most agents were biologist that visited a planet every other month, worked in labs and produced reports. Biologist degrees were still needed but fitness levels were much higher, survival training was a must and knowledge of interstellar law ruled The Conglomerate community. Agents were being given their own shuttles and in some cases their own ships that were fitted with weaponry. Firearms' training was also a must. Elaine and Roger chose not to carry any weapons with them. To a certain extent, they were weapons. Elaine and Roger had arrived early and walked about the area a little. It was a hot day and they felt the light enter through the materials they wore. Their skin had turned hard displacing a ruff trunk like colour Elaine noticed, lifting the edge of her glove somewhat.





"I hope the additional food and water has been ordered," Elaine commented as the line moved along.

"I wonder if we should be standing in the VIP line," Roger asked.

"Probably, but it really doesn't matter," Elaine answered Rober.

As their turn came, the four attendants, one lady and three men, two of which were ship's officers turned their attention to Elaine and Roger. A look of bewilderment showed in their eyes. Elaine took the lead and said, "we should already be cleared," as she gently handed them her papers. Roger sat his papers next to Elaine's. Before looking at the papers, the lady smiled, "we'll have to scan your hands, normal check in policy."

"We were assured that this would not be necessary," Roger slipped in front of Elaine. Both knew that the scanner would not be able to read their prints now.

"I'm sorry, but this is Orion law, please remove the glove and place your hand on the counter," the officer standing by the ticket clerk now involved himself."

This time, Elaine moved up. "Look, we're travelling under presidential directive." She placed the card over their identification papers.

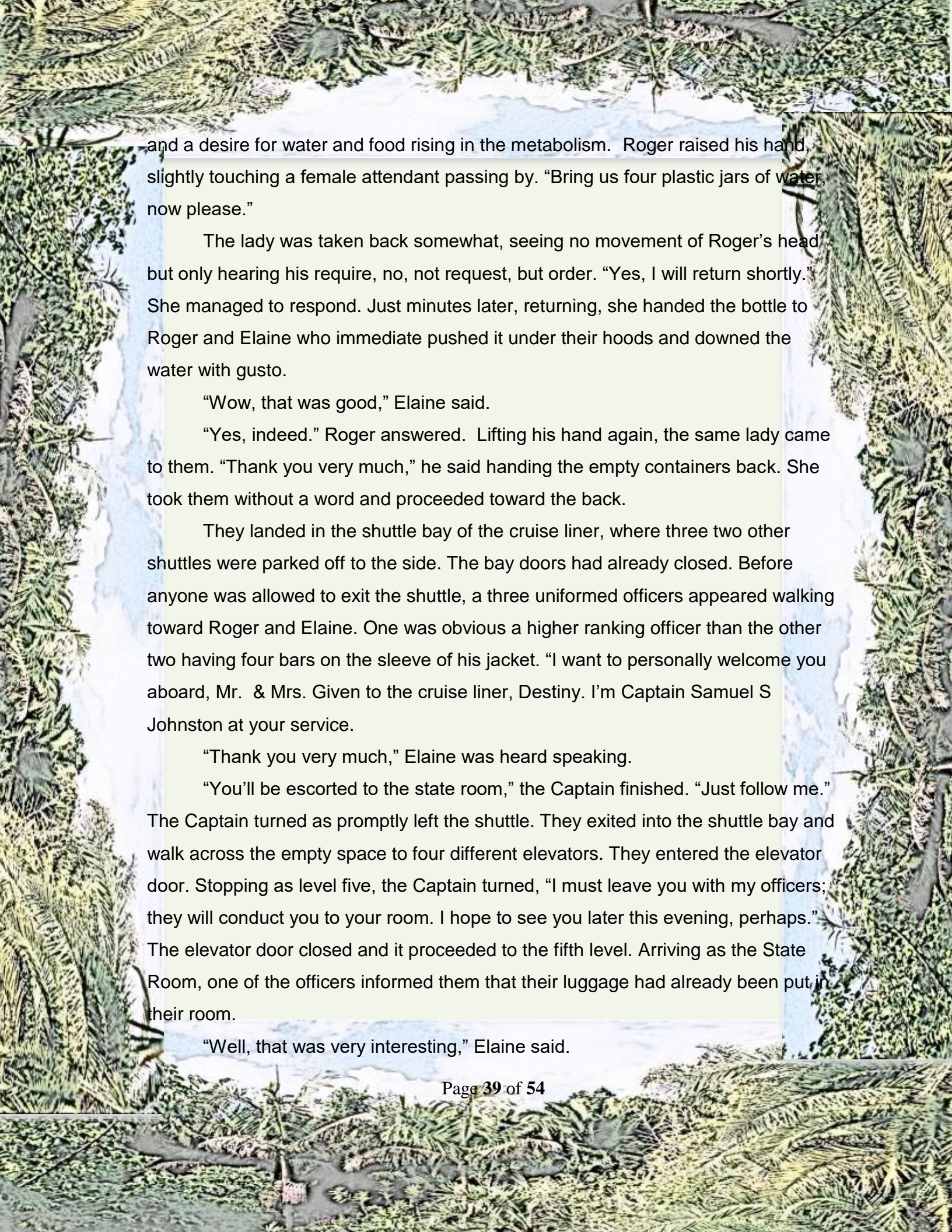
Their eyes opened wider looking at the card, "Mr & Mrs Givens? Of course, we have been expecting you but your appearance has somewhat distracted us. I apologize for the misunderstanding." He pushed a button on his tablet communicator. "Sir, Mr & Mrs Givens have arrived."

"Escort them into the shuttle and let me know before you arrive." Someone replied.

"Please follow me, thank you." The attendant said leaving his station and proceeding through a set of close doors.

Roger and Elaine grabbed at their papers, pulling them into side opening of their robe. Entering the shuttle, people were standing putting items of clothes away in various compartments. Roger and Elaine carried no bags so they promptly sat into the spacious seats the officer pointed to. Roger and Elaine notice the reduction of noise and could feel people glancing toward them. After a few minutes, they could feel their skin changing again, softening, their strength slowly leaving them





and a desire for water and food rising in the metabolism. Roger raised his hand, slightly touching a female attendant passing by. "Bring us four plastic jars of water, now please."

The lady was taken back somewhat, seeing no movement of Roger's head but only hearing his require, no, not request, but order. "Yes, I will return shortly." She managed to respond. Just minutes later, returning, she handed the bottle to Roger and Elaine who immediately pushed it under their hoods and downed the water with gusto.

"Wow, that was good," Elaine said.

"Yes, indeed." Roger answered. Lifting his hand again, the same lady came to them. "Thank you very much," he said handing the empty containers back. She took them without a word and proceeded toward the back.

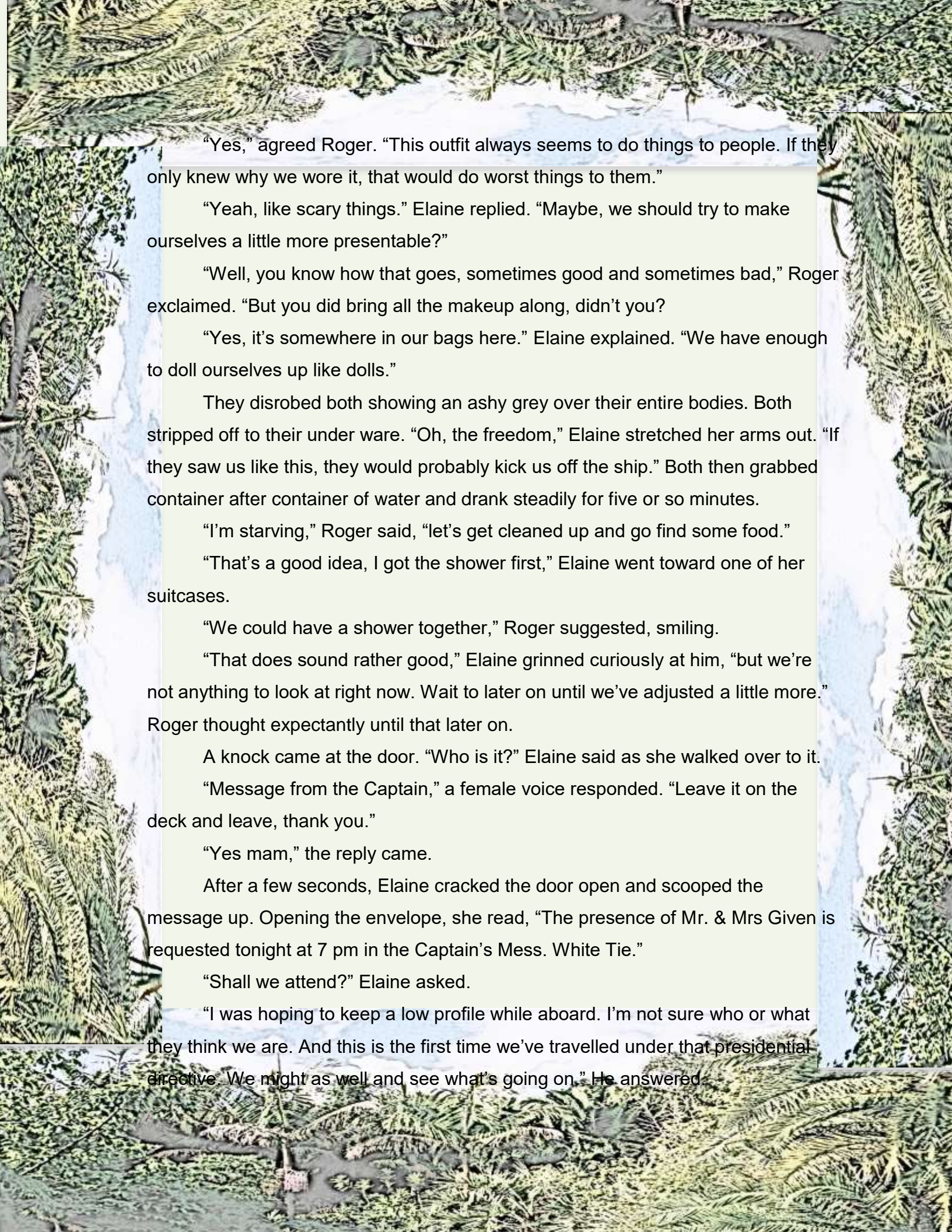
They landed in the shuttle bay of the cruise liner, where three or two other shuttles were parked off to the side. The bay doors had already closed. Before anyone was allowed to exit the shuttle, a three uniformed officers appeared walking toward Roger and Elaine. One was obviously a higher ranking officer than the other two having four bars on the sleeve of his jacket. "I want to personally welcome you aboard, Mr. & Mrs. Given to the cruise liner, Destiny. I'm Captain Samuel S Johnston at your service.

