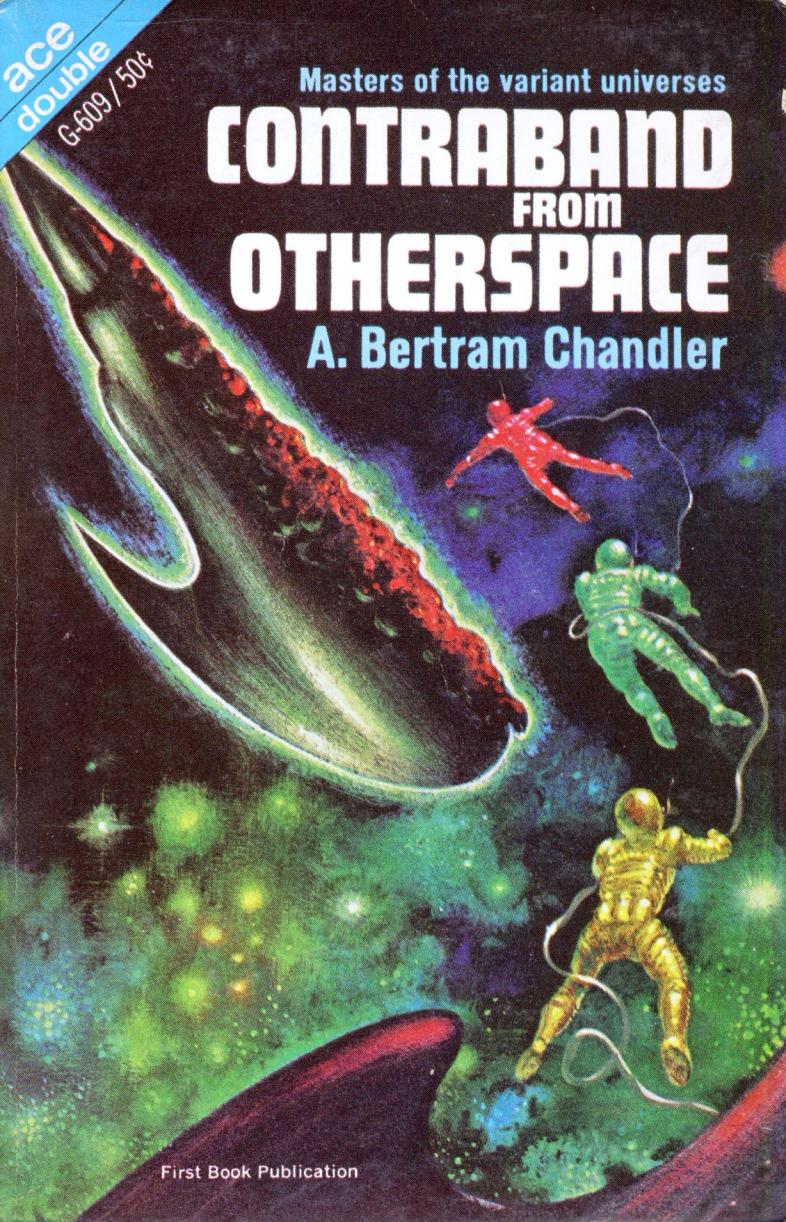


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CONTRABAND FROM OTHERSPACE

A. Bertram Chandler



First Book Publication

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Out there, along the outer edge of the galaxy, many strange things can happen, for there time and space undergo strange distortions and "space ghosts" may appear where no ship ought to be.

Where Commodore Grimes of the *Rim Mamelute* was concerned the derelict vessel, so strangely named *Distriyir*, was no space ghost. It was solid, it was real, and it was very disturbing. For one thing, it had been manned by desperate men and women clad in rags. For another, everything was curiously misplaced, misspelled, somehow *wrong*, even to the adjustment of seats as if people had tails!

All too soon Grimes realized that the truth would be too dreadful to contemplate and that, whatever were the facts, he would have to act at once to blot out both the strange ship and its entire historical continuum, at whatever the cost!

Turn this book over for
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A. Bertram Chandler, who is both a Master Mariner and a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, and who is currently Captain of a trans-Tasman cargo liner, writes of himself:

"I have always been an avid reader of science fiction and, frankly, I enjoy writing it, although it has been said that most of my output could be classed as 'costume sea stories'.

"It was during the Second World War that I first started to write; this was mainly due to the kindly encouragement of Mr. John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding* (as it was then) upon whom I called, as a Faithful Reader, during my first visit to New York. Shortly thereafter I became a regular contributor both to his magazine and to most of the others in the field.

"After the War I continued writing, but dropped out after promotion to Chief Officer in the British liner company in which I was then serving—the Mate of a big ship has very little spare time! After my emigration to Australia, however, I was bullied by my second wife into taking up the pen again, and became once more a fairly prolific writer of short stories.

"Finally I felt that the time was ripe for full length novels. In them one has ample room to kick ideas around to see if they yelp."

CONTRABAND FROM OTHERSPACE

by

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER



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Dedication

For who else but Susan?

REALITY FORBIDDEN

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They drift out to the Rim Worlds—the misfits, the failures and the rebels. They make their tortuous ways out to the very edge of the Galaxy—the malcontents, the round pegs who, even here, are foredoomed to the discovery of an infinitude of square holes. And from all Space they come—the displaced persons.

From all Space—and (for the skin of the expanding Galaxy is stretched, in every dimension, to the utmost flimsiness) from all Space-Time.

I

THE INEVITABLE freezing wind whistled thinly over Port Forlorn, bearing eddies of gritty dust and flurries of dirty snow, setting discarded sheets of newspaper cavorting over the fire-scarred concrete of the landing field like midget ballet dancers in soiled costumes. From his office, on the top floor of the Port Administration Building, Commodore Grimes stared out at what, over the long years, he had come to regard as his own little kingdom. To a casual observer his seamed, deeply tanned face would have appeared expressionless—but those who knew him well could have read a certain regret in the lines of his craggy features, in the almost imperceptible softening of the hard, slate-gray eyes.

The king had abdicated.

The Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners had resigned from the service of the Rim Worlds Confederacy—both as a senior executive of the government owned and operated shipping line and as Commodore of the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve. His resignations were not yet effective—but they would be, so soon as Captain Trantor, in *Rim Kestrel*, came dropping down through the overcast to be relieved of his minor command prior to assuming the greater one.

On a day such as this there was little for Grimes to see. Save for *Faraway Quest*, the Rim Worlds Government Survey Ship, and for *Rim Mamelute* the spaceport was deserted. Soon enough it would resume its normal activity, with units of the Rim Runners' fleet roaring in through the cloud blanket, from Faraway, Ultimo and Thule, from the planets of the Eastern Circuit, from the anti-matter systems to the Galactic West. (And among them would be Trantor's ship, inbound from Mellise.) But now there were only the old *Quest* and the little, battered space-tug in port, silent and deserted, the survey ship a squat, gray tower (that looked as though it should have been lichen-coated) half obscured by the snow squall, the *Mamelute* huddling at its base as though seeking shelter in the lee of the larger vessel.

Grimes sighed, only half aware that he had done so. But he was not (he told himself) a sentimental man. It was just that *Faraway Quest* had been his last spacegoing command, and would be his last command, ever, out on the Rim. In her he had discovered and charted the worlds of the Eastern Circuit, opened them up to trade. In her he had made the first contact with the people of the anti-matter systems. In her, only short weeks ago, with a mixed crew of Rim Worlds Naval Reserve officers and Federation Survey Service personnel, he had tried to solve the mystery of those weird, and sometimes frightening phenomena known as Rim Ghosts. And whilst on this Wild Ghost Chase (as his second in command referred to it) he had found in Sonya Verrill the cure for his loneliness—as she had found, in him, the cure for hers. But his marriage to her (as do all marriages) had brought its own problems, its own responsibilities. Already he was beginning to wonder if he would like the new life the course of which Sonya had plotted so confidently.

He started as the little black box on his desk buzzed. He heard a sharp female voice announce, "Commander Verrill to see you, Commodore Grimes."

Another voice, also female, pleasantly contralto but with an underlying snap of authority, corrected the first speaker. "Mrs. Grimes to see the Commodore, Miss Willoughby."

"Come in, Sonya," said Grimes, addressing the instrument.

She strode into the office, dramatic as always. Melting snow crystals sparkled like diamonds on her swirling, high-collared cloak of dull crimson Altairian crystal silk, in the intricate coronet of her pale blonde hair. Her face was flushed, as much by excitement as by the warmth of the building after the bitter cold outside. She was a tall woman, and a splendid one, and many men on many worlds had called her beautiful.

She reached out, grabbed Grimes by his slightly protuberant ears, pulled his face to hers and kissed him soundly.

After she had released him, he asked mildly, "And what was that in aid of, my dear?"

She laughed happily. "John, I just had to come to tell you the news in person. It wouldn't have been the same over the telephone. I've just received two Carlottigrams from Earth—one official, one personal. To begin with, my resignation's effective, as and from today. Oh, I can still be called back in an emergency, but that shouldn't worry us. And my gratuity has been approved . . ."

"How much?" he asked, not altogether seriously.

She told him.

He whistled softly. "The Federation's more generous than the Confederacy. But, of course, your taxpayers are richer than ours, and there are so many more of them. . . ."

She ignored this. "And that's not all, my dear. Admiral Salverson of the Bureau of Supply, is an old friend of mine. He sent a personal message along with the other. It seems that there's a little one ship company for sale, just a feeder line running between Montalbon and Carribea. The gratuity barely covers the down payment—but with *your* gratuity, and our savings, and the profits we're bound to make we shall be out of the red in no time at all. Just think of it, John! You as Owner-Master, and myself as your everloving Matel!"

Grimes thought of it as he turned to stare again out of the wide window, his mind's eye piercing the dismal overcast to the nothingness beyond. Light, and warmth, and a sky ablaze with stars instead of this bleak desolation . . .

Light and warmth . . . And a milk run.
And Sonya.

He said slowly, "We may find it hard to settle down. Even you. You're not a Rimworlder, but your life, in the Federation's Naval Intelligence, has been adventurous, and you've worked out on the Rim so much that you almost qualify for citizenship . . ."

"I qualified for citizenship when I married you. And I want to settle down, John. But not here."

The black box on the desk crackled, then said in Miss Willoughby's voice, "Port Control is calling, Commodore Grimes. Shall I put them through?"

"Yes, please," Grimes told her.

II

"CASSIDY HERE," said the box.

"Yes, Captain Cassidy?"

"Orbital Station 3 reports a ship, sir."

"Isn't that one of the things they're paid for?" asked Grimes mildly.

"Yes, sir." Cassidy's voice was sulky. "But there's nothing due for almost a week, and . . ."

"Probably one of the Federation Survey Service wagons," Grimes told him, flashing a brief smile (which she answered with a glare) at Sonya. "They think they can come and go as they damn well please. Tell Station 3 to demand—*demand*, not request—identification."

"The Station Commander has already done that, Commodore. But there's no reply."

"And Station 3 doesn't run to a Psionic Radio Officer. I always said that we were ill advised to get rid of the telepaths as soon as our ships and stations were fitted with Carlotti equipment . . ." He paused, then asked, "Landing approach?"

"No, sir. Station 3 hasn't had time to extrapolate her trajectory yet, but the way she's heading now it looks as though

she'll miss Lorn by all of a thousand miles and finish up in the sun. . . ."

"They haven't had time?" Grimes' voice was cold. "What the hell sort of watch are they keeping?"

"A good one, sir. Commander Hall is one of our best men—as you know. It seems that this ship just appeared out of nothing—those were Hall's own words. There was no warning at all on the Mass Proximity Indicator. And then, suddenly, there she was—on both M.P.I. *and* radar. . . ."

"Any of your people loafing around these parts?" Grimes asked Sonya.

"No," she told him. "At least, not that I know of."

"And you are—or were—an Intelligence Officer, so you should know. H'm." He turned again to the box. "Captain Cassidy, tell Station 3 that I wish direct communication with them."

"Very good, sir."