"Thank you very much," Elaine was heard speaking.

"You'll be escorted to the state room," the Captain finished. "Just follow me." The Captain turned as promptly left the shuttle. They exited into the shuttle bay and walk across the empty space to four different elevators. They entered the elevator door. Stopping as level five, the Captain turned, "I must leave you with my officers; they will conduct you to your room. I hope to see you later this evening, perhaps." The elevator door closed and it proceeded to the fifth level. Arriving as the State Room, one of the officers informed them that their luggage had already been put in their room.

"Well, that was very interesting," Elaine said.





"Yes," agreed Roger. "This outfit always seems to do things to people. If they only knew why we wore it, that would do worst things to them."

"Yeah, like scary things." Elaine replied. "Maybe, we should try to make ourselves a little more presentable?"

"Well, you know how that goes, sometimes good and sometimes bad," Roger exclaimed. "But you did bring all the makeup along, didn't you?"

"Yes, it's somewhere in our bags here." Elaine explained. "We have enough to doll ourselves up like dolls."

They disrobed both showing an ashy grey over their entire bodies. Both stripped off to their under ware. "Oh, the freedom," Elaine stretched her arms out. "If they saw us like this, they would probably kick us off the ship." Both then grabbed container after container of water and drank steadily for five or so minutes.

"I'm starving," Roger said, "let's get cleaned up and go find some food."

"That's a good idea, I got the shower first," Elaine went toward one of her suitcases.

"We could have a shower together," Roger suggested, smiling.

"That does sound rather good," Elaine grinned curiously at him, "but we're not anything to look at right now. Wait to later on until we've adjusted a little more." Roger thought expectantly until that later on.

A knock came at the door. "Who is it?" Elaine said as she walked over to it.

"Message from the Captain," a female voice responded. "Leave it on the deck and leave, thank you."


"Yes mam," the reply came.

After a few seconds, Elaine cracked the door open and scooped the message up. Opening the envelope, she read, "The presence of Mr. & Mrs Given is requested tonight at 7 pm in the Captain's Mess. White Tie."

"Shall we attend?" Elaine asked.

"I was hoping to keep a low profile while aboard. I'm not sure who or what they think we are. And this is the first time we've travelled under that presidential directive. We might as well and see what's going on," He answered.





Their bodies were adjusted to the dull light of their state room but this only increased lust for food. After their showers, they dressed. "Shall we wear our red robes tonight darlings," Roger looked at her.

"Why not, we'll be an instant hit," Elaine replied. Roger in a white pull-over with bow tie and tuxedo pants, while Elaine wore a red skill tight evening gown. Both had doll themselves up a little, trying to hide the remaining marks on their skin and blotting out the white areas on their faces.

"Wow! You look good," Roger feasted on her beauty. "And do you!" They embraced.

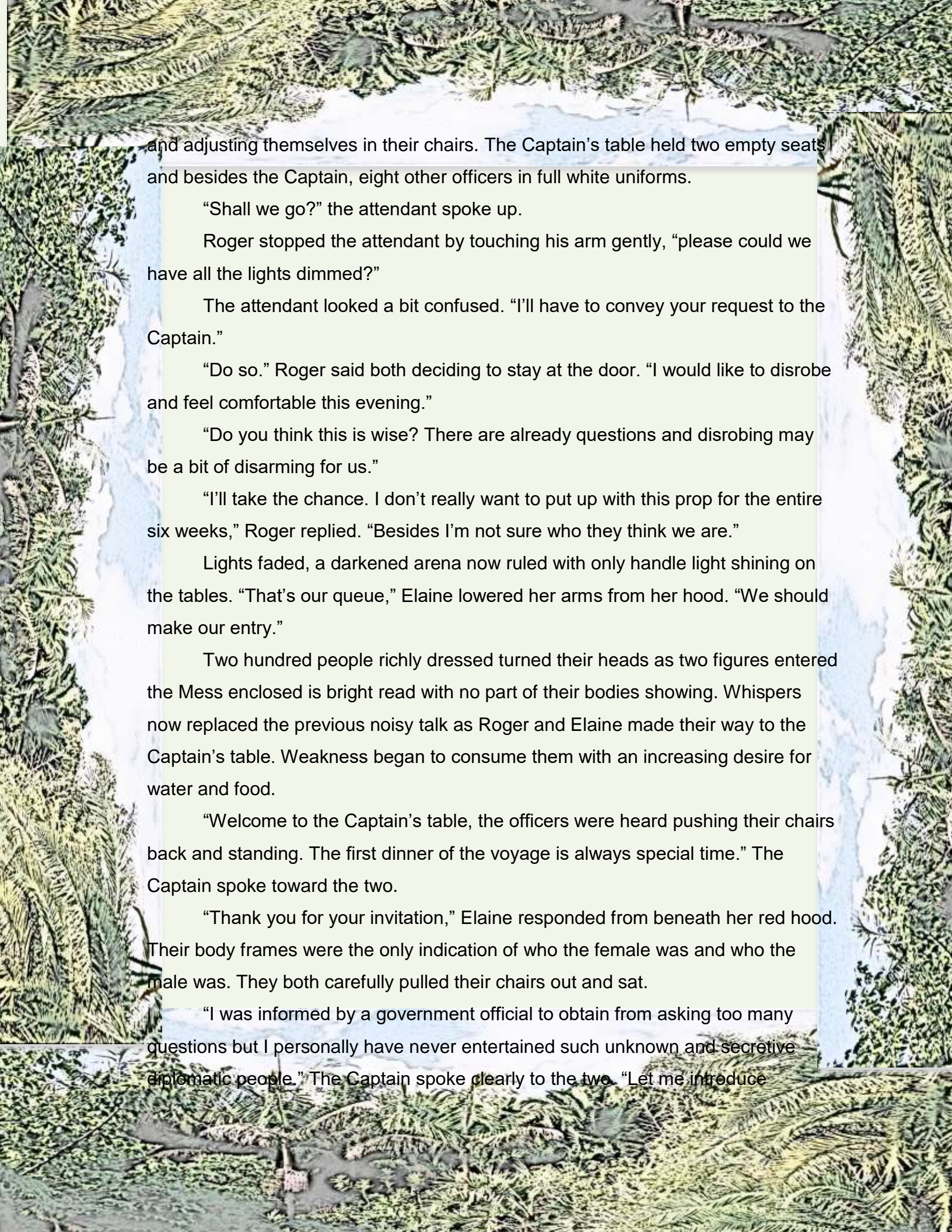
It was only 4:00 pm ship time. "Well, let's go find some food before dinner," Elaine laughed. They ventured off down the hall spotting a café at the end of deck five and ate ravenously, slipping water along with their meal of sandwiches. They explored the different levels of the ship finding five different decks. There were three different halls on each deck which was divided up into five sections. Deck five contained exercise rooms, communications screens, two different restaurants with the Captain's Mess situated forward. Above Deck Five, there was a glassed over viewing area. There were additional restaurants on each of the decks with coffee bars scattered here and there. There were only two different state rooms with only one being occupied. These were four room apartments: a large sitting area, dining room, two bed rooms with an on suite bath. All other apartments were smallish one room studios with two single beds and pull out couch. The Captain's Mess was the main restaurant where one had to book a seat at a table. The others were first come, first serve.

After several hours of walking they returned to Deck Five and approached the Captain's Mess. Their hoods hung over their faces, their robes guided along the floor; both held hands walking up to the door attendant. "We are expected," Elaine took center stage.

"Of course," the attendant said, "please follow me."

Elaine held the front of her hood open. People packed the Mess, still sitting





and adjusting themselves in their chairs. The Captain's table held two empty seats and besides the Captain, eight other officers in full white uniforms.

"Shall we go?" the attendant spoke up.

Roger stopped the attendant by touching his arm gently, "please could we have all the lights dimmed?"

The attendant looked a bit confused. "I'll have to convey your request to the Captain."

"Do so." Roger said both deciding to stay at the door. "I would like to disrobe and feel comfortable this evening."

"Do you think this is wise? There are already questions and disrobing may be a bit of disarming for us."

"I'll take the chance. I don't really want to put up with this prop for the entire six weeks," Roger replied. "Besides I'm not sure who they think we are."

Lights faded, a darkened arena now ruled with only handle light shining on the tables. "That's our queue," Elaine lowered her arms from her hood. "We should make our entry."

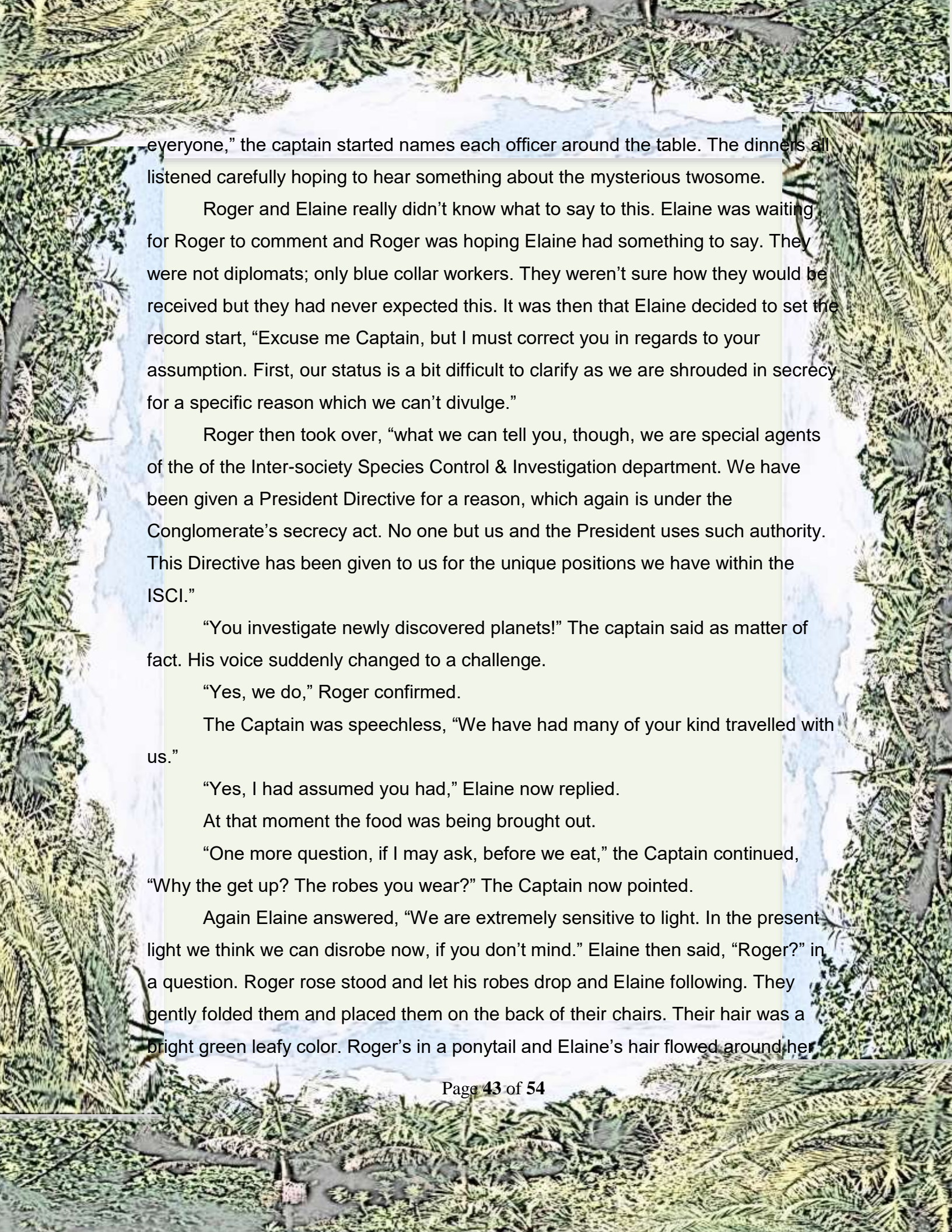
Two hundred people richly dressed turned their heads as two figures entered the Mess enclosed is bright read with no part of their bodies showing. Whispers now replaced the previous noisy talk as Roger and Elaine made their way to the Captain's table. Weakness began to consume them with an increasing desire for water and food.

"Welcome to the Captain's table, the officers were heard pushing their chairs back and standing. The first dinner of the voyage is always special time." The Captain spoke toward the two.

"Thank you for your invitation," Elaine responded from beneath her red hood. Their body frames were the only indication of who the female was and who the male was. They both carefully pulled their chairs out and sat.

"I was informed by a government official to obtain from asking too many questions but I personally have never entertained such unknown and secretive diplomatic people." The Captain spoke clearly to the two. "Let me introduce





everyone,” the captain started names each officer around the table. The dinners all listened carefully hoping to hear something about the mysterious twosome.

Roger and Elaine really didn't know what to say to this. Elaine was waiting for Roger to comment and Roger was hoping Elaine had something to say. They were not diplomats; only blue collar workers. They weren't sure how they would be received but they had never expected this. It was then that Elaine decided to set the record start, “Excuse me Captain, but I must correct you in regards to your assumption. First, our status is a bit difficult to clarify as we are shrouded in secrecy for a specific reason which we can't divulge.”

Roger then took over, “what we can tell you, though, we are special agents of the of the Inter-society Species Control & Investigation department. We have been given a President Directive for a reason, which again is under the Conglomerate's secrecy act. No one but us and the President uses such authority. This Directive has been given to us for the unique positions we have within the ISCI.”

“You investigate newly discovered planets!” The captain said as matter of fact. His voice suddenly changed to a challenge.

“Yes, we do,” Roger confirmed.

The Captain was speechless, “We have had many of your kind travelled with us.”

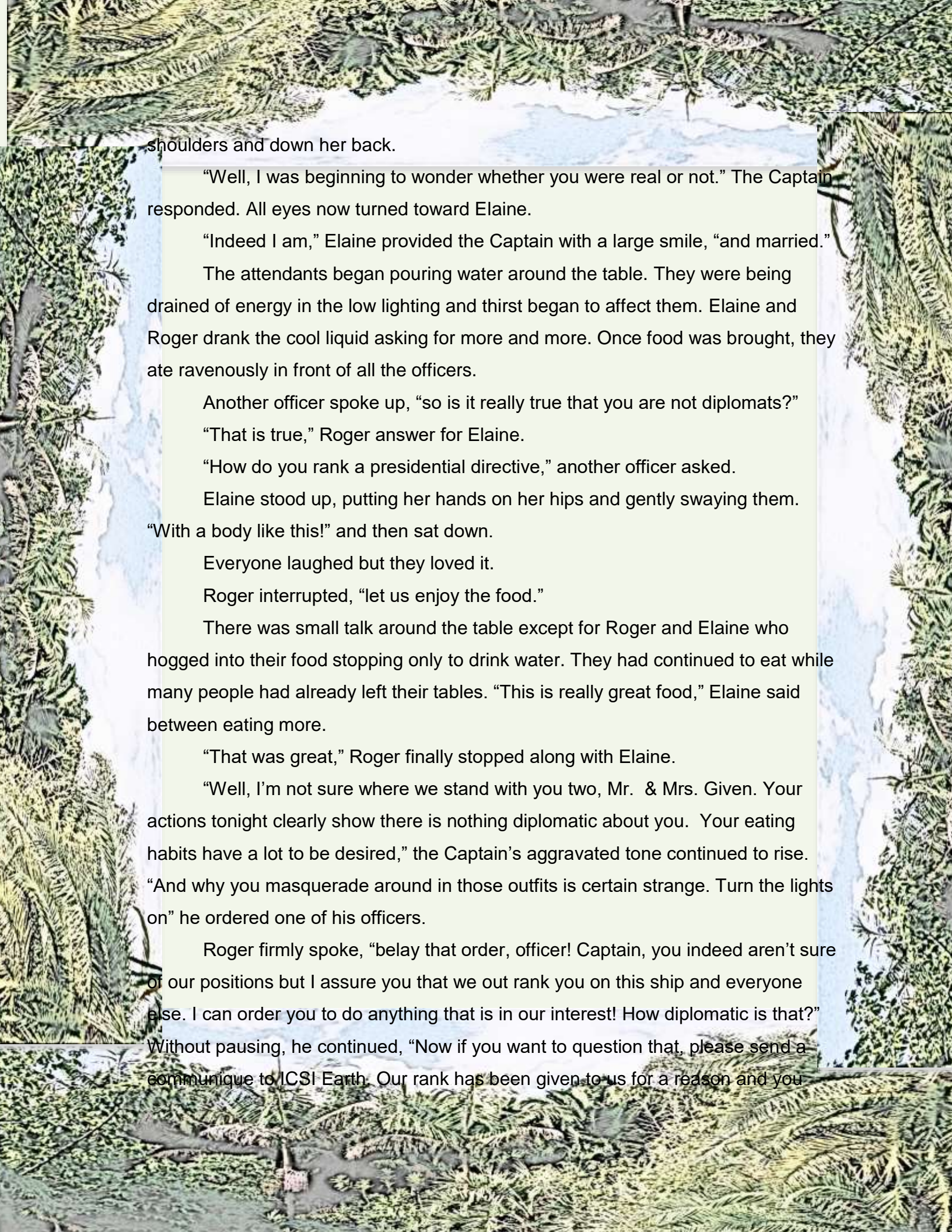
“Yes, I had assumed you had,” Elaine now replied.

At that moment the food was being brought out.

“One more question, if I may ask, before we eat,” the Captain continued, “Why the get up? The robes you wear?” The Captain now pointed.

Again Elaine answered, “We are extremely sensitive to light. In the present light we think we can disrobe now, if you don't mind.” Elaine then said, “Roger?” in a question. Roger rose stood and let his robes drop and Elaine following. They gently folded them and placed them on the back of their chairs. Their hair was a bright green leafy color. Roger's in a ponytail and Elaine's hair flowed around her





shoulders and down her back.

“Well, I was beginning to wonder whether you were real or not.” The Captain responded. All eyes now turned toward Elaine.

“Indeed I am,” Elaine provided the Captain with a large smile, “and married.”

The attendants began pouring water around the table. They were being drained of energy in the low lighting and thirst began to affect them. Elaine and Roger drank the cool liquid asking for more and more. Once food was brought, they ate ravenously in front of all the officers.

Another officer spoke up, “so is it really true that you are not diplomats?”

“That is true,” Roger answer for Elaine.

“How do you rank a presidential directive,” another officer asked.

Elaine stood up, putting her hands on her hips and gently swaying them.

“With a body like this!” and then sat down.

Everyone laughed but they loved it.

Roger interrupted, “let us enjoy the food.”