The Commodore strode to his desk, sat down in his chair, pulled out a drawer. His stubby fingers played over the console that was revealed. Suddenly the window went opaque, and as it did so the lights in the office dimmed to a faint glow. One wall of the room came alive, a swirl of light and color that coalesced to form a picture, three dimensional, of the Watch House of Station 3. There were the wide ports, beyond the thick transparencies of which was the utter blackness of Space as seen from the Rim Worlds, a blackness made even more intense by contrast with the faintly glimmering nebulosities, sparse and dim, that were the distant, unreachable island universes. Within the compartment were the banked instruments, the flickering screens, the warped, convoluted columns, each turning slowly on its axis, that were the hunting antennae of the Carlotti Beacon. Uniformed men and women busied themselves at control panels, stood tensely around the big plotting tank. One of them—the Station Commander—turned to face the camera. He asked, "Have you the picture, Commodore Grimes, sir?"

"I have, Commander," Grimes told him. "How is the extrapolation of trajectory?"

"You may have a close-up of the tank, sir."

The scene dissolved, and then only the plotting tank was in Grimes' screen. In the center of it was the dull-glowing (but not dull-glowing in reality) globe that represented the Lorn sun. And there was the curving filament of light that represented the orbit of the strange ship, the filament that extended itself as Grimes and Sonya watched, that finally touched the ruddy incandescence of the central sphere. This was only an extrapolation; it would be months before it actually occurred. There was still time, ample time, for the crew of the intruder to pull her out of the fatal plunge. And yet, somehow, there was a sense of urgency. If a rescue operation were to be undertaken, it must be done without delay. A stern chase is a long chase.

"What do you make of it?" Grimes asked Sonya.

She said, "I don't like it. Either they can't communicate, or they won't communicate. And I think they can't. There's something wrong with that ship. . . ."

"Something very wrong. Get hold of Cassidy, will you? Tell him that I want *Rim Mamelute* ready for Space as soon as possible." He stared at the screen, upon which Commander Hall had made a reappearance. "We're sending the *Mamelute* out after her, Hall. Meanwhile, keep on trying to communicate."

"We are trying, sir."

Cassidy's voice came from the black box, "Sir, Captain Welling, the skipper of the *Mamelute*, is in the hospital. Shall I . . . ?"

"No, Cassidy. Somebody has to mind the shop—and you're elected. But there's something you can do for me. Get hold of Mr. Mayhew, the Psionic Radio Officer. Yes, yes, I know that he's taking his Long Service Leave, but get hold of him. Tell him I want him here, complete with his amplifier, as soon as possible, if not before. And get *Mamelute* cleared away."

"But who's taking her out, sir?"

"Who do you think? Get cracking, Cassidy."

"You'll need a Mate," said Sonya.

He found time to tease her, saying, "Rather a come-down from the Federation Survey Service, my dear."

"Could be. But I have a feeling that this may be a job for an Intelligence Officer."

"You'll sign on as Mate," he told her firmly.

III

Rim Mamelute, as a salvage tug, was already in a state of near-readiness. She was fully fueled and provisioned; all that remained to be done was the mustering of her personnel. Her engineers, pottering around in Rim Runners' workshop on the spaceport premises, were easily located. The Port doctor was conscripted from his office, and was pleased enough to be pulled away from his boring paperwork. The Port Signal Station supplied a radio officer and—for *Rim Mamelute's* permanent Mate made it plain that he would resent being left out of the party—Sonya agreed to come along as Catering Officer.

Grimes could have got the little brute upstairs within an hour of his setting the wheels in motion, but he insisted on waiting for Mayhew. In any salvage job, communication between the salvo and the salved is essential—and to judge by the experience of Station 3, any form of electronic radio communication was *out*. He stood on the concrete, just outside the tug's airlock, looking up at the overcast sky. Sonya came out to join him.

"Damn the man!" he grumbled. "He's supposed to be on his way. He was told it was urgent."

She said, "I hear something."

He heard it too, above the thin whine of the wind, a deepening drone. Then the helicopter came into sight above the high roof of the Administration Building, the jet flames at the tip of its rotor blades a bright, blue circle against the gray sky. It dropped slowly, carefully, making at last a landing remarkable for its gentleness. The cabin door opened and the tall, gangling telepath, his thin face pasty against the up-

turned collar of his dark coat, clambered to the ground. He saw Grimes, made a slovenly salute, then turned to receive the large case that was handed him by the pilot.

"Take your time," growled Grimes.

Mayhew shuffled around to face the Commodore. He set the case carefully down on the ground, patted it gently. He said, mild reproof in his voice, "Lassie's not as used to traveling as she was. I try to avoid shaking her up."

Grimes sighed. He had almost forgotten about the peculiar relationship that existed between the spacefaring telepaths and their amplifiers—the living brains of dogs suspended in their tanks of nutrient solution. It was far more intense than that existing between normal man and normal dog. When a naturally telepathic animal is deprived of its body, its psionic powers are vastly enhanced—and it will recognize as friend and master only a telepathic man. There is symbiosis, on a psionic level.

"Lassie's not at all well," complained Mayhew.

"Think her up a nice, juicy bone," Grimes almost said, then thought better of it.

"I've tried that, of course," Mayhew told him. "But she's not . . . she's just not interested any more. She's growing old. And since the Carlotti system was introduced nobody is making psionic amplifiers any more."

"Is she functioning?" asked the Commodore coldly.

"Yes, sir. But . . ."

"Then get aboard, Mr. Mayhew. Mrs. Grimes will show you to your quarters. Prepare and secure for blast-off without delay."

He stamped up the short ramp into the airlock, climbed the ladders to the little control room. The Mate was already in the co-pilot's chair, his ungainly posture a match for his slovenly uniform. Grimes looked at him with some distaste, but he knew that the burly young man was more than merely competent, and that although his manner and appearance militated against his employment in a big ship he was ideally suited to service in a salvage tug.

"Ready as soon as you are, Skipper," the Mate said. "You takin' her up?"

"You're more used to this vessel than I am, Mr. Williams. As soon as all's secure you may blast off."

"Good-oh, Skip."

Grimes watched the indicator lights, listened to the verbal reports, aware that Williams was doing likewise. Then he said into the transceiver microphone, "*Rim Mamelute* to Port Control. Blasting off."

Before Port Control could acknowledge, Williams hit the firing key. Not for the *Mamelute* the relatively leisurely ascent, the relatively gentle acceleration of the big ships. It was, thought Grimes dazedly, like being fired from a gun. Almost at once, it seemed, harsh sunlight burst through the control room ports. He tried to move his fingers against the crushing weight, tried to bring one of them to the button set in the arm rest of his chair that controled the polarisation of the transparencies. The glare was beating full in his face, was painful even through his closed eyelids. But Williams beat him to it. When Grimes opened his eyes he saw that the Mate was grinning at him.

"She's a tough little bitch, the old *Mamelute*," announced the objectionable young man with pride.

"Yes, Mr. Williams," enunciated Grimes with difficulty. "But there are some of us who aren't as tough as the ship. And, talking of lady dogs, I don't think that Mr. Mayhew's amplifier can stand much acceleration. . . ."

"That pickled poodle's brain, Skip? The bastard's better off than we are, floatin' in its nice warm bath o' thick soup." He grinned again. "But I was forgettin'. We haven't the regular crew this time. What say we maintain a nice, steady one and a half Gs? That do yer?"

One G would be better, thought Grimes. *After all, those people, whoever they are, are in no immediate danger of falling into the sun. But perhaps even a few minutes' delay might make all the difference between life and death to them . . . Even so, we must be capable of doing work, heavy, physical work, when we catch them.*

"Yes, Mr. Williams," he said slowly. "Maintain one and a half gravities. You've fed the elements of the trajectory into the computer, of course?"

"Of course, Skip. Soon as I have her round I'll put her on auto. She'll be right."

When the tug had settled down on her long chase, Grimes left Williams in the control room, went down into the body of the ship. He made his rounds, satisfied himself that all was well in engine room, surgery, the two communications offices and, finally, the galley. Sonya was standing up to acceleration as though she had been born and bred on a high gravity planet. He looked at her with envy as she poured him a cup of roffee, handing it to him without any obvious compensation for its increased weight. Then she snapped at him, "Sit down, John. If you're as tired as you look you'd better lie down."

He said, "I'm all right."

"You're not," she told him. "And there's no need for you to put on the big, tough space captain act in front of me."

"If you can stand it . . ."

"What if I can, my dear? I haven't led such a sheltered life as you have. I've knocked around in little ships more than I have in big ones, and I'm far more used to going places in a hurry than you."

He lowered himself to a bench and she sat beside him. He sipped his coffee, then asked her, "Do you think, then, that we should be in more of a hurry?"

"Frankly, no. Salvage work is heavy work, and if we maintain more than one and a half Gs over a quite long period we shall all of us be too tired to function properly, even that tough Mate of yours." She smiled. "I mean the Mate who's on Articles as such, not the one you're married to."

He chuckled. "But she's tough, too."

"Only when I have to be, my dear."

Grimes looked at her, and thought of the old proverb which says that there is many a true word spoken in jest.

IV

THE STRANGE VESSEL was a slowly expanding speck of light in the globular screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator; it was a gradually brightening blip on *Mamelute's* radar display that seemed as though it were being drawn in towards the tug by the ever decreasing spiral of the range marker. Clearly it showed up on the instruments, although it was still too far distant for visual sighting, and it was obvious that the extrapolation of trajectory made by Station 3 was an accurate one. It was falling free, neither accelerating nor decelerating, its course determined only by the gravitational forces within the Lorn Star's planetary system, and left to itself must inevitably fall into the sun. But long before its shell plating began to heat it would be overhauled by the salvage ship and dragged away and clear from its suicide orbit.

And it was silent. It made no reply to the signals beamed at it from *Rim Mamelute's* powerful transmitter. Bennett, the Radio Officer, complained to Grimes, "I've tried every frequency known to civilized man, and a few that aren't. But, so far, no joy."

"Keep on trying," Grimes told him, then went to the cabin that Mayhew, the telepath, shared with his organic amplifier.

The Psionic Radio Officer was slumped in his chair, staring vacantly at the glass tank in which, immersed in its cloudy nutrient fluid, floated the obscenely naked brain. The Commodore tried to ignore the thing. It made him uneasy. Every time that he saw one of the amplifiers he could not help wondering that it would be like to be, as it were, disembodied, to be deprived of all external stimuli but the stray thoughts of other, more fortunate (or less unfortunate) beings—and those thoughts, as like as not, on an incomprehensible level. What would a man do, were he so used, his brain removed from his skull and employed by some race of superior beings for their own fantastic purposes? Go mad, probably. And did the dogs sacrificed so that Man could

communicate with his fellows over the light years ever go mad?

"Mr. Mayhew," he said.

"Sir?" muttered the telepath.

"As far as electronic radio is concerned, that ship is dead."

"Dead?" repeated Mayhew in a thin whisper.

"Then you think that there's nobody alive on board her?"

"I . . . I don't know. I told you before we started that Lassie's not a well dog. She's old, Commodore. She's old, and she dreams most of the time, almost all of the time. She . . . she just ignores me . . ." His voice was louder as he defended his weird pet against the implied imputation that he had made himself. "It's just that she's old, and her mind is getting very dim. Just vague dreams and ghostly memories, and the past more real than the present, even so."

"What sort of dreams?" asked Grimes, stirred to pity for that naked canine brain in its glass cannister.

"Hunting dreams, mainly. She was a terrier, you know, before she was . . . conscripted. Hunting dreams. Chasing small animals, like rats. They're good dreams, except when they turn to nightmares. And then I have to wake her up—but she's in such a state of terror that she's no good for anything."

"I didn't think that dogs have nightmares," remarked Grimes.

"Oh, but they do, sir, they do. Poor Lassie always has the same one—about an enormous rat that's just about to kill her. It must be some old memory of her puppy days, when she ran up against such an animal, a big one, bigger than she was. . . ."

"H'm. And, meanwhile, nothing from the ship."

"Nothing at all, sir."

"Have you tried transmitting, as well as just maintaining a listening watch?"