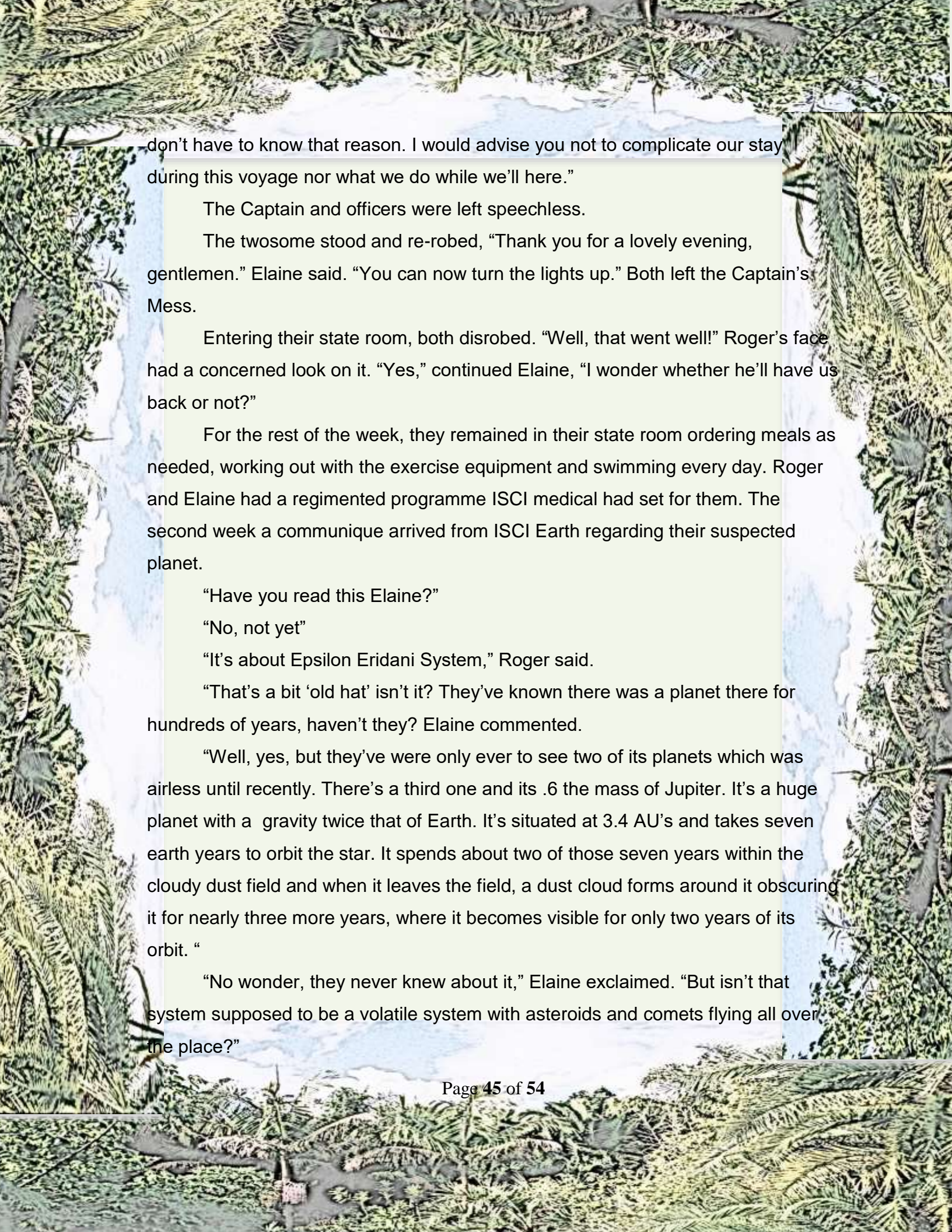
There was small talk around the table except for Roger and Elaine who hogged into their food stopping only to drink water. They had continued to eat while many people had already left their tables. “This is really great food,” Elaine said between eating more.

“That was great,” Roger finally stopped along with Elaine.

“Well, I’m not sure where we stand with you two, Mr. & Mrs. Given. Your actions tonight clearly show there is nothing diplomatic about you. Your eating habits have a lot to be desired,” the Captain’s aggravated tone continued to rise. “And why you masquerade around in those outfits is certain strange. Turn the lights on” he ordered one of his officers.

Roger firmly spoke, “belay that order, officer! Captain, you indeed aren’t sure of our positions but I assure you that we out rank you on this ship and everyone else. I can order you to do anything that is in our interest! How diplomatic is that?” Without pausing, he continued, “Now if you want to question that, please send a communique to ICSI Earth. Our rank has been given to us for a reason and you





don't have to know that reason. I would advise you not to complicate our stay during this voyage nor what we do while we'll here."

The Captain and officers were left speechless.

The twosome stood and re-robed, "Thank you for a lovely evening, gentlemen." Elaine said. "You can now turn the lights up." Both left the Captain's Mess.

Entering their state room, both disrobed. "Well, that went well!" Roger's face had a concerned look on it. "Yes," continued Elaine, "I wonder whether he'll have us back or not?"

For the rest of the week, they remained in their state room ordering meals as needed, working out with the exercise equipment and swimming every day. Roger and Elaine had a regimented programme ISCI medical had set for them. The second week a communique arrived from ISCI Earth regarding their suspected planet.

"Have you read this Elaine?"

"No, not yet"

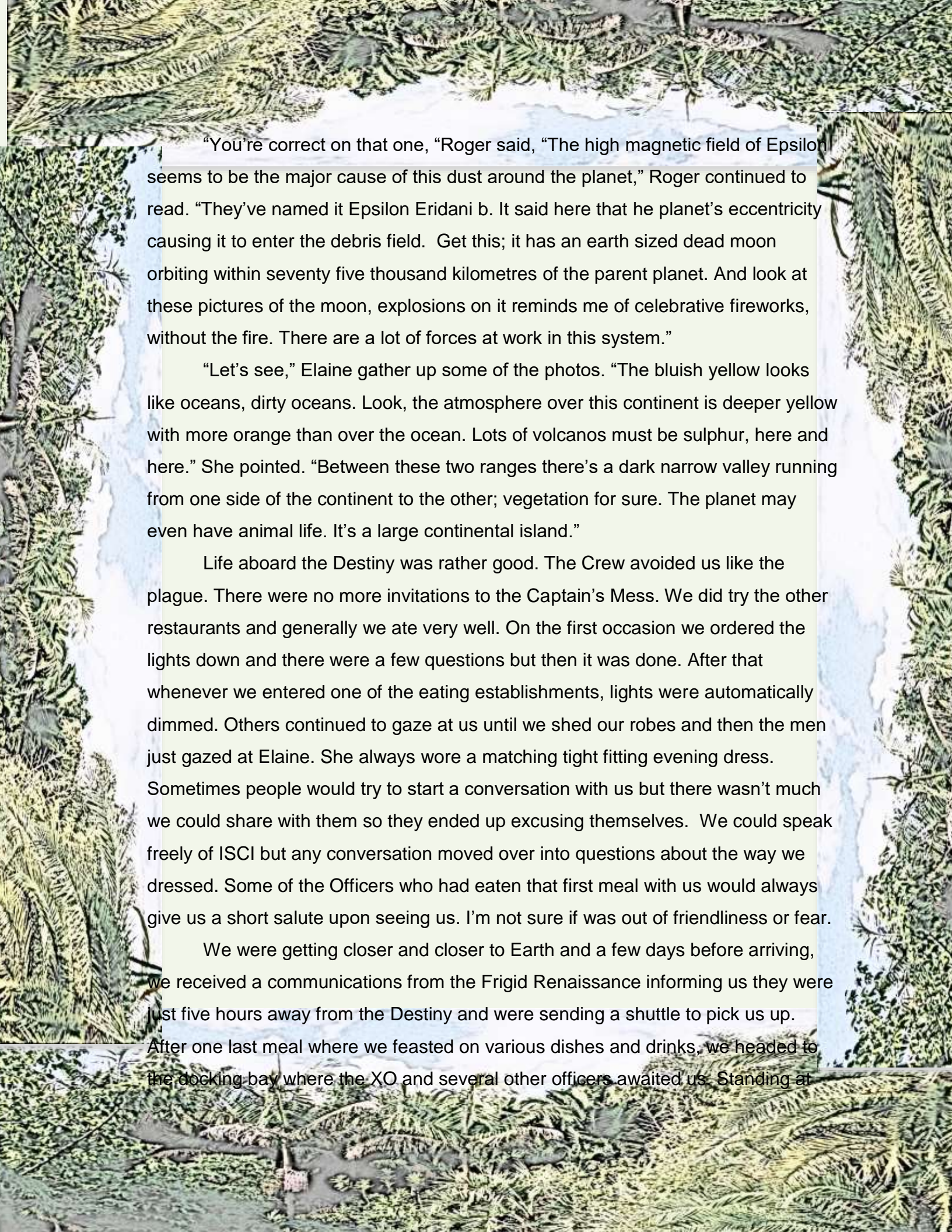
"It's about Epsilon Eridani System," Roger said.

"That's a bit 'old hat' isn't it? They've known there was a planet there for hundreds of years, haven't they? Elaine commented.

"Well, yes, but they've were only ever to see two of its planets which was airless until recently. There's a third one and its .6 the mass of Jupiter. It's a huge planet with a gravity twice that of Earth. It's situated at 3.4 AU's and takes seven earth years to orbit the star. It spends about two of those seven years within the cloudy dust field and when it leaves the field, a dust cloud forms around it obscuring it for nearly three more years, where it becomes visible for only two years of its orbit. "

"No wonder, they never knew about it," Elaine exclaimed. "But isn't that system supposed to be a volatile system with asteroids and comets flying all over the place?"





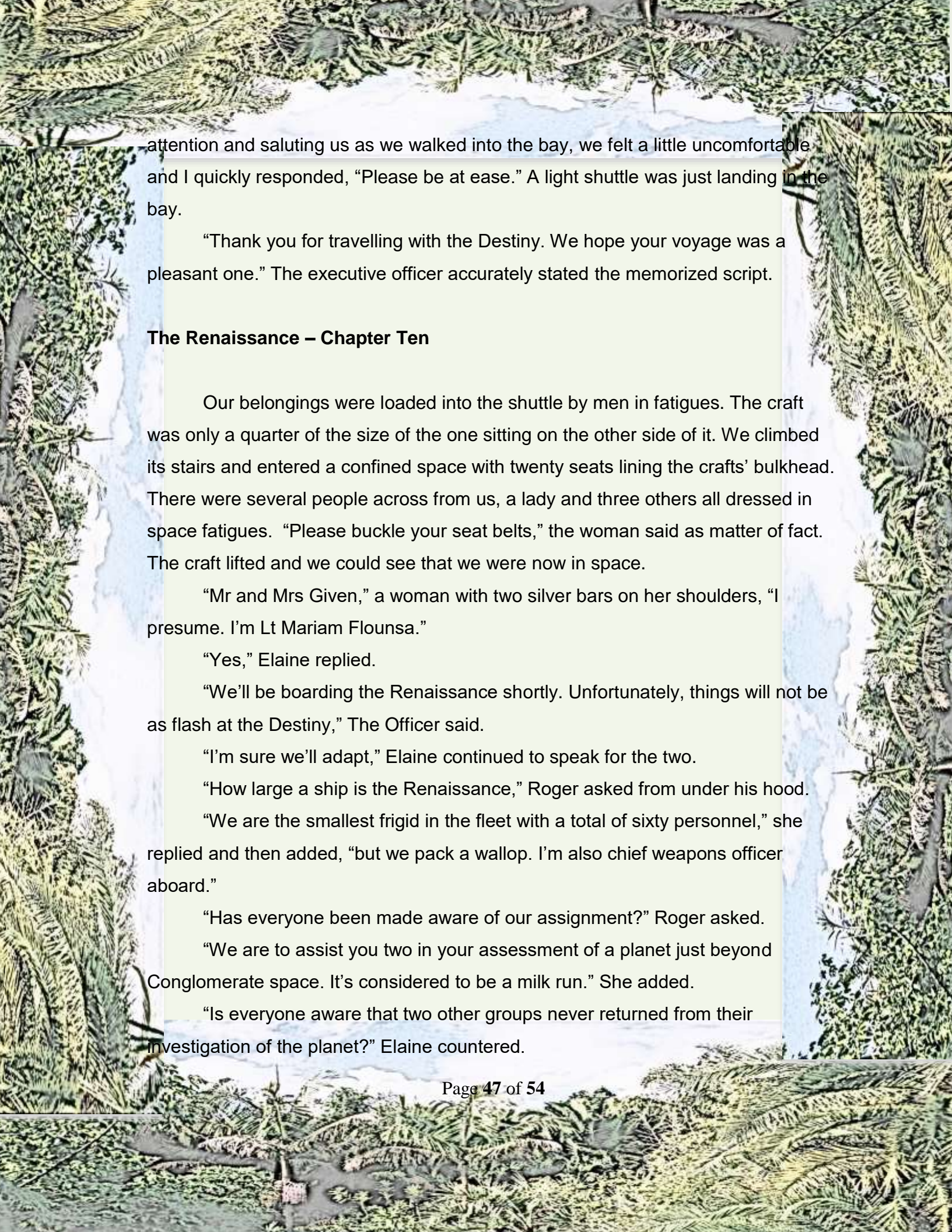
"You're correct on that one," Roger said, "The high magnetic field of Epsilon seems to be the major cause of this dust around the planet," Roger continued to read. "They've named it Epsilon Eridani b. It said here that the planet's eccentricity causing it to enter the debris field. Get this; it has an earth sized dead moon orbiting within seventy five thousand kilometres of the parent planet. And look at these pictures of the moon, explosions on it reminds me of celebrative fireworks, without the fire. There are a lot of forces at work in this system."

"Let's see," Elaine gathered up some of the photos. "The bluish yellow looks like oceans, dirty oceans. Look, the atmosphere over this continent is deeper yellow with more orange than over the ocean. Lots of volcanos must be sulphur, here and here." She pointed. "Between these two ranges there's a dark narrow valley running from one side of the continent to the other; vegetation for sure. The planet may even have animal life. It's a large continental island."

Life aboard the *Destiny* was rather good. The Crew avoided us like the plague. There were no more invitations to the Captain's Mess. We did try the other restaurants and generally we ate very well. On the first occasion we ordered the lights down and there were a few questions but then it was done. After that whenever we entered one of the eating establishments, lights were automatically dimmed. Others continued to gaze at us until we shed our robes and then the men just gazed at Elaine. She always wore a matching tight fitting evening dress. Sometimes people would try to start a conversation with us but there wasn't much we could share with them so they ended up excusing themselves. We could speak freely of ISCI but any conversation moved over into questions about the way we dressed. Some of the Officers who had eaten that first meal with us would always give us a short salute upon seeing us. I'm not sure if it was out of friendliness or fear.

We were getting closer and closer to Earth and a few days before arriving, we received a communications from the *Frigid Renaissance* informing us they were just five hours away from the *Destiny* and were sending a shuttle to pick us up. After one last meal where we feasted on various dishes and drinks, we headed to the docking bay where the XO and several other officers awaited us. Standing at



A lush tropical jungle scene with a river and a small boat. The river is in the center, with a small boat on it. The banks are covered in dense green foliage, including palm trees and other tropical plants. The sky is visible in the background, showing a bright blue color.

attention and saluting us as we walked into the bay, we felt a little uncomfortable and I quickly responded, "Please be at ease." A light shuttle was just landing in the bay.

"Thank you for travelling with the Destiny. We hope your voyage was a pleasant one." The executive officer accurately stated the memorized script.

## **The Renaissance – Chapter Ten**

Our belongings were loaded into the shuttle by men in fatigues. The craft was only a quarter of the size of the one sitting on the other side of it. We climbed its stairs and entered a confined space with twenty seats lining the crafts' bulkhead. There were several people across from us, a lady and three others all dressed in space fatigues. "Please buckle your seat belts," the woman said as matter of fact. The craft lifted and we could see that we were now in space.

"Mr and Mrs Given," a woman with two silver bars on her shoulders, "I presume. I'm Lt Mariam Flounsa."

"Yes," Elaine replied.

"We'll be boarding the Renaissance shortly. Unfortunately, things will not be as flash at the Destiny," The Officer said.

"I'm sure we'll adapt," Elaine continued to speak for the two.

"How large a ship is the Renaissance," Roger asked from under his hood.

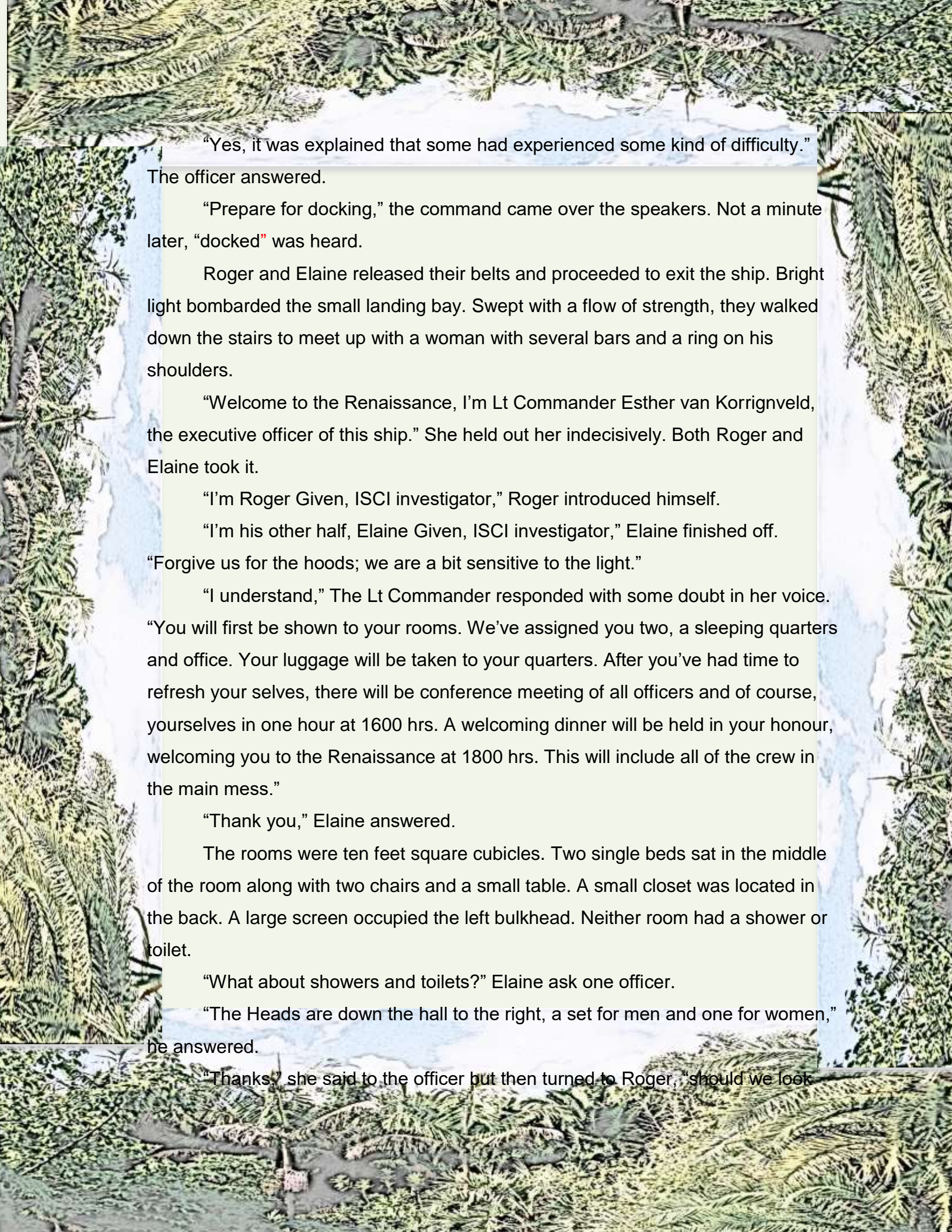
"We are the smallest frigid in the fleet with a total of sixty personnel," she replied and then added, "but we pack a wallop. I'm also chief weapons officer aboard."

"Has everyone been made aware of our assignment?" Roger asked.

"We are to assist you two in your assessment of a planet just beyond Conglomerate space. It's considered to be a milk run." She added.

"Is everyone aware that two other groups never returned from their investigation of the planet?" Elaine countered.





"Yes, it was explained that some had experienced some kind of difficulty."

The officer answered.

"Prepare for docking," the command came over the speakers. Not a minute later, "docked" was heard.

Roger and Elaine released their belts and proceeded to exit the ship. Bright light bombarded the small landing bay. Swept with a flow of strength, they walked down the stairs to meet up with a woman with several bars and a ring on his shoulders.

"Welcome to the Renaissance, I'm Lt Commander Esther van Korrignveld, the executive officer of this ship." She held out her indecisively. Both Roger and Elaine took it.

"I'm Roger Given, ISCI investigator," Roger introduced himself.

"I'm his other half, Elaine Given, ISCI investigator," Elaine finished off.

"Forgive us for the hoods; we are a bit sensitive to the light."

"I understand," The Lt Commander responded with some doubt in her voice. "You will first be shown to your rooms. We've assigned you two, a sleeping quarters and office. Your luggage will be taken to your quarters. After you've had time to refresh your selves, there will be conference meeting of all officers and of course, yourselves in one hour at 1600 hrs. A welcoming dinner will be held in your honour, welcoming you to the Renaissance at 1800 hrs. This will include all of the crew in the main mess."

"Thank you," Elaine answered.