"Of course, sir." Mayhew's voice was pained. "During Lassie's lucid moments I've been punching out a strong signal, strong enough even to be picked up by non-telepaths. You

must have felt it yourself, sir. *Help is on the way.* But there's been no indication of mental acknowledgement."

"All we know about the ship, Mayhew, is that she seems to be a derelict. We don't know who built her. We don't know who mans her—or manned her."

"Anybody who builds a ship, sir, must be able to think."

Grimes, remembering some of the unhandier vessels in which he had served in his youth, said, "Not necessarily."

Mayhew, not getting the point, insisted, "But they must be able to think. And, in order to think, you must have a brain to think with. And any brain at all, emits psionic radiation. Furthermore, sir, such radiation sets up secondary radiation in the inanimate surroundings of the brain. What is the average haunt but a psionic record on the walls of a house in which strong emotions have been let loose? A record that is played back given the right conditions."

"H'm. But you say that the derelict is psionically dead, that there's not even a record left by her builders, or her crew, to be played back to you."

"The range is still extreme, sir. And as for this secondary psionic radiation, sir, sometimes it fades rapidly, sometimes it lingers for years. There must be laws governing it, but nobody has yet been able to work them out."

"So there could be something . . ."

"There could be, sir. And there could not."

"Just go on trying, Mr. Mayhew."

"Of course, sir. But with poor Lassie in her present state I can't promise anything."

Grimes went along to the galley. He seated himself on the bench, accepted the cup of coffee that Sonya poured for him. He said, "It looks, my dear, as though we shall soon be needing an Intelligence Officer as well as a Catering Officer."

"Why?" she asked.

He told her of his conversation with Mayhew. He said, "I'd hoped that he'd be able to find us a few short cuts—but his crystal ball doesn't seem to be functioning very well these

days . . . If you could call that poodle's brain in aspic a crystal ball."

"He's told me all about it," she said. "He's told everybody in the ship all about it. But once we get the derelict in tow, and opened up, we shall soon be able to find out what makes her tick. Or made her tick."

"I'm not so sure, Sonya. The way in which she suddenly appeared from nowhere, not even a trace on Station 3's M.P.I. beforehand, makes me think that she could be very, *very* alien."

"The Survey Service is used to dealing with aliens," she told him. "The Intelligence Branch especially so."

"I know, I know."

"And now, as I'm still only the humble galley slave, can I presume to ask my lord and master the E.T.C.?"

"Unless something untoward fouls things up, E.T.C. should be in exactly five Lorn Standard Days from now."

"And then it will be *Boarders Away!*" she said, obviously relishing the prospect.

"Boarders Away!" he agreed. "And I, for one, shall be glad to get out of this spaceborne sardine can."

"Frankly," she said, "I shall be even gladder to get out of this bloody galley so that I can do the real work for which I was trained."

V

SLOWLY THE RANGE closed, until the derelict was visible as a tiny, bright star a few degrees to one side of the Lorn Sun. The range closed, and *Rim Mamelute's* powerful telescope was brought into play. It showed very little; the stranger ship appeared to be an almost featureless spindle, the surface of its hull unbroken by vanes, sponsons or antennae. And still, now that the distance could be measured in scant tens of miles, the alien construction was silent, making no reply to the signals directed at it by both the salvage tug's communications officers.

Grimes sat in the little control room, letting Williams handle the ship. The Mate crouched in his chair, intent upon his tell-tale instruments, nudging the tug closer and closer to the free-falling ship with carefully timed rocket blasts, matching velocities with the skill that comes only from long practice. He looked up briefly from his console to speak to Grimes. "She's hot, Skipper. Bloody hot."

"We've radiation armor," said Grimes. The words were question rather than statement.

"O' course. The *Mamelute's* ready for anything. Remember the *Rim Eland* disaster? Her pile went critical. We brought her in. I boarded her when we took her in tow, just in case there was anybody still living. There wasn't. It was like bein' inside a radio-active electric fryin' pan . . ."

A charming simile . . . thought Grimes.

He used the big, mounted binoculars to study the derelict. They showed him little more than had the telescope at longer range. So she was hot, radio-active. It seemed that the atomic blast that had initiated the radiation had come from outside, not inside. There were, after all, protuberances upon that hull, but they had been melted and then re-hardened, like guttering candle wax. There were the remains of what must have been vaned landing gear. There was the stump of what could have been, once, a mast of some kind, similar to the retractable masts of the spaceships with which Grimes was familiar, the supports for Deep Space radio antennae and radar scanners.

"Mr. Williams," he ordered, "we'll make our approach from the other side of the derelict."

"You're the boss, Skipper."

Brief accelerations crushed Grimes down into the padding of his chair, centrifugal force, as *Mamelute's* powerful gyroscopes turned her about her short axis, made him giddy. Almost he regretted having embarked upon this chase in person. He was not used to small ships, to the violence of their motions. He heard, from somewhere below, a crash of kitchenware. He hoped that Sonya had not been hurt.

She had not been—not physically, at any rate. Somehow,

even though the tug was falling free once more, she contrived to stamp into the control room. She was pale with temper, and the smear of some rich, brown sauce on her right cheek accentuated her pallor. She glared at her husband and demanded, "What the hell's going on? Can't you give us some warning before indulging in a bout of astro-batics?"

Williams chuckled to himself and made some remark about the unwisdom of amateurs shipping out in space tugs. She turned on him, then, and said that she had served in tugs owned by the Federation Survey Service, and that they had been, like all Federation star ships, taut ships, and that any officer who failed to warn all departments of impending maneuvers would soon find himself busted down to Space-man, Third Class.

Before the Mate could make an angry reply Grimes intervened. He said smoothly, "It was my fault, Sonya. But I was so interested in the derelict that I forgot to renew the alarm. After all, it was sounded as we began our approach. . . ."

"I know that. But I was prepared for an approach, not this tumbling all over the sky like a drunken bat."

"Once again, I'm sorry. But now you're here, grab yourself the spare chair and sit down. This is the situation. All the evidence indicates that there's been some sort of atomic explosion. That ship is *hot*. But I think that the blast was from outside, not inside. I think that the other side of the hull will be relatively undamaged."

"It is," grunted Williams.

The three of them stared out of the viewports. The shell plating, seen from this angle, was dull, not bright, pitted with the tiny pores that were evidence of frequent passages through swarms of micro-meteorites. At the stern, one wide vane stood out sharp and clear in the glare of *Mamelute's* searchlights. Forward, the armor screens over the control room ports were obviously capable of being retracted, were not fused to the hull. There were sponsons from which projected the muzzles of weapons—they could have been can-

non or laser projectors, but what little was visible was utterly unfamiliar. There was a telescopic mast, a-top which was a huge, fragile-seeming radar scanner, motionless.

And just abaft the sharp stem there was the name.

No, thought Grimes, studying the derelict through the binoculars, *two names*.

It was the huge, sprawling letters, crude daubs of black paint, that he read first. *Freedom*, they spelled. Then there were the other symbols, gold-embossed, half obscured by the dark pigment. There was something wrong about them, a subtle disproportion, an oddness of spacing. But they made sense—after a while. They did not belong to the alphabet with which Grimes was familiar, but they must have been derived from it. There was the triangular “D”, the “I” that was a fat, upright oblong, the serpentine “S” . . .

“*Distriyir* . . .” muttered Grimes. “*Destroyer?*” He passed the glasses, on their universal mount, to Sonya. “What do you make of this? What branch of the human race prints like that? What people have simplified their alphabet by getting rid of the letter ‘E’?”

She adjusted the focus to suit her own vision. She said at last, “That painted-on-name is the work of human hands all right. But the other . . . I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like it before. There’s a certain lack of logicity—human logicity, that is. Oh, that stylized ‘D’ is logical enough. But the substitution of ‘I’ for ‘E’—if it is a substitution . . . And then, as far as *we* are concerned, a destroyer is a class of ship—not a ship’s name . . .”

“I seem to recall,” Grimes told her, “that there was once a warship called *Dreadnought*—and the dreadnoughts have been a class of warship ever since the first ironclads were launched on Earth’s seas.”

“All right, Mr. amateur naval historian—but have you ever, in the course of your very wide reading on your favorite subject, come across mention of a ship called *Destroyer*—and spelled without a single ‘E’? There are non-humans mixed up in this somewhere—and highly intelligent non-humans at that.”

"And humans," said Grimes.

"But we'll never find out anything just by talking about it," grumbled the Mate. "An' the sooner we take this bitch in tow, the shorter the long drag back to Port Forlorn. I'd make fast alongside—but even here, in the blast shadow, that hull is too damn' hot. It'll have to be tow wires from the outriggers—an' keep our fingers crossed that they don't get cut by our exhaust . . ."

"Take her in tow, then board," said Sonya.

"O' course. First things first. There'll be nobody alive inside that radio-active can . . ."

The intercommunication telephone was buzzing furiously. Grimes picked up the instrument. "Commodore here."

"Mayhew, sir." The telepath's voice was oddly muffled. He sounded as though he had been crying. "It's Lassie, sir. She's dead. . . ."

A happy release, thought Grimes. But what am I supposed to do about it?

"One of her nightmares, sir," Mayhew babbled on. "I was inside her mind, and I tried to awaken her. But I couldn't. There was this huge rat—and there were the sharp yellow teeth of it, and the stink of it. . . . It was so . . . it was so real, so vivid. And it was the fear that killed her—I could feel her fear, and it was almost too much for me . . ."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Mayhew," said Grimes inadequately. "I'm sorry. I will see you later. But we are just about to take the derelict in tow, and we are busy."

"I . . . I understand, sir."

And then Grimes relaxed into the padding of his chair, watching, not without envy, as Williams jockeyed the salvage tug into position ahead of the derelict, then carefully matched velocity. The outriggers were extruded, and then there was the slightest shock as the little missiles, each with a powerful magnetic grapnel as its warhead, were fired.

Contact was made, and then Williams, working with the utmost care, eased *Rim Mamelute* around in a great arc, never putting too much strain on the towing gear, always

keeping the wires clear of the tug's incandescent exhaust. It was pretty to watch.

Even so, when at last it was over, when at last the Lorn Star was almost directly astern, he could not resist the temptation of asking, "But why all this expenditure of reaction mass and time to ensure a bows-first tow, Mr. Williams?"

"S.O.P., Skipper. It's more convenient if the people in the towed ship can see where they're going."

"But it doesn't look as though there are any people. Not live ones, that is."

"But we could be putting a prize crew aboard her, Skipper."

Grimes thought about saying something about the radio-activity, then decided not to bother.

"You just can't win, John," Sonya told him.

VI

IN THEORY one can perform heavy work while clad in radiation armor. One can do so in practice—provided that one has been through a rigorous course of training. Pendeen, Second Engineer of *Rim Mamelute*, had been so trained. So, of course, had been Mr. Williams—but Grimes had insisted that the Mate stay aboard the tug while he, with Sonya and the engineer, effected an entry into the hull of the derelict. Soon, while the boarding party was making its exploratory walk over the stranger ship's shell plating, he had been obliged to order Williams to cut the drive; sufficient velocity had been built up so that both vessels were now in Free Fall away from the sun.

Even in Free Fall it was bad enough. Every joint of the heavy suit was stiff, every limb had so much mass that great physical effort was required to conquer inertia. Weary and sweating heavily, Grimes forced himself to keep up with his two companions, by a great effort of will contrived to maintain his side of the conversation in a voice that did not betray his poor physical condition.

He was greatly relieved when they discovered, towards the stern, what was obviously an airlock door. Just a hair-thin crack in the plating it was, outlining a circular port roughly seven feet in diameter. There were no signs of external controls, and the crack was too thin to allow the insertion of any tool.

"Send for the bell, sir?" asked Pendeen, his normally deep voice an odd treble in Grimes' helmet phones.

"The bell? Yes, yes. Of course. Carry on, Mr. Pendeen."

"Al to Bill," Grimes heard. "Do you read me? Over."

"Bill to Al. Loud an' clear. What can I do for you?"

"We've found the airlock. But we want the bell."

"You would. Just stick around. It'll be over."

"And send the cutting gear while you're about it."

"Will do. Stand by."