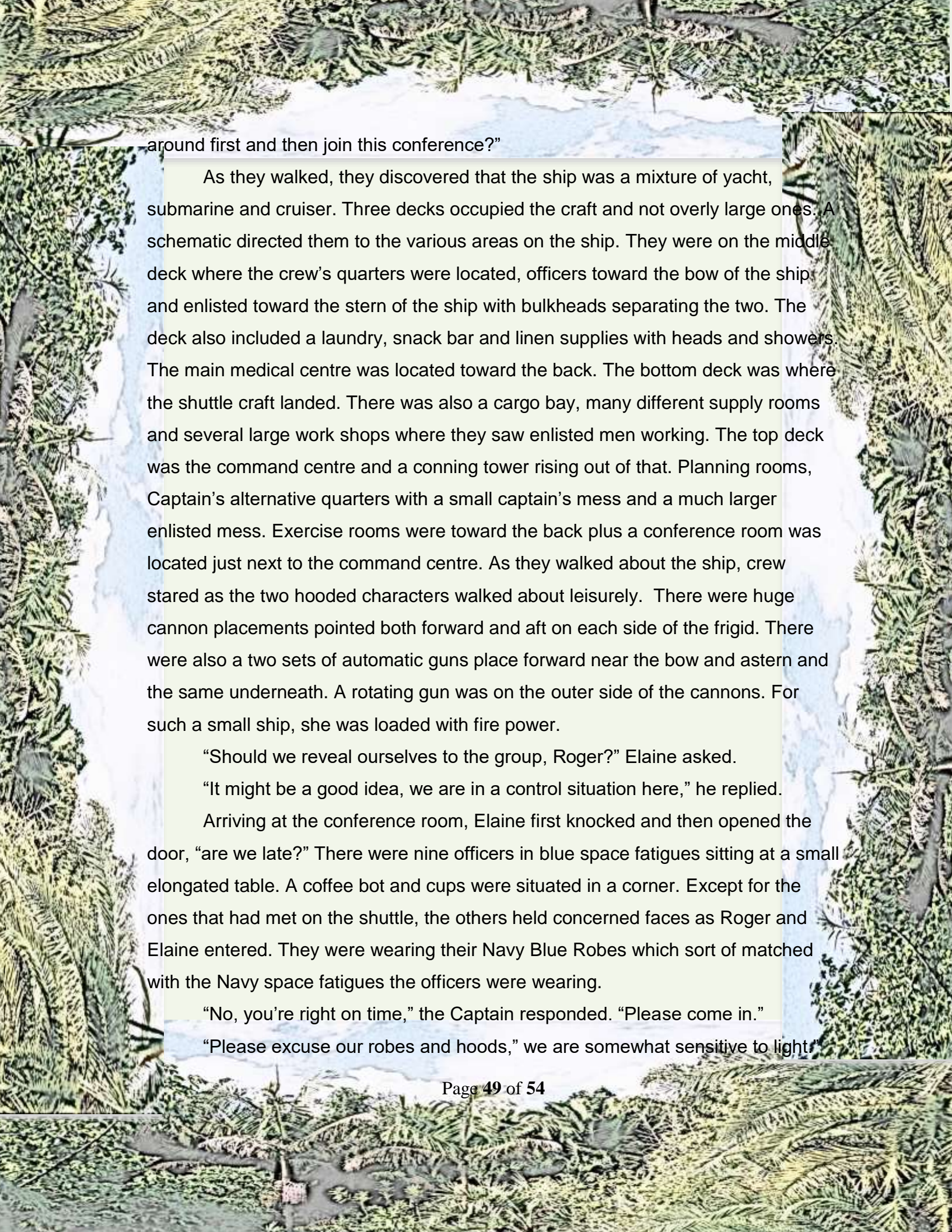
The rooms were ten feet square cubicles. Two single beds sat in the middle of the room along with two chairs and a small table. A small closet was located in the back. A large screen occupied the left bulkhead. Neither room had a shower or toilet.

"What about showers and toilets?" Elaine ask one officer.

"The Heads are down the hall to the right, a set for men and one for women," he answered.

"Thanks," she said to the officer but then turned to Roger, "should we look





around first and then join this conference?”

As they walked, they discovered that the ship was a mixture of yacht, submarine and cruiser. Three decks occupied the craft and not overly large ones. A schematic directed them to the various areas on the ship. They were on the middle deck where the crew's quarters were located, officers toward the bow of the ship, and enlisted toward the stern of the ship with bulkheads separating the two. The deck also included a laundry, snack bar and linen supplies with heads and showers. The main medical centre was located toward the back. The bottom deck was where the shuttle craft landed. There was also a cargo bay, many different supply rooms and several large work shops where they saw enlisted men working. The top deck was the command centre and a conning tower rising out of that. Planning rooms, Captain's alternative quarters with a small captain's mess and a much larger enlisted mess. Exercise rooms were toward the back plus a conference room was located just next to the command centre. As they walked about the ship, crew stared as the two hooded characters walked about leisurely. There were huge cannon placements pointed both forward and aft on each side of the frigid. There were also a two sets of automatic guns place forward near the bow and astern and the same underneath. A rotating gun was on the outer side of the cannons. For such a small ship, she was loaded with fire power.

“Should we reveal ourselves to the group, Roger?” Elaine asked.

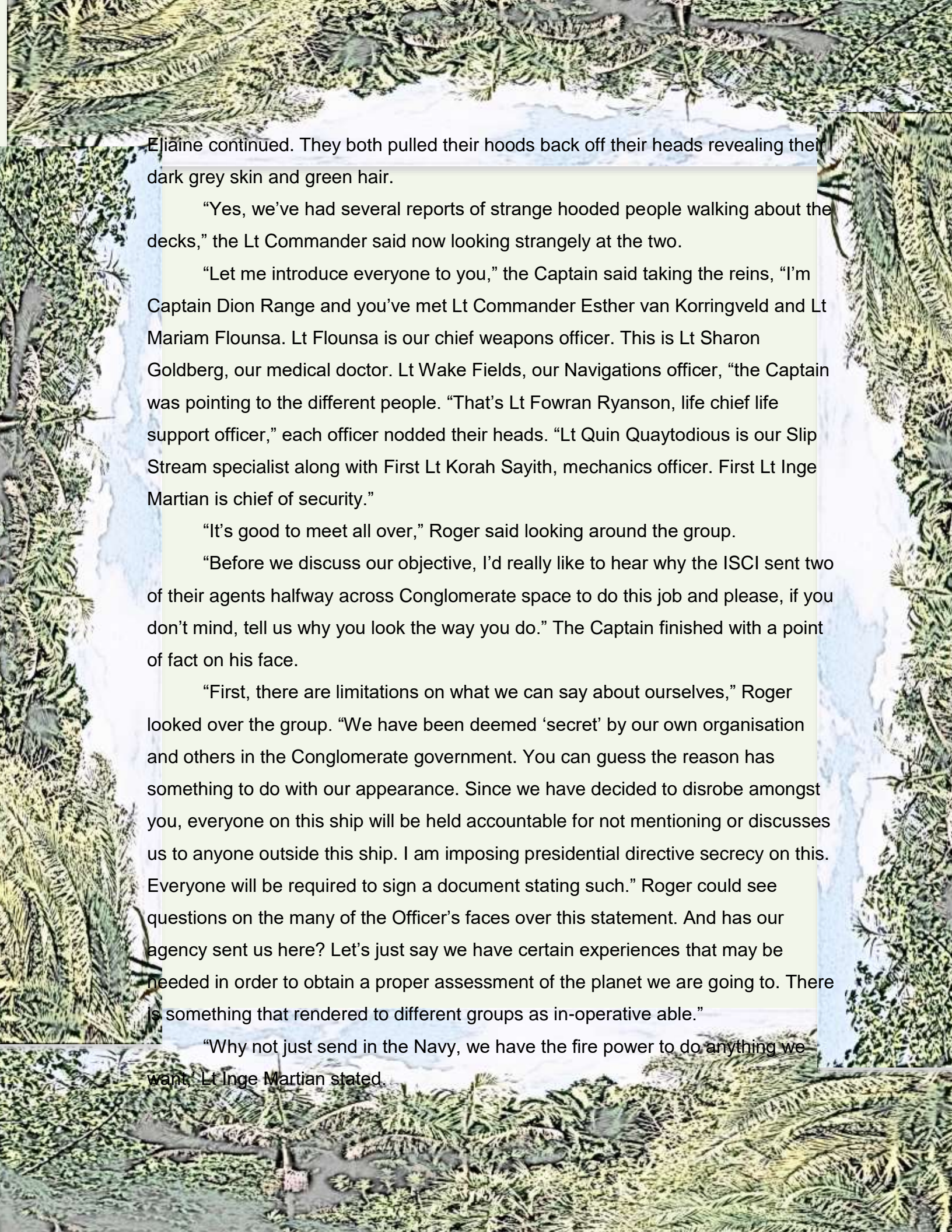
“It might be a good idea, we are in a control situation here,” he replied.

Arriving at the conference room, Elaine first knocked and then opened the door, “are we late?” There were nine officers in blue space fatigues sitting at a small elongated table. A coffee bot and cups were situated in a corner. Except for the ones that had met on the shuttle, the others held concerned faces as Roger and Elaine entered. They were wearing their Navy Blue Robes which sort of matched with the Navy space fatigues the officers were wearing.

“No, you're right on time,” the Captain responded. “Please come in.”

“Please excuse our robes and hoods,” we are somewhat sensitive to light.”





Eliaine continued. They both pulled their hoods back off their heads revealing their dark grey skin and green hair.

“Yes, we’ve had several reports of strange hooded people walking about the decks,” the Lt Commander said now looking strangely at the two.

“Let me introduce everyone to you,” the Captain said taking the reins, “I’m Captain Dion Range and you’ve met Lt Commander Esther van Korringleveld and Lt Mariam Flounsa. Lt Flounsa is our chief weapons officer. This is Lt Sharon Goldberg, our medical doctor. Lt Wake Fields, our Navigations officer,” the Captain was pointing to the different people. “That’s Lt Fowran Ryanson, life chief life support officer,” each officer nodded their heads. “Lt Quin Quaytodious is our Slip Stream specialist along with First Lt Korah Sayith, mechanics officer. First Lt Inge Martian is chief of security.”