"Had any experience with the Laverton Bell, sir?" asked Pendeen, his voice not as respectful as it might have been.

"No. No actual working experience, that is."

"I have," said Sonya.

"Good. Then you'll know what to do when we get it."

Grimes, looking towards *Rim Mamelute*, could see that something bulky was coming slowly towards them along one of the tow wires, the rocket that had given the packet its initial thrust long since burned out. He followed the others towards the stem of the derelict, but stood to one side, held to the plating by the magnetic soles of his boots, as they unclipped the bundle from the line. He would have helped them to carry it back aft, but they ignored him.

Back at the airlock valve, Sonya and Pendeen worked swiftly and competently, releasing the fastenings, unfolding what looked like a tent of tough white plastic. This had formed the wrapper for other things—including a gas bottle, a laser torch and a thick tube of adhesive. Without waiting for instructions Sonya took this latter, removed the screw cap and, working on her hands and knees, used it to describe a glistening line just outside the crack that marked the door. Then all three of them, standing in the middle of the circle, lifted the fabric above their heads, unfolding it as they did

so. Finally, with Grimes and Pendeen acting as tent poles, Sonya neatly fitted the edge of the shaped canopy to the ring of adhesive, now and again adding a further gob of the substance from the tube.

"Stay as you are, sir," the engineer said to Grimes, then fell to a squatting position. His gloved hands went to the gas cylinder, to the valve wheel. A white cloud jetted out like a rocket exhaust, then faded to invisibility. Around the boarding party the walls of the tent bellied outwards, slowly tautened, distended to their true shape by the expanding helium. Only towards the end was the hiss of the escaping gas very faintly audible.

Pendeen shut the valve decisively, saying, "That's that. Is she all tight, Sonya?"

"All tight, Al," she replied.

"Good." With a greasy crayon he drew a circle roughly in the center of the airlock door, one large enough to admit a spacesuited body. He picked up the laser torch, directed its beam downwards, thumbed the firing button. The flare of vaporizing metal was painfully bright, outshining the helmet lights, reflected harshly from the white inner surface of the plastic igloo. There was the illusion of suffocating heat—or was it more than only an illusion? Pendeen switched off the torch and straightened, looking down at the annulus of still-glowing metal. With an effort he lifted his right foot, breaking the contact of the magnetized sole with the plating. He brought the heel down sharply. The *clang*, transmitted through the fabric of their armor, was felt rather than heard by the others.

And then the circular plate was falling slowly, into the darkness of the airlock chamber, and the rough manhole was open so that they could enter.

Grimes was first into the alien ship, followed by Sonya and then Pendeen. It was light enough in the little compartment once they were into it, the beams of their helmet lights reflected from the white-painted walls. On the inner door there was a set of manual controls that worked—once Grimes

realized that the spindle of the wheel had a left handed thread. Beyond the inner door there was an alleyway, and standing there was a man.

The Commodore whipped the pistol from his holster, his reflexes more than compensating for the stiffness of the joints of his suit. Then, slowly, he returned the weapon to his belt. This man was dead. Radiation may have killed him, but it had not killed all the bacteria of decay present in his body. Some freak of inertial and centrifugal forces, coming into play when the derelict had been taken in tow, had flung him to a standing posture, and the magnetic soles of his rough sandals—Grimes could see the gleam of metal—had held him to the deck.

So he was dead, and he was decomposing, his skin taut and darkly purple, bulging over the waistband of the loin-cloth—it looked like sacking—that was his only clothing. He was dead—and Grimes was suddenly grateful for the sealed suit that he was wearing, the suit that earlier he had been cursing, that kept out the stench of him.

Gently, with pity and pointless tenderness, he put his gloved hands to the waist of the corpse, lifted it free of the deck, shifted it to one side.

"We must be just above engineroom level," said Sonya, her voice deliberately casual.

"Yes," agreed Grimes. "I wonder if this ship has an axial shaft. If she has, it will be the quickest way of getting to the control room."

"That will be the best place to start investigations," she said.

They moved on through the alleyway, using the Free Fall shuffle that was second nature to all of them, letting the homing instinct that is part of the nature of all spacemen guide them. They found more bodies, women as well as men, sprawled in untidy attitudes, hanging like monstrous mermen and merwomen in a submarine cave. They tried to ignore them, as they tried to ignore the smaller bodies, those of children, and came at last, at the end of a short, radial alleyway, to the stout pillar of the axial shaft.

There was a door in the pillar, and it was open, and one by one they passed through it and then began pulling themselves forward along the central guide rod, ignoring the spiral ramp that lined the tunnel. Finally they came to a conventional enough hatchway, but the valve sealing the end of the shaft was jammed. Grimes and Sonya fell back to let Pendeen use the laser torch. Then they followed him into the control room.

VII

THERE WERE MORE bodies in the control room. There were three dead men and three dead women, all of them strapped into acceleration chairs. Like all the others scattered throughout the ship they were clad only in rough, scanty rags, were swollen with decomposition.

Grimes forced himself to ignore them. He could do nothing for them. Perhaps, he thought, he might some day avenge them (somehow he did not feel that they had been criminals, pirates)—but that would not bring them back to life. He looked past the unsightly corpses to the instruments on the consoles before their chairs. These, at first glance, seemed to be familiar enough—white dials with the black calibrations marked with Arabic numerals; red, green, white and amber pilot lights, dead now, but ready to blossom with glowing life at the restoration of a power supply. Familiar enough they were, at first glance. But there were the odd differences, the placement of various controls in positions that did not tally with the construction and the articulation of the normal human frame. And there was the lettering: MINNSCHINN DRIVI, RIMITI CINTRIL. Who, he asked himself, were the builders of this ship, this vessel that was almost a standard Federation Survey Service cruiser? What human race had jettisoned every vowel in the alphabet but this absurdly fat “I?”

“John,” Sonya was saying, “give me a hand, will you?”

He turned to see what she was doing. She was trying to

unbuckle a seat belt that was deeply embedded in the distended flesh at the waist of one of the dead men.

He conquered his revulsion, swallowed the nausea that was rising in his throat. He pulled the sharp sheath knife from his belt, said, "This is quicker," and slashed through the tough fabric of the strap. He was careful not to touch the gleaming, purple skin. He knew that if he did so the dead man would . . . burst.

Carefully, Sonya lifted the body from its seat, set it down on the deck so that the magnetized sandal soles were in contact with the steel plating. Then she pointed to the back of the chair. "What do you make of that?" she asked.

That was a vertical slot, just over an inch in width, that was continued into the seat itself, half bisecting it.

It was Pendeen who broke the silence. He said simply, "They had tails."

"But they haven't," objected Grimes. It was obvious that the minimal breech-clouts of the dead people could not conceal even a tiny caudal appendage.

"My dear John," Sonya told him in an annoyingly superior voice, "these hapless folk are neither the builders nor the original crew of this ship. Refugees? Could be. Escapees? A slave revolt? Once again—could be. Or must be. This is a big ship, and a fighting ship. You can't run a vessel of this class without uniforms, without marks of rank so you can see at a glance who is supposed to be doing what. Furthermore, you don't clutter up a man-o'-war with children."

"She's not necessarily a man-o'-war," demurred Grimes. "She could be a defensively armed merchantman . . ."

"With officers and first class passengers dressed in foul rags? With a name like DESTROYER?"

"We don't *know* that that grouping of letters on the stem does spell DESTROYER."

"We don't *know* that this other grouping of letters"—she pointed to the control panel that Grimes had been studying—"spells MANNSCHENN DRIVE, REMOTE CONTROL. But I'm willing to bet my gratuity that if you trace the leads

you'll wind up in a compartment full of dimension-twisting gyroscopes."

"All right," said Grimes. "I'll go along with you. I'll admit that we're aboard a ship built by some humanoid—but possibly non-human race that, even so, uses a peculiar distortion of English as its written language. . . ."

"A humanoid race with tails," contributed Pendeen.

"A humanoid race with tails," agreed Sonya. "But *what* race? Look at this slot in the chair back. It's designed for somebody—or something—with a thin tail, thin at the root as well as at the extremity. And the only tailed beings we know with any technology comparable to our own have thick tails—and, furthermore, have their own written languages. Just imagine one of our saurian friends trying to get out of that chair in a hurry, assuming that he'd ever been able to get into it in the first place. He'd be trapped."

"You're the Intelligence Officer," said Grimes rather nastily.

"All right. I am. Also, I hold a Doctorate in Xenology. And I tell you, John, that what we've found in this ship, so far, doesn't add up to any kind of sense at all."

"She hasn't made any sense ever since she was first picked up by Station 3," admitted Grimes.

"That she hasn't," said Pendeen. "And I don't like her. Not one little bit."

"Why not, Mr. Pendeen?" asked Grimes, realizing that it was a foolish question to ask about a radio-active hull full of corpses.

"Because . . . because she's *wrong*, sir. The proportions of all her controls and fittings—just wrong enough to be scary. And left-handed threads, and gauges calibrated from right to left."

"So they are," said Grimes. "So they are. But that's odder still. Why don't they write the same way? From Right to Left?"

"Perhaps they do," murmured Sonya. "But I don't think so. I think that the only difference between their written language and ours is that they have an all-purpose 'I', or an all-purpose symbol that's used for every vowel sound." She

was prowling around the control room. Damn it all, there *must* be a Log Book. . . ."

"There should be a Log Book," amended Grimes.

"All right. There should be a Log Book. Here's an obvious Log Desk, complete with stylus, but empty. I begin to see how it must have been. The ship safe in port, all her papers landed for checking, and then her seizure by these people, by these unfortunate humans, whoever they were . . . H'm. The Chart Tank might tell us something . . ." She glared at the empty globe. "It would have told us something if it hadn't been in close proximity to a nuclear blast. But there will be traces. Unfortunately we haven't the facilities here to bring them out." She resumed her purposeful shuffle. "And what have we here? SIGNIL LIG? SIGNAL LOG? A black box that might well contain quite a few answers when we hook it up to a power supply. And that, I think, will lie within the capabilities of our Radio Officer back aboard *Rim Mamelute*."

The thing was secured by simple enough clips to the side of what was obviously a transceiver. Deftly, Sonya disengaged it, tucked it under her arm.

"Back to the *Mamelute*," said Grimes. It was more an order than a suggestion.

"Back to the *Mamelute*," she agreed.

The Commodore was last from the control room, watched first Pendeen and then Sonya vanish through the hatch into the axial shaft. He half-wished that enough air remained in their suit tanks for them to make a leisurely examination of the accommodation that must be situated abaft Control—and was more than half-relieved that circumstances did not permit such a course of action. He had seen his fill of corpses. In any case, the Signal Log might tell them far more than the inspection of decomposing corpses ever could.

He felt far easier in his mind when the three of them were standing, once more, in the plastic igloo that covered the breached airlock, and almost happy when, one by one, they had squeezed through the built-in spinster valve back to the clean emptiness of Space. The harsh working lights of

Rim Mamelute seemed soft somehow, mellow almost, suggested the lights of Home. And the cramped interior of the tug, when they were back on board, was comforting. If one has to be jostled, it is better to be jostled by the living than by dead men and women, part-cremated in a steel coffin tumbling aimlessly between the stars.

VIII

IT WAS very quiet in the radio office of *Rim Mamelute*. Grimes and Sonya stood there, watching chubby little Bennett make the last connections to the black box that they had brought from the control room of the derelict. "Yes," the Electronic Radio Officer had told them, "it is a Signal Log, and it's well shielded, so whatever records it may contain probably haven't been wiped by radiation. Once I get it hooked up we'll have the play-back."

And now it was hooked up. "Are you sure you won't burn it out?" asked the Commodore, suddenly anxious.

"Almost sure, sir," answered Bennett cheerfully. "The thing is practically an exact copy of the Signal Logs that were in use in some ships of the Federation Survey Service all of fifty years ago. Before my time. Anyhow, my last employment before I came out to the Rim was in the Lyran Navy, and their wagons were all Survey Service cast-offs. In many of them the original communications gear was still in place, and still in working order. No, sir, this isn't the first time that I've made one of these babies sing. Reminds me of when we picked up the wreck of the old *Minstrel Boy*; I was Chief Sparks of the *Tara's Hall* at the time, and got the gen from her Signal Log that put us on the trail of Black Bart"—he added unnecessarily—"the pirate."

"I have heard of him," said Grimes coldly.

Sonya remarked, pointing towards the box, "But it doesn't look old."

"No, Mrs. Grimes. It's not old. Straight from the maker, I'd say. But there's no maker's name, which is odd. . . ."

"Switch on, Mr. Bennett," ordered the Commodore.

Bennett switched 'on. The thing hummed quietly to itself, crackled briefly and thinly as the spool was rewound. It crackled again, more loudly, and the play-back began.

The voice that issued from the speaker spoke English—of a sort. But it was not human. It was a thin, high, alien squeaking—and yet, somehow, not alien enough. The consonants were ill-defined, and there was only one vowel sound.

"*Eeveengeer tee Deestreeeyer. Eeveengeer tee Deestreeeyer. Heeve tee. Heeve teel*"

The voice that answered was not a very convincing imitation of that strange accent. "*Deestreeeyer tee Eeveenger. Reepeat, please. Reepeat . . .*"

"A woman," whispered Sonya. "Human . . ."

"*Heeve tee, Deestreeeyer. Heeve tee, eer wee eepeen feer!*"

A pause, then the woman's voice again, the imitation even less convincing, a certain desperation all too evident: "*Deestreeeyer tee Avenger. Deestreeeyer tee Eeveengeer . . . Eer Dreeve ceentreels eer eet eef eerdeer!*"

Playing for time, thought Grimes. *Playing for time, while clumsy hands fumble with unfamiliar armament. But they tried. They did their best. . . .*

"Deel" screamed the inhuman voice. "Heemeen seem, deel"

"And that must have been it," muttered Grimes.

"It was," said Sonya flatly, and the almost inaudible whirring of what remained on the spool bore her out.

"That mistake she made," said Grimes softly, "is the clue. For *Eeveengeer*, read *Avenger*. For every 'E' sound substitute the vowel that makes sense. But insofar as the written language is concerned, that fat 'I' is really an 'E'. . . ."

"That seems to be the way of it," agreed Sonya.

"'Die,' " repeated the Commodore slowly. "'Human scum, diel' " He said, "Whoever those people are, they wouldn't be at all nice to know."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Sonya told him. "That we might get to know them. Whoever they are—and wherever, and whenever. . . ."

IX

THE DERELICT HUNG in orbit about Lorn, and the team of scientists and technicians continued the investigations initiated by *Rim Mamelute's* people during the long haul to the tug's home planet. Grimes, Sonya and the others had been baffled by what they had found—and now, with reluctance, the experts were admitting their own bafflement.

This ship, named *Destroyer* by her builders, and renamed *Freedom* by those who had not lived long to enjoy it, seemed to have just completed a major refit and to have been in readiness for her formal recommissioning. Although her magazines and some of her storerooms were stocked, although her hydroponics tanks and tissue culture vats had been operational at the time of her final action, her accommodation and working spaces were clean of the accumulation of odds and ends that, over the years, adds appreciably to the mass of any vessel. There were no files of official correspondence, although there was not a shortage of empty filing cabinets. There were no revealing personal possessions such as letters, photographs and solidographs, books, recordings, magazines and pin-up girl calendars. (The hapless humans who had been killed by the blast seemed to have brought aboard only the rags that they were wearing.) There were no log books in either control or engine rooms.

The cabins were furnished, however, and in all of them were the strange chairs with the slotted backs and seats, the furniture that was evidence of the existence of a race—an unknown race, insisted the xenologists—of tailed beings, approximating the human norm in stature. Every door tally was in place, and each one made it clear that the creatures who had manned the ship, before her seizure, used the English language, but a version of it peculiarly their own: KIP-TIN . . . CHIFF INGINIIR . . . RIICTIIN DRIVI RIIM . . . HIDRIPINICS RIIM. . .

Even so she was, apart from the furniture and the distor-

tion of printed English and—as the engineers pointed out—the prevalence of left-handed threads, a very ordinary ship, albeit somewhat old fashioned. There was, for example, no Carlotti navigational and communications equipment. And the signal log was a model the use of which had been discontinued by the Survey Service for all of half a standard century. And she lacked yet another device, a device of fairly recent origin, the Mass Proximity Indicator.

She was, from the engineering viewpoint, a very ordinary ship; it was the biologists who discovered the shocking abnormality.

They did not discover it at once. They concentrated, at first, upon the cadavers of the unfortunate humans. These were, it was soon announced, indubitably human. They had been born upon and had lived their lives upon an Earth-type planet, but their lives had not been pleasant ones. Their physiques exhibited all the signs of undernourishment, of privation, and they almost all bore scars that told an ugly story of habitual maltreatment. But they were men, and they were women, and had they lived and had they enjoyed for a year or so normal living conditions they would have been indistinguishable from the citizens of any man-colonized world.

And there was nothing abnormal in the hydroponics tanks. There were just the standard plants that are nurtured in ships' farms throughout the Galaxy—tomatoes and cucumbers, potatoes and carrots, the Centaurian umbrella vine, Vegan moss-fern.

It was the tissue culture vats that held the shocking secret.

The flesh that they contained, the meat that was the protein supply for the tailed beings who should have manned the ship, was human flesh.

"I was right," said Sonya to Grimes. "I was right. Those people—whoever, wherever (and whenever?) they are—are our enemies. But *where* are they? And when?"

"From . . . from Outside . . . ?" wondered the Commodore.

"Don't be a bloody fool, John. Do you think that a race

could wander in from the next galaxy but three, reduce a whole planet of humans to slavery, and worse than slavery, without our knowing about it? And why should such a race, if there were one, have to borrow or steal our shipbuilding techniques, our language even? Damn it all, it doesn't make sense. It doesn't even begin to make sense."

"That's what we've all been saying ever since this blasted derelict first appeared."

"And it's true." She got up from her chair and began to pace up and down Grimes' office. "Meanwhile, my dear, we've been left holding the baby. You've been asked to stay on in your various capacities until the mystery has been solved, and my resignation from the Intelligence Branch of the Survey Service has been rescinded. I've been empowered by the Federation Government to co-opt such Confederacy personnel to assist me in my investigations as I see fit. (That means you—for a start.) Forgive me for thinking out loud. It helps sometimes. Why don't you try it?"

"All we know," said Grimes slowly, "is that we've been left holding the baby."

"All we know," she countered, "is that we're supposed to carry the can back."

"But why shouldn't we?" he demanded suddenly. "Not necessarily this can, but one of our own."

She stopped her restless motion, turned to stare at him. She said coldly, "I thought that you had made a study of archaic slang expressions. Apparently I was wrong."

"Not at all, Sonya. I know what 'to carry the can back' means. I know, too, that the word 'can' is still used to refer to more and bigger things than containers of beer or preserved foods. Such as . . ."

"Such as ships," she admitted.

"Such as ships. All right. How do we carry the can, or a can back? Back to where the can came from?"

"But where? Or when?"

"That's what we have to find out."

She said, "I think it will have to be *the* can. That is if you're thinking what I think you're thinking: that this *De-*

stroyer or *Freedom* or whatever you care to call her drifted in from one of the alternative universes. She'll have that built-in urge, yes, urge. She'll have that built-in urge to return to her own continuum."

"So you accept the alternative universe theory?"

"It seems to fit the facts. After all, out here on the Rim, the transition from one universe to another has been made more than once."

"As we should know."

"If only we knew how the derelict did drift in. . . ."

"Did she *drift* in?" asked Grimes softly. And then, in spoken answer to his wife's unspoken query, "I think that she was blown in."

"Yes . . . yes. Could be. A nuclear explosion in close, very close proximity to the ship. The very fabric of the continuum strained and warped . . ." She smiled, but it was a grim smile. "That could be it."

"And that could be the way to carry the can back."

"I don't want to be burned, my dear. And, oddly enough, I shouldn't like to see you burned."

"There's no need for anybody to be burned. Have you ever heard of lead shielding?"

"Of course. But the weight! Even if we shielded only a small compartment, the reaction drive'd be working flat out to get us off the ground, and we'd have damn all reaction mass to spare for any maneuvers. And the rest of the ship, as we found when we boarded the derelict, would be so hot as to be uninhabitable for months."

He gestured towards the wide window to the squat tower that was *Faraway Quest*. "I seem to remember, Sonya, that you shipped with me on our Wild Ghost Chase. Even though you were aboard as an officer of the Federation's Naval Intelligence you should remember how the *Quest* was fitted. That sphere of anti-matter—now back in safe orbit—that gave us anti-gravity. . . . We can incorporate it into *Freedom's* structure as it was incorporated into *Quest's*. With it functioning, we can afford to shield the entire ship and still enjoy almost negative mass."

"So you think we should take *Freedom*, or *Destroyer*, and not *Faraway Quest*?"

"I do. Assuming that we're able to blow her back into the continuum she came from, she'll be a more convincing Trojan horse than one of our own ships."

"Cans," she said. "Trojan horses. Can you think of any more metaphors?" She smiled again, and her expression was not quite so grim. "But I see what you mean. Our friends with the squeaky voices and the long, thin tails will think that their own lost ship has somehow wandered back to them, still manned by the escaped slaves." Her face hardened. "I almost feel sorry for them."

"Almost," he agreed.

X

THE BOFFINS WERE reluctant to release *Freedom*, but Grimes was insistent, explaining that disguise of *Faraway Quest*, no matter how good, might well be not good enough. A small, inconspicuous but betraying feature of her outward appearance could lead to her immediate destruction. "Then what about the crew, Commodore?" asked one of the scientists. "Surely those tailed beings will soon realize that the ship is not manned by the original rebels."

"Not necessarily," Grimes told the man. "In fact, I think it's quite unlikely. Even among human beings all members of a different race tend to look alike. And when it comes to members of two entirely different species . . ."

"I'm reasonably expert," added Sonya, "but even I find it hard until I've had time to observe carefully the beings with whom I'm dealing."

"But there's so much that we could learn from the ship!" protested the scientist.

"Mr. Wales," Grimes said to the Rim Runners' Superintending Engineer, "how much do you think there is to be learned from the derelict?"

"Not a damn thing, Commodore. But if we disguise one

of our own ships, and succeed in blowing her into whatever comic alternative universe she came from, there's far too much that could be learned from *us*. As far as shipbuilding is concerned, we're practically a century ahead."

"Good enough. Well, gentlemen?"

"I suggest, Commodore, that we bring your *Freedom's* armament up to scratch," said Admiral Hennessey, but the way that he said it made it more of an order than a suggestion.

Grimes turned to face the Admiral, the Flag Officer Commanding the Naval Force of the Confederacy. Bleak stare clashed with bleak stare, almost audibly. As an officer of the Reserve, Grimes considered himself a better spaceman than his superior, and was inclined to resent the intrusion of the Regular Navy into what he was already regarding as his own show.

He replied firmly, "No, sir. That could well give the game away."

He was hurt when Sonya took the Admiral's side—but, after all, she was Regular Navy herself, although Federation and not Confederacy. She said, "But what about the lead sheathing, John? What about the sphere of anti-matter?"

Grimes was not beaten. "Mr. Wales has already made a valid point. He thinks that it would be imprudent to make the aliens a present of a century's progress in astronautical engineering. It would be equally imprudent to make them a present of a century's progress in weaponry."

"You have a point there, Grimes," admitted the Admiral. "But I do not feel happy in allowing my personnel to ship in a vessel on a hazardous mission without the utmost protection that I can afford them."

"Apart from the Marines, sir, my personnel rather than yours. Practically every officer will be a reservist."

The Admiral glared at the Commodore. He growled, "Frankly, if it were not for the pressure brought to bear by our Big Brothers of the Federation, I should insist on commissioning a battle squadron." He smiled coldly in Sonya's direction. "But the Terran Admiralty seems to trust Com-

mander Verrill—or Mrs. Grimes—and have given her on-the-spot powers that would be more fitting to a holder of Flag Officer's rank. And my own instructions from Government House are to afford her every assistance."