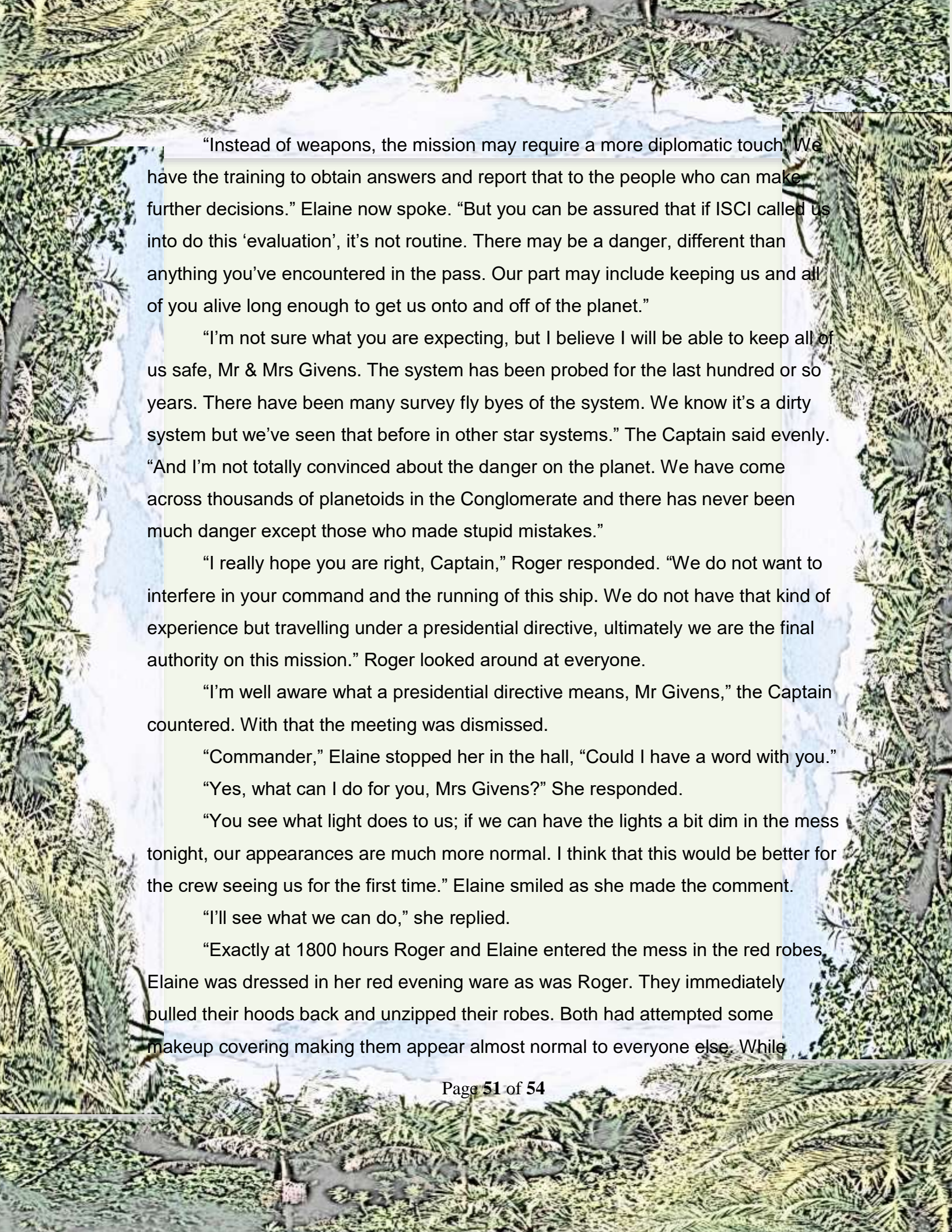
“It’s good to meet all over,” Roger said looking around the group.

“Before we discuss our objective, I’d really like to hear why the ISCI sent two of their agents halfway across Conglomerate space to do this job and please, if you don’t mind, tell us why you look the way you do.” The Captain finished with a point of fact on his face.

“First, there are limitations on what we can say about ourselves,” Roger looked over the group. “We have been deemed ‘secret’ by our own organisation and others in the Conglomerate government. You can guess the reason has something to do with our appearance. Since we have decided to disrobe amongst you, everyone on this ship will be held accountable for not mentioning or discusses us to anyone outside this ship. I am imposing presidential directive secrecy on this. Everyone will be required to sign a document stating such.” Roger could see questions on the many of the Officer’s faces over this statement. And has our agency sent us here? Let’s just say we have certain experiences that may be needed in order to obtain a proper assessment of the planet we are going to. There is something that rendered to different groups as in-operative able.”

“Why not just send in the Navy, we have the fire power to do anything we want,” Lt Inge Martian stated.





"Instead of weapons, the mission may require a more diplomatic touch. We have the training to obtain answers and report that to the people who can make further decisions." Elaine now spoke. "But you can be assured that if ISCI called us into do this 'evaluation', it's not routine. There may be a danger, different than anything you've encountered in the pass. Our part may include keeping us and all of you alive long enough to get us onto and off of the planet."

"I'm not sure what you are expecting, but I believe I will be able to keep all of us safe, Mr & Mrs Givens. The system has been probed for the last hundred or so years. There have been many survey fly byes of the system. We know it's a dirty system but we've seen that before in other star systems." The Captain said evenly. "And I'm not totally convinced about the danger on the planet. We have come across thousands of planetoids in the Conglomerate and there has never been much danger except those who made stupid mistakes."

"I really hope you are right, Captain," Roger responded. "We do not want to interfere in your command and the running of this ship. We do not have that kind of experience but travelling under a presidential directive, ultimately we are the final authority on this mission." Roger looked around at everyone.

"I'm well aware what a presidential directive means, Mr Givens," the Captain countered. With that the meeting was dismissed.

"Commander," Elaine stopped her in the hall, "Could I have a word with you."

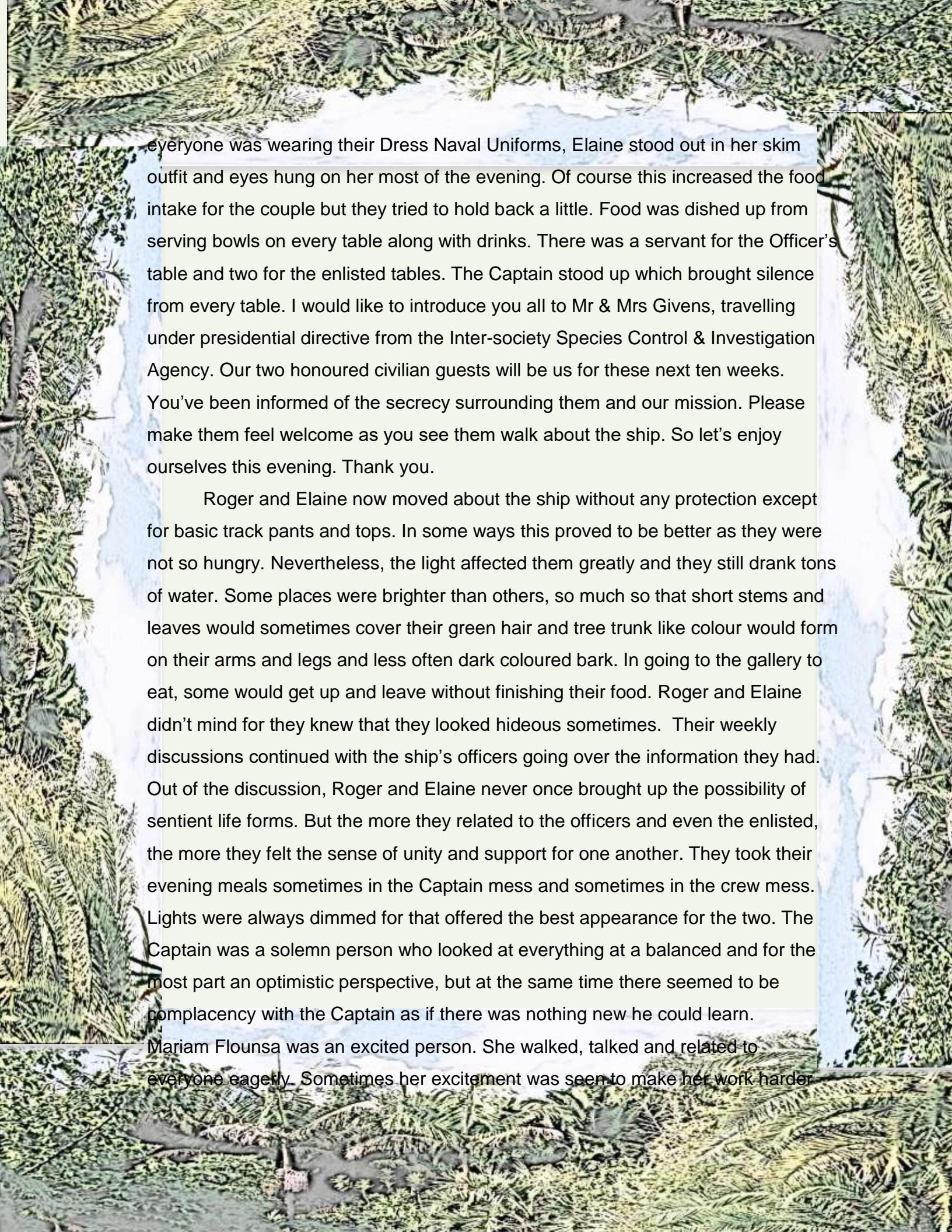
"Yes, what can I do for you, Mrs Givens?" She responded.

"You see what light does to us; if we can have the lights a bit dim in the mess tonight, our appearances are much more normal. I think that this would be better for the crew seeing us for the first time." Elaine smiled as she made the comment.

"I'll see what we can do," she replied.

"Exactly at 1800 hours Roger and Elaine entered the mess in the red robes. Elaine was dressed in her red evening ware as was Roger. They immediately pulled their hoods back and unzipped their robes. Both had attempted some makeup covering making them appear almost normal to everyone else. While

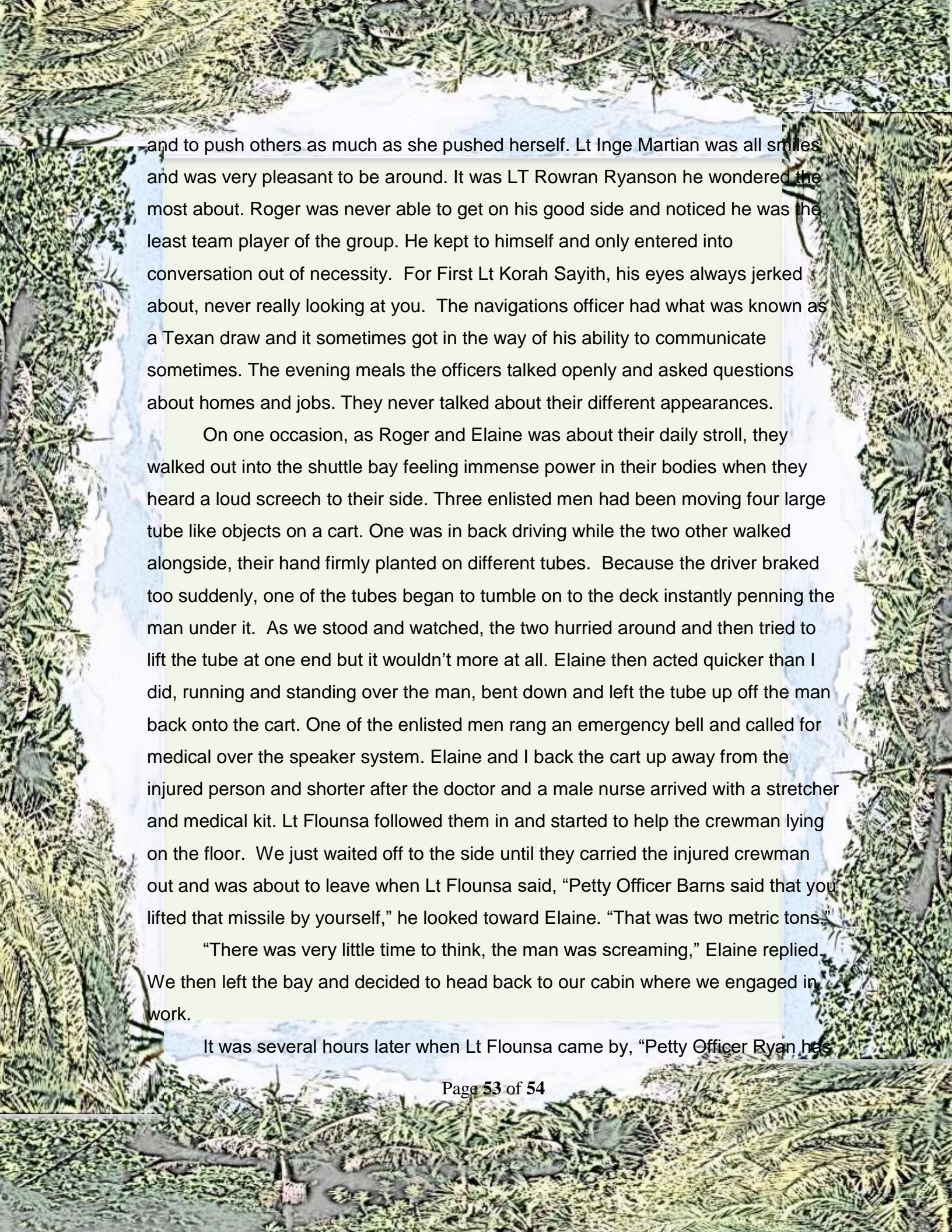




everyone was wearing their Dress Naval Uniforms, Elaine stood out in her skim outfit and eyes hung on her most of the evening. Of course this increased the food intake for the couple but they tried to hold back a little. Food was dished up from serving bowls on every table along with drinks. There was a servant for the Officer's table and two for the enlisted tables. The Captain stood up which brought silence from every table. I would like to introduce you all to Mr & Mrs Givens, travelling under presidential directive from the Inter-society Species Control & Investigation Agency. Our two honoured civilian guests will be us for these next ten weeks. You've been informed of the secrecy surrounding them and our mission. Please make them feel welcome as you see them walk about the ship. So let's enjoy ourselves this evening. Thank you.

Roger and Elaine now moved about the ship without any protection except for basic track pants and tops. In some ways this proved to be better as they were not so hungry. Nevertheless, the light affected them greatly and they still drank tons of water. Some places were brighter than others, so much so that short stems and leaves would sometimes cover their green hair and tree trunk like colour would form on their arms and legs and less often dark coloured bark. In going to the gallery to eat, some would get up and leave without finishing their food. Roger and Elaine didn't mind for they knew that they looked hideous sometimes. Their weekly discussions continued with the ship's officers going over the information they had. Out of the discussion, Roger and Elaine never once brought up the possibility of sentient life forms. But the more they related to the officers and even the enlisted, the more they felt the sense of unity and support for one another. They took their evening meals sometimes in the Captain mess and sometimes in the crew mess. Lights were always dimmed for that offered the best appearance for the two. The Captain was a solemn person who looked at everything at a balanced and for the most part an optimistic perspective, but at the same time there seemed to be complacency with the Captain as if there was nothing new he could learn. Mariam Flounsa was an excited person. She walked, talked and related to everyone eagerly. Sometimes her excitement was seen to make her work harder





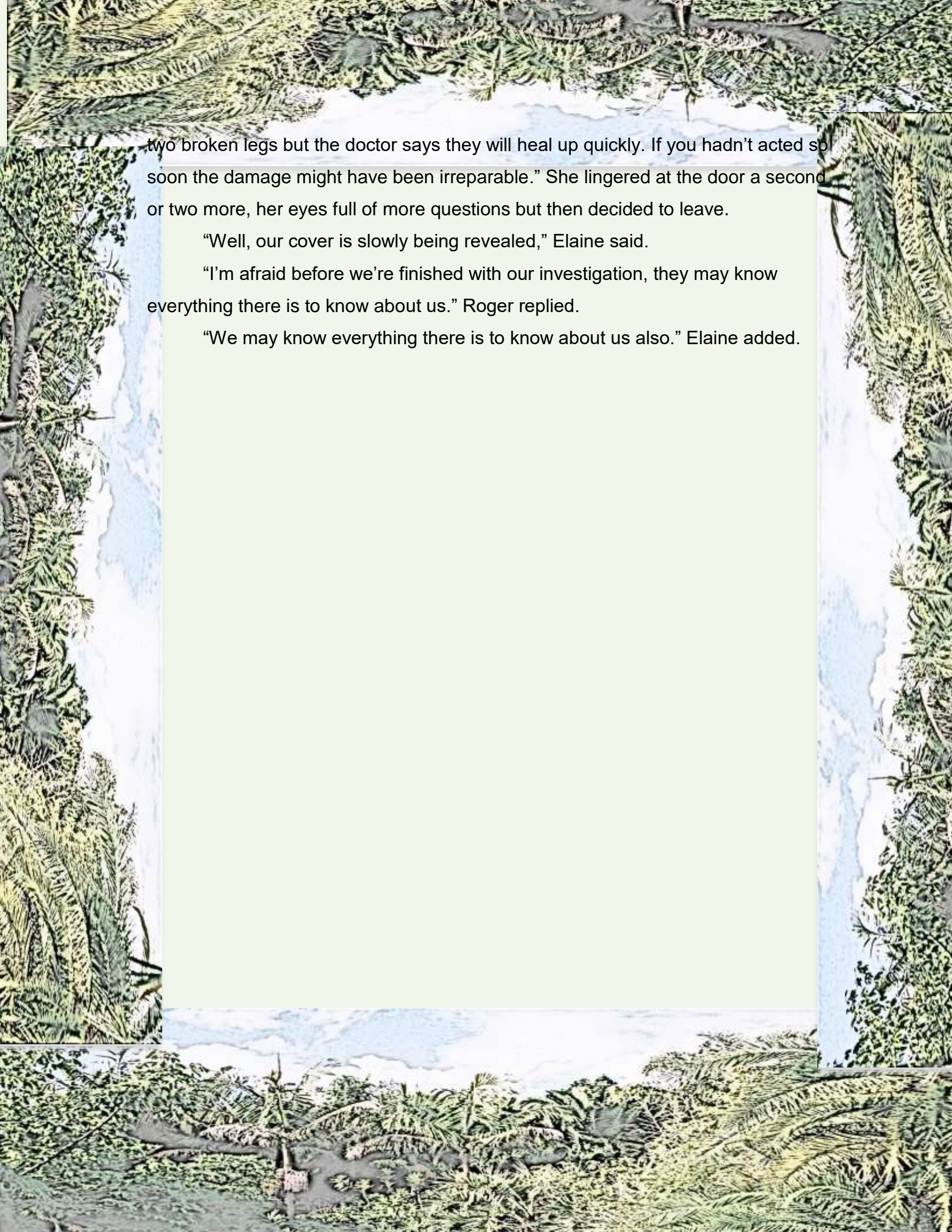
and to push others as much as she pushed herself. Lt Inge Martian was all smiles and was very pleasant to be around. It was LT Rowan Ryanson he wondered the most about. Roger was never able to get on his good side and noticed he was the least team player of the group. He kept to himself and only entered into conversation out of necessity. For First Lt Korah Sayith, his eyes always jerked about, never really looking at you. The navigations officer had what was known as a Texan draw and it sometimes got in the way of his ability to communicate sometimes. The evening meals the officers talked openly and asked questions about homes and jobs. They never talked about their different appearances.

On one occasion, as Roger and Elaine was about their daily stroll, they walked out into the shuttle bay feeling immense power in their bodies when they heard a loud screech to their side. Three enlisted men had been moving four large tube like objects on a cart. One was in back driving while the two other walked alongside, their hand firmly planted on different tubes. Because the driver braked too suddenly, one of the tubes began to tumble on to the deck instantly penning the man under it. As we stood and watched, the two hurried around and then tried to lift the tube at one end but it wouldn't move at all. Elaine then acted quicker than I did, running and standing over the man, bent down and left the tube up off the man back onto the cart. One of the enlisted men rang an emergency bell and called for medical over the speaker system. Elaine and I back the cart up away from the injured person and shortly after the doctor and a male nurse arrived with a stretcher and medical kit. Lt Flounsa followed them in and started to help the crewman lying on the floor. We just waited off to the side until they carried the injured crewman out and was about to leave when Lt Flounsa said, "Petty Officer Barnes said that you lifted that missile by yourself," he looked toward Elaine. "That was two metric tons."

"There was very little time to think, the man was screaming," Elaine replied. We then left the bay and decided to head back to our cabin where we engaged in work.

It was several hours later when Lt Flounsa came by, "Petty Officer Ryan has





two broken legs but the doctor says they will heal up quickly. If you hadn't acted so soon the damage might have been irreparable." She lingered at the door a second or two more, her eyes full of more questions but then decided to leave.

"Well, our cover is slowly being revealed," Elaine said.

"I'm afraid before we're finished with our investigation, they may know everything there is to know about us." Roger replied.

"We may know everything there is to know about us also." Elaine added.