He made a ritual of selecting a long, black cigar from the case that he took from an inside pocket of his uniform, lit it, filled the already foul air of the derelict's control room with wreathing eddies of acrid blue smoke. He said in a voice that equaled in acridity the fumes that carried it, "Very well, Commodore. You're having your own way. Or your wife is having her own way; she has persuaded the Federation that you are to be in full command. (But will you be, I wonder . . .) May I, as your Admiral, presume to inquire just what are your intentions, assuming that the nuclear device that you have commandeered from my arsenal does blow you into the right continuum?"

"We shall play by ear, sir."

The Admiral seemed to be emulating the weapon that he had just mentioned, but he did not quite reach critical mass. "Play by ear!" he bellowed at last, when coherent speech was at last possible. "Play by ear! Damn it all, sir, that's the sort of fatuous remark one might expect from a Snotty making his first training cruise, but not from an allegedly responsible officer."

"Admiral Hennessey," Sonya's voice was as cold as his had been. "This is not a punitive expedition. This is not a well organized attack by naval forces. This is an Intelligence operation. We do not know what we are up against. We are trying to find out." Her voice softened slightly. "I admit that the Commodore expressed himself in a rather unspaceman-like manner, but playing by ear is what we shall do. How shall I put it? We shall poke a stick into the ants' nest and see what comes out. . . ."

"We shall hoist the banner of the Confederacy to the mast-head and see who salutes," somebody said in one of those carrying whispers. The Admiral, the Commodore and Sonya Verrill turned to glare at the man. Then Sonya laughed. "That's one way of putting it. Only it won't be the black and

gold of the Confederacy—it'll be the black and silver of the Jolly Roger. A little judicious piracy—or privateering. Will Rim Worlds Letters of Marque be valid wherever we're going, Admiral?"

That officer managed a rather sour chuckle. "I think I get the drift of your intentions, Commander. I hate to have to admit it—but I wish that I were coming with you." He transferred his attention to Grimes. "So, Commodore, I think that I shall be justified in at least repairing or renewing the weapons that were damaged or destroyed by the blast—as long as I don't fit anything beyond the technology of the builders of this ship."

"Please do that, sir."

"I shall. But what about small arms for your officers and the Marines?"

Grimes pondered the question. There had been no pistols of any kind aboard the derelict when he had boarded her. It could be argued that this was a detail that did not much matter—should the ship be boarded and seized herself there would be both the lead sheathing *and* the sphere of anti-matter that would make it obvious to the boarding party that she had been . . . elsewhere. Assuming, that is, that the last survivors of her crew did not trigger the explosive charge that would shatter the neutronium shell and destroy the magnets, thus bringing the sphere of anti-iron into contact with the normal matter surrounding it. Then there would be nobody to talk about what had been found.

But *Freedom*—as a pirate or a privateer—would be sending boarding parties to other ships. There was the possibility that she might have to run before superior forces, unexpectedly appearing, leaving such a boarding party to its fate. Grimes most sincerely hoped that he would never have to make such a decision. And if the boarding party possessed obviously alien hand weapons the tailed beings would be, putting it very mildly, suspicious.

"No hand weapons," he said at last, reluctantly. "But I hope that we shall be able to capture a few, and that we shall be able to duplicate them in the ship's workshop. Mean-

while, I'd like your Marines to be experts in unarmed combat—both suited and unsuited."

"And expert knife fighters," added Sonya.

"Boarding axes and cutlasses," contributed the Admiral, not without relish.

"Yes, sir," agreed Grimes. "Boarding axes and cutlasses."

"I suggest, Commodore," said Hennessey, "that you do a course at the Personal Combat Center at Lorn Base."

"I don't think there will be time, sir," said Grimes hopefully.

"There will be, Commodore. The lead sheathing and the anti-matter sphere cannot be installed in five minutes. And there are weapons to be repaired and renewed."

"There will be time," said Sonya.

Grimes sighed. He had been in one or two minor actions in his youth, but they had been so . . . impersonal. It was the enemy ship that you were out to get, and the fact that a large proportion of her crew was liable to die with her was something that you glossed over. You did not see the dreadful damage that your missiles and beams did to the fragile flesh and blood mechanisms that were human beings. Or if you did see it—a hard frozen corpse is not the same as one still warm, still pumping blood from severed arteries, still twitching in a ghastly semblance to life.

"There will be time, Commodore," repeated the Admiral.

"There will be time," repeated Sonya.

"And what about you, Mrs. Grimes?" asked Hennessey unkindly.

"You forget, sir, that in my branch of the Federation's service we are taught how to kill or maim with whatever is to hand any and every life form with which we may come into contact."

"Then I will arrange for the Commodore's course," Hennessey told her.

It was, for Grimes, a grueling three weeks. He was fit enough, but he was not as hard as he might have been. Even wearing protective armor he emerged from every bout with

the Sergeant Instructor badly bruised and battered. And he did not like knives, although he attained fair skill with them as a throwing weapon. He disliked cutlasses even more. And the boarding axes, with their pike heads, he detested.

And then, quite suddenly, it came to him. The Instructor had given him a bad time, as usual, and had then called a break. Grimes stood there, sagging in his armor, using the shaft of his axe as a staff upon which to lean. He was aching, and he was itching inside his protective clothing, and his copious perspiration was making every abrasion on his skin smart painfully.

Without warning the Instructor kicked Grimes support away with a booted foot and then, as the Commodore sprawled on the hard ground, raised his own axe for the simulated kill. Although a red haze clouded his vision, Grimes rolled out of the path of the descending blade, heard the blunted edge thud into the dirt a fraction of an inch from his helmeted head. He was on his feet then, moving with an agility that he had never dreamed that he possessed, he was on his feet, crouching, and his pike head thrusting viciously at the Instructor's crotch. The man squealed as the blow connected; even the heavy cod piece could not save him from severe pain. He squealed, but brought his own axe around in a sweeping, deadly arc. Grimes parried, blade edge to shaft, to such good effect that the lethal head of the other's weapon was broken off, clattering to the ground many feet away. He parried and followed through, his blade clanging on the Instructor's shoulder armor. Yet another blow, this time to the man's broad back, and he was down like a felled ox.

Slowly the red haze cleared from the Commodore's vision as he stood there. Slowly he lowered his axe, and as he did so he realized that the Instructor had rolled over, was lying there laughing up at him, was saying, "Easy, sir. Easy. You're not supposed to kill me, sir. Or to ruin my matrimonial prospects."

"I'm sorry, Sergeant," Grimes said stiffly. "But that was a dirty trick you played."

"It was meant to be dirty, sir. Never trust nobody—that's Lesson One."

"And Lesson Two, Sergeant?"

"You've learned that too, sir. You gotta *hate*. You officers are all the same—you don't really hate the poor cows at the other end of the trajectory when you press a firing button. But in this sort of fighting you *gotta hate*."

"I think I see, Sergeant," said Grimes.

But he was not sorry when he was able to return to his real business—to see *Freedom* (or *Destroyer*) readied for her expedition into the Unknown.

XI

Freedom was commissioned as a cruiser of the Navy of the Rim Worlds Confederacy, but the winged wheel of the Rim Worlds had not replaced the embossed lettering of her original name or the crude, black-painted characters that had partially obscured it. *Freedom* was manned by spacemen and spacewomen of the Reserve and a company of Marines. But there was no display of gold braid and brass buttons—marks of rank and departmental insignia had been daubed on the bare skin of wrists and upper arms and shoulders in an indelible vegetable dye. Apart from this crude attempt at uniform, the ship's complement was attired in scanty, none too clean rags. The men were shaggily bearded, the roughly hacked hair of the women was unkempt. All of them bore unsightly cicatrices on their bodies—but these were the result of plastic surgery, not of ill-treatment.

Outwardly, *Freedom* was just as she had been when she suddenly materialized in her suicidal orbit off Lorn. Internally, however, there had been changes made. On the side that had been scared by the blast the weapons—the laser projectors and the missile launchers had been repaired, although this had been done so as not to be apparent to an external observer. In a hitherto empty storeroom just forward of the enginerooms the sphere of anti-matter had been installed—

the big ball of anti-iron and the powerful magnets that held it in place inside its neutronium casing. And within the shell plating was the thick lead sheathing that would protect the ship's personnel from lethal radiation when the nuclear device was exploded, the bomb that, Grimes hoped, would blow the vessel back to where she had come from. (The physicists had assured him that the odds on this happening were seven to five, and that the odds on the ship's finding herself in a habitable universe were almost astronomical.)

There was one more change insofar as the internal fittings were concerned, and it was a very important one. The tissue culture vats now contained pork, and not human flesh. "After all," Grimes had said to a Biologist who was insisting upon absolute verisimilitude, "there's not all that much difference between pig and long pig. . . ."

The man had gone all technical on him, and the Commodore had snapped, "Pirates we may have to become, but not cannibals!"

But even pirates, thought Grimes, surveying the officers in his control room, *would be dressier than this mob*. He was glad that he had insisted upon the painted badges of rank—the beards made his male officers hard to recognize. With the female ones it was not so bad, although other features (like the men, the women wore only breech clouts) tended to distract attention from their faces.

Clothes certainly make the man, the Commodore admitted wryly to himself. *And the woman—although this very undress uniform suits Sonya well enough, even though her hair-do does look as though she's been dragged through a hedge backwards*. And it felt all wrong for him to be sitting in the chair of command, the seat of the mighty, without the broad gold stripes on his epaulettes (and without the epaulettes themselves, and without a shirt to mount them on) and without the golden comets encrusting the peak of his cap. But the ragged, indigo band encircling each hairy wrist would have to do, just as the coarse, burlap kilt would have to substitute for the tailored, sharply creased shorts that were his normal shipboard wear.

He was concerning himself with trivialities, he knew, but it is sometimes helpful and healthy to let the mind be lured away, however briefly, from consideration of the greater issues.

Williams—lately Mr. Williams, Mate of *Rim Mamelute*, now Commander Williams, Executive Officer of *Freedom*—had the con. Under his control the ship was riding the beam from Lorn back to the position in which she had first been picked up by Orbital Station 3. It was there, the scientists had assured Grimes, that she would stand the best change of being blown back into her own continuum. The theory seemed to make sense, although the mathematics of it were far beyond the Commodore, expert navigator though he was.

The ship was falling free now, her reaction drive silent, dropping down the long, empty miles towards a rendezvous that would be no more (at first) than a flickering of needles on dials, an undulation of the glowing traces on the faces of monitor tubes. She was falling free, and through the still unshuttered ports there was nothing to be seen ahead but the dim, ruddy spark that was the Eblis sun, and nothing to port but a faint, far nebulosity that was one of the distant island universes.

To starboard was the mistily gleaming galactic lens, a great ellipse of luminosity in which there were specks of brighter light, like jewels in the hair of some dark goddess.

Grimes smiled wryly at his poetic fancies, and Sonya, who had guessed what he had been thinking, grinned at him cheerfully. She was about to speak when Williams' voice broke the silence. "Hear this! Hear this! Stand by for deceleration. Stand by for deceleration!"

Retro-rockets coughed, then shrieked briefly. For a second or so seat belts became almost intolerable bonds. The Executive Officer emitted a satisfied grunt, then said, "Spot on, Skipper. Secure for the Big Bang?"

"You know the drill, Commander Williams. Carry on, please."

"Good-oh, Skipper." Williams snapped orders, and the ship shivered a little as the capsule containing the nuclear device

was launched. Grimes saw the thing briefly from a port before the shutters—armor plating and thick lead sheathing—slid into place. It was just a dull-gleaming metal cylinder. It should have looked innocuous, but somehow it didn't. Grimes was suddenly acutely conscious of the craziness of this venture. The scientists had been sure that everything would work as it should, but they were not here to see their theories put to the test. *But I must be fair*, Grimes told himself. *After all, it was our idea. Mine and Sonya's. . . .*

"Fire!" he heard Williams say.

But nothing happened.

There was no noise—but, of course, in the vacuum of Deep Space there should not have been. There was no sense of shock. There was no appreciable rise of the control room temperature.

"A missfire?" somebody audibly wondered.

"Try to raise Lorn," Grimes ordered the Radio Officer. "Orbital Station 3 is maintaining a listening watch on our frequency."

There was a period of silence, broken only by the hiss and crackle of interstellar static, then the voice of the operator saying quietly, "*Freedom* to Station Three. *Freedom* to Station Three. Do you hear me? Come in, please."

Again there was silence.

"Sample the bands," said Grimes. "Listening watch only."

And then they knew that the bomb had exploded, that the results of the explosion had been as planned. There was an overheard dialogue between two beings with high, squeaky voices, similar to the voice that had been recorded in *Freedom's* signal log. There was a discussion of Estimated Time of Arrival and of arrangements for the discharge of cargo—hard to understand at first, but easier once ear and brain became attuned to the distortion of vowel sounds.

When the ports were unscreened, the outside view was as it had been prior to the launching of the bomb, but Grimes and his people knew that the worlds in orbit around those dim, far suns were not, in this Universe, under human dominion.

XII

"WHAT'S THEIR radar like?" asked Grimes.

"Judging by what's in this ship, not too good," replied Williams. "Their planet and station-based installations will have a longer range, but unless they're keepin' a special lookout they'll not pick us up at this distance."

"Good," said Grimes. "Then swing her, Commander. Put the Lorn sun dead ahead. Then calculate what deflection we shall need to make Lorn itself our planetfall."

"Reflection Drive, sir?"

"No. Mannschenn Drive."

"But we've no Mass Proximity Indicator, Skipper, and a jump of light minutes only."

"We've slipsticks, and a perfectly good computer. With any luck we shall be able to intercept that ship coming in for a landing."

"You aren't wasting any time, John," said Sonya, approval in her voice. The Commodore could see that she was alone in her sentiments. The other officers, including the Major of Marines, were staring at him as though doubtful of his sanity.

"Get on with it, Commander," snapped Grimes. "Our only hope of intercepting that ship is to make a fast approach, and one that cannot be detected. And make it Action Stations while you're about it."

"And Boarding Stations?" asked the Major. The space-going soldier had recovered his poise and was regarding his superior with respect.

"Yes. Boarding Stations. Get yourself and your men into those adapted spacesuits. He added, with a touch of humor, "And don't trip over the tails."

He sat well back in his chair as the gyroscopes whined, as the ship's transparent nose with its cobweb of graticules swung slowly across the almost empty sky. And then the yellow Lorn sun was ahead and Sonya, who had taken over the computer, was saying, "Allowing a time lag of exactly one

hundred and twenty seconds from . . . *now*, give her five seconds of arc left deflection."

"Preliminary thrust?" asked Williams.

"Seventy-five pounds, for exactly 0.5 second."

"Mannschenn Drive ready," reported the officer at the Remote Control.

Grimes was glad that he had ordered the time-varying device to be warmed up before the transition from one universe to the other had been made. He had foreseen the possibility of flight; he had not contemplated the possibility of initiating a fight. But, as he had told the Admiral, he was playing by ear.

He said to Sonya, "You have the con, Commander Verrill. Execute when ready."

"Ay, ay, sir. Stand by all. Commander Williams—preliminary thrust on the word 'Fire!' Mr. Cavendish, Mannschenn Drive setting 2.756. Operate for exactly 7.5 seconds immediately reaction drive has been cut. Stand by all. Ten . . . Nine . . . Eight . . . Seven . . . Six . . . Five . . ."

Like one of the ancient submarines, Grimes was thinking. *An invisible approach to the target, and not even a periscope to betray us. But did those archaic warships ever make an approach on Dead Reckoning? I suppose that they must have done, but only in their infancy.*

"Four . . . Three . . . Two . . . One . . . *Fire!*"

The rockets coughed briefly, diffidently, and the normally heavy hand of acceleration delivered no more than a gentle pat. Immediately there was the sensation of both temporal and spatial disorientation as the ever-precessing gyroscopes of the Drive began to spin—a sensation that faded almost at once. And then the control room was flooded with yellow light—light that dimmed as the ports were polarized. But there was still light, a pearly radiance of reflected illumination from the eternal overcast, the familiar overcast of Lorn. That planet hung on their port beam, a great, featureless sphere, looking the same as it had always looked to the men and women at the controls of the ship.

But it was not the same.

There was that excited voice, that shrill voice spilling from the speaker: "*Whee eere yee? Wheet sheep? Wheet sheep? Wee sheell reepeert yee. Yee knee theer eet ees feerbeedeen tee eese thee Dreeve weetheen three reedeel!*"

"Almost rammed the bastards," commented Williams. "That was close, Skip."

"It was," agreed Grimes, looking at the radar repeater before his chair. "Match trajectory, Commander." He could see the other ship through the ports now. Like *Freedom*, she was in orbit about Lorn. The reflected sunlight from her metal skin was dazzling and he could not make out her name or any other details. But Sonya had put on a pair of polaroids with telescopic lenses. She reported, "Her name's *Weejee*. Seems to be just a merchantman. No armament that I can see."

"Mr. Carter!"

"Sir!" snapped the Gunnery Officer.

"See if your laser can slice off our friend's main venturi. And then the auxiliary ones."

"Ay, ay, sir."

The invisible beams stabbed out from *Freedom's* projectors. In spite of the dazzle of reflected sunlight from the other's hull the blue incandescence of melting, vaporizing metal was visible. And then Grimes was talking into the microphone that somebody had passed to him, "*Freedom to Weejee. Freedom to Weejee. We are about to board you. Offer no resistance and you will not be harmed.*"

And the shrill voice, hysterical now, was screaming to somebody far below on the planet's surface. "Heelp! Heelp! Eet ees thee *Deestreeyer!* Eet ees the sleeves! Heelp!"

"Jam their signals!" ordered Grimes. How long would it be before a warship came in answer to the distress call? Perhaps there was already one in orbit, hidden by the bulk of the planet. And there would be ground to space missiles certainly—but Carter could take care of them with his laser.

Somebody came into the control room, a figure in bulky space armor, a suit that had been designed to accommodate a long, prehensile tail. For a moment Grimes thought that it

was one of the rightful owners of the ship, that somehow a boarding had been effected. And then the Major's voice, distorted by the diaphragm in the snouted helmet, broke the spell. "Commodore Grimes, sir," he said formally, "my men are ready."

Grimes told him, "I don't think that our friends out there are going to open up." He added regretfully, "And we have no laser pistols."

"There are cutting and burning tools in the engineer's workshop, sir. I have already issued them to my men."

"Very good, Major. You may board."

"Your instructions, sir?"

"Limit your objectives. I'd like the log books from her Control, and any other papers, such as manifests, that could be useful. But if there's too much resistance, don't bother. We may have to get out of here in a hurry. But I shall expect at least one prisoner."

"We shall do our best, sir."

"I know you will, Major. But as soon as I sound the Recall, come a-running."

"Very good, sir." The Marine managed a smart salute, even in the disguising armor, left the control room.

"Engaging ground to space missiles," announced the Gunnery Officer in a matter of fact voice. Looking out through the planetward ports Grimes could see tiny, distant, intensely brilliant sparks against the cloud blanket. There was nothing to worry about—yet. Carter was picking off the rockets as soon as they came within range of his weapons.

And then he saw the Marines jetting between the two ships, each man with a vapor trail that copied and then surpassed the caudal appendage of his suit. They carried boarding axes, and the men in the lead were burdened with bulky cutting tools. He watched them come to what must have been a clangorous landing on the other vessel's shell plating and then, with an ease that was the result of many drills, disperse themselves to give the tool-bearers room to work. Metal melted, flared and exploded into glowing vapor. The ragged-edged disc that had been the outer valve of the air-

lock was pried up and clear and sent spinning away into emptiness. There was a slight delay as the inner door was attacked—and then the armored figures were vanishing rapidly into the holed ship.

From the speaker of the transceiver that was tuned to spacesuit frequency Grimes heard the Major's voice, "Damn it all, Bronsky, that's a tool, not a weapon! Don't waste the charge!"

"He'd have got you, sir . . ."

"Never mind that. I want that airtight door down!"

And there were other sounds—clanging noises, panting, a confused scuffling. There was a scream, a human scream.

In the control room the radar officer reported. "Twelve o'clock low. Two thousand miles. Reciprocal trajectory. Two missiles launched."

"Carter!" said Grimes.

"In hand, sir," replied that officer cheerfully. "So far."

"Recall the Marines," ordered Grimes. "Secure control room for action."

The armored shutters slid over the ports. Grimes wondered how much protection the lead sheathing would give against laser, if any. But if the Major and his men were caught between the two ships their fate would be certain, unpleasantly so. And it was on the planetary side of the ship, the side from which the boarding party would return, that the exterior television scanner had been destroyed by the blast that had thrown the ship into Grimes' universe. That scanner had not been renewed. The Commodore could not tell whether or not the Major had obeyed his order; by the time that the Marines were out of the radar's blind spot they would be almost in *Freedom's* airlock.

Not that the radar was of much value now, at short range; *Freedom* was enveloped in a dense cloud of metallic motes. This would shield her from the enemy's laser, although not from missiles. And the floating screen would render her own anti-missile laser ineffective. Missile against missile was all very well, but the other warship was operating from a base from which she could replenish her magazines.

"Reporting on board, sir." It was the Major's voice, coming from the intercom speaker. "With casualties—none serious—and prisoner."

Wasting no time, Grimes sized up the navigational situation. The ship would be on a safe trajectory if the reaction drive were brought into operation at once. He so ordered and then, after a short blast from the rockets, switched to Mannschenn Drive. He could sort out the ship's next destination later.

"Secure all for interstellar voyage," he ordered. Then, into the intercom microphone: "Take your prisoner to the wardroom, Major. We shall be along in a few minutes."

XIII

THE PRISONER, still with his guards, was in the wardroom when Grimes, Sonya and Mayhew got there. He was space-suited still, and manacled at wrists and ankles, and six Marines, stripped to the rags that were their uniforms aboard this ship, were standing around him, apparently at ease but with their readiness to spring at once into action betrayed by a tenseness that was felt rather than seen. But for something odd about the articulation of the legs at the knee, but for the unhuman eyes glaring redly out through the narrow transparency of the helmet, this could have been one of the Major's own men, still to be unsuited. And then Grimes noticed the tail. It was twitching inside its long, armored sheath.

"Mr. Mayhew?" asked Grimes.

"It . . . He's not human, sir," murmured the telepath. Grimes refrained from making any remarks about a blinding glimpse of the obvious. "But I can read . . . after a fashion. There is hate, and there is fear—dreadful, paralyzing fear."

The fear, thought Grimes, that any rational being will know when his maltreated slaves turn on him, gain the upper hand.

"Strip him, sir?" asked the Major briskly.

"Yes," agreed Grimes. "Let's see what he really looks like."

"Brown! Gilmore! Get the armor off the prisoner."

"We'll have to take the irons off him first, sir," pointed out one of the men dubiously.

"There are six of you, and only one of him. But if you want to be careful, unshackle his wrists first, then put the cuffs back on as soon as you have the upper half of his suit off."

"Very good, sir."

"I think that we should be careful," said Sonya.

"We are being careful, ma'am," snapped the Major.

Brown unclipped a key ring from his belt, found the right key and unlocked the handcuffs, cautiously, alert for any hostile action on the part of the prisoner. But the being still stood there quietly, only that twitching tail a warning of potential violence. Gilmore attended to the helmet fastenings, made a half turn and lifted the misshapen bowl of metal and plastic from the prisoner's head. All of the humans stared at the face so revealed—the gray-furred visage with the thin lips crinkled to display the sharp, yellow teeth, the pointed, bewhiskered snout, the red eyes, the huge, circular flaps that were the ears. The thing snarled shrilly, wordlessly. And there was the stink of it, vaguely familiar, nauseating.

Gilmore expertly detached air tanks and fittings, peeled the suit down to the captive's waist while Brown, whose full beard could not conceal his unease, pulled the sleeves down from the long, thin arms, over the clawlike hands. The sharp click as the handcuffs were replaced coincided with his faint sigh of relief.

And when we start the interrogation, Grimes was wondering, shall we be up against the name, rank and serial number convention?

Gilmore called another man to help him who, after Brown had freed the prisoner's ankles, lifted one foot after the other from its magnetic contact with the deck plating. Gilmore continued stripping the captive, seemed to be getting into trouble as he tried to peel the armor from the tail. He mut-

tered something about not having enlisted to be a valet to bleeding snakes.

Yes, it was like a snake, that tail. It was like a snake, and it whipped up suddenly, caught Gilmore about the throat and tightened, so fast that the strangling man could emit no more than a frightened grunt. And the manacled hands jerked up and then swept down violently, and had it not been for Brown's shaggy mop of hair he would have died. And a clawed foot ripped one of the other men from throat to navel.

It was all so fast, and so vicious, and the being was fighting with a ferocity that was undiminished by the wounds that he, himself was receiving, was raging through the compartment like a tornado, a flesh and blood tornado with claws and teeth. Somebody had used his knife to slash Gilmore free, but he was out of the fight, as were Brown and the Marine with the ripped torso. Globules of blood from the ragged gash mingled with the blood that spouted from the stump of the severed tail, were dispersed by the violently agitated air to form a fine, sickening mist.

Knives were out now, and Grimes shouted that he wanted the prisoner alive, not dead. Knives were out, but the taloned feet of the captive were as effective as the human weapons, and the manacled hands were a bone-crushing club.

"Be careful!" Grimes was shouting. "Careful! Don't kill him!"

But Sonya was there, and she, of all those present, had come prepared for what was now happening. She had produced from somewhere in her scanty rags a tiny pistol, no more than a toy it looked. But it was no toy, and it fired anaesthetic darts. She hovered on the outskirts of the fight, her weapon ready, waiting for the chance to use it. Once she fired—and the needle-pointed projectile sank into glistening human skin, not matted fur. Yet another of the Marines was out of action.

She had to get closer to be sure of hitting her target, the target that was at the center of a milling mass of arms and legs, human and non-human. She had to get closer, and as

she approached, sliding her magnetized sandals over the deck in a deceptively rapid slouch, the being broke free of his captors, taking advantage of the sudden lapse into unconsciousness of the man whom Sonya had hit with her first shot.

She did not make a second one, the flailing arm of one of the men hit her gun hand, knocking the weapon from her grasp. And then the blood-streaked horror was on her, and the talons of one foot were hooked into the waistband of her rags and the other was upraised for a disembowelling stroke.

Without thinking, without consciously remembering all that he had been taught, Grimes threw his knife. But the lessons had been good ones, and, in this one branch of Personal Combat, the Commodore had been an apt pupil. Blood spurted from a severed caratoid artery and the claws—bloody themselves, but with human blood—did not more, in their last spasmodic twitch, than inflict a shallow scratch between the woman's breasts.

Grimes ran to his wife but she pushed him away, saying, "Don't mind me. There are others more badly hurt."

And Mayhew was trying to say something to him, was babbling about his dead amplifier, Lassie, about her last and lethal dream.

It made sense, but it had made sense to Grimes before the telepath volunteered his explanation. The Commodore had recognized the nature of the prisoner, in spite of the size of the being, in spite of the cranial development. In his younger days he had boarded a pest-ridden grain ship. He had recalled the vermin that he had seen in the traps set up by the ship's crew, and the stench of them.

And he remembered the old adage—that a cornered rat will fight.

XIV

Freedom was falling down the dark dimensions, so far with no course set, so far with her destination undecided.

In Grimes' day cabin there was a meeting of the senior

officers of the expedition to discuss what had already been learned, to make some sort of decision on what was to be done next. The final decision would rest with the Commodore, but he had learned, painfully, many years ago, that it is better to ask some of the questions than to know all the answers.

The Major was telling his story again: "It wasn't all that hard to get into the ship, sir. But they were waiting for us, in spacesuits, in the airlock vestibule. Some of them had pistols. As you know, we brought one back."

"Yes," said Grimes. "I've seen it. A not very effective laser weapon. I think that our workshop can turn out copies—with improvements."

"As you say, sir, not very effective. Luckily for us. And I gained the impression that they were rather scared of using them. Possibly it was the fear of doing damage to their own ship." He permitted himself a slight sneer. "Typical, I suppose, of merchant spacemen."

"It's easy to see, Major, that you've never had to write to Head Office to explain a half inch dent in the shell plating. But carry on."

"There were hordes of them, sir, literally choking the alleyways. We tried to cut and burn and bludgeon our way through them, to get to the control room, and if you hadn't recalled us we'd have done so . . ."

"If I hadn't recalled you you'd be prisoners now—or dead. And better off dead at that. But tell me, were you able to notice anything about the ship herself?"

"We were rather too busy, sir. Of course, if we'd been properly equipped, we'd have had at least two cameras. As it was . . ."

"I know. I know. You had nothing but spacesuits over your birthday suits. But surely you gained some sort of impression."

"Just a ship, sir. Alleyways, airtight doors and all the rest of it. Oh, yes . . . Fluorescent strips instead of luminescent panels. Old-fashioned."

"Sonya?"

"Sounds like a mercantile version of this wagon, John. Or like a specimen of Rim Rummers' vintage tonnage."

"Don't be catty. And you, Doctor?"

"So far," admitted the medical officer, "I've made only a superficial examination. But I'd say that our late prisoner was an Earth-type mammal. Male. Early middle age."

"And what species?"

"I don't know, Commodore. If we had thought to bring with us some laboratory white rats I could run a comparison of tissues."

"In other words, you smell a rat. Just as we all do." He was speaking softly now. "Ever since the first ship rats have been stowaways—in surface vessels, in aircraft, in spaceships. Carried to that planet in shipments of seed grain they became a major pest on Mars. But, so far, we have been lucky. There have been mutations, but never a mutation that has become a real menace to ourselves."

"Never?" asked Sonya with an arching of eyebrows.

"Never, so far as we know, in *our* Universe."

"But in this one . . ."

"Too bloody right they are," put in Williams. "Well, we know what's cookin' now, Skipper. We still have one nuclear thunderflash in our stores. I vote that we use it and blow ourselves back to where we came from."

"I wish it were as simple as all that, Commander," Grimes told him. "When we blew ourselves here, the chances were that the ship would be returned to her own Space-Time. When we attempt to reverse the process there will be, I suppose, a certain tendency for ourselves and the machinery and materials that we have installed to be sent back to our own Universe. But no more than a tendency. We shall be liable to find ourselves anywhere—or anywhen." He paused. "Not that it really worries any of us. We're all volunteers, with no close ties left behind us. But we have a job to do, and I suggest that we at least try to do it before attempting a return."

"Then what do we try to do, Skip?" demanded Williams.

"We've made a start, Commander. We know now what

we're up against. Intelligent, oversized rats who've enslaved man at least on the Rim Worlds.

"Tell me, Sonya, you know more of the workings of the minds of Federation top brass, both military and political, than I do. Suppose this state of affairs had come to pass in our Universe, a hundred years ago, say, when the Rim Worlds were no more than a cluster of distant colonies always annoying the Federation by demanding independence?"

She laughed bitterly. "As you know, there are planets whose humanoid inhabitants are subjects of the Shaara Empire. And on some of those worlds the mammalian slaves of the ruling arthropods are more than merely humanoid. They are human, descendents of ships' crews and passengers cast away in the days of the Ehrenhaft Drive vessels, the so-called gaussjammers. But we'd never dream of going to war against the Shaara to liberate our own flesh and blood. It just wouldn't be . . . expedient. And I guess that in this Space-Time it just wouldn't be expedient to go to war against these mutated rats. Too, there'll be quite a large body of opinion that will say that the human Rim Worlders should be left to stew in their own juice."

"So you, our representative of the Federation's armed forces, feel that we should accomplish nothing by making for Earth to tell our story."

"Not only should we accomplish nothing, but, in all probability, our ship would be confiscated and taken apart to see what makes her tick insofar as dimension hopping is concerned. And it would take us all a couple of lifetimes to break free of the red tape with which we should be festooned."

"In other words, if we want anything done we have to do it ourselves."

"Yes."

"Then do we want anything done?" asked Grimes quietly.

He was almost frightened by the reaction provoked by his question. It seemed that not only would he have a mutiny on his hands, but also a divorce. Everybody was talking at once, loudly and indignantly. There was the Doctor's high-pitched

bray: "And it was *human* flesh in the tissue culture vats!" and William's roar: "You saw the bodies of the sheilas in this ship, an' the scars on 'em!" and the Major's curt voice: "The Marine Corps will carry on even if the Navy rats!" Then Sonya, icily calm: "I thought that the old-fashioned virtues still survived on the Rim. I must have been mistaken."

"Quiet!" said Grimes. "Quiet!" he shouted. He grinned at his officers. "All right. You've made your sentiments quite clear, and I'm pleased that you have. The late owners of this ship are intelligent beings—but that does not entitle them to treat other intelligent beings as they treat their slaves. Sonya mentioned the human slaves on the worlds of the Shaara Empire, but those so-called slaves are far better off than many a free peasant on Federation worlds. They're not mistreated, and they're not livestock. But we've seen the bodies of the men, women and children who died aboard this ship. And if we can make their deaths not in vain . . ."

Sonya flashed him an apologetic smile. "But how?" she asked. "But how?"

"That's the question." He turned to Mayhew. "You've been maintaining a listening watch. Do these people have psionic radio?"

"I'm afraid they do, sir," the telepath told him unhappily. "I'm afraid they do. And . . ."

"Out with it, man."

"They use amplifiers, just as we do. But . . ."

"But what?"

"They aren't dogs' brains. They're human ones!"

XV

SONYA ASKED SHARPLY, "And what else have you to report?"

"I . . . I have been listening."

"That's what you're paid for. And what have you picked up?"

"There's a general alarm out. To all ships, and to Faraway

Ultimo and Thule, and to the garrisons on Tharn, Mellise and Grollor . . ."

"And to Stree?"

"No. Nothing at all to Stree."

"It makes sense," murmured the woman. "It makes sense. Tharn, with its humanoids living in the equivalent of Earth's Middle Ages. Grollor, with just the beginnings of an industrial culture. Mellise, with its intelligent amphibians and no industries, no technology at all. Our mutant friends must have found the peoples of all those worlds a push-over."

"But Stree . . . We don't know just what powers—psychic? psionic?—those philosophical lizards can muster, and we're on friendly terms with them. So . . ."

"So we might get help there," said Grimes. "It's worth considering. Meanwhile, Mr. Mayhew, has there been any communication with the anti-matter worlds to the Galactic West?"

"No, sir."

"And any messages to our next door neighbors—the Shakesperian Sector, the Empire of Waverly?"

"No, sir."

Grimes smiled—but it was a cold smile. "Then this is, without doubt, a matter for the Confederacy. The legalities of it all are rather fascinating . . ."

"The illegalities, Skipper," said Williams. "But I don't mind being a pirate in a good cause."

"You don't mind being a pirate. Period," said Sonya.

"Too bloody right I don't. It makes a change."

"Shall we regard ourselves as liberators?" asked Grimes, but it was more an order than a question. "Meanwhile, Commander Williams, I suggest that we set course for Stree. And you, Mr. Mayhew, maintain your listening watch. Let me know at once if there are any other vessels in our vicinity—even though they haven't Mass Proximity Indicators they can still pick up our temporal precession field, and synchronize."

"And what are your intentions when you get to Stree, sir?" asked the Major.

"As I told the Admiral, I play by ear." He unstrapped himself from his chair and, closely followed by Sonya, led the way to the control room. He secured himself in his seat and watched Williams as the Commander went through the familiar routine of setting course—Mannschenn Drive off, directional gyroscopes brought into play to swing the ship to her new heading, the target star steadied in the cartwheel sight, the brief burst of power from the reaction drive. Mannschenn Drive cut in again. The routine was familiar, and the surroundings in which it was carried out were familiar, but he still found it hard to adjust to the near nudity of himself and his officers. But Williams, with only three bands of indigo dye on each thick, hairy wrist to make his rank, was doing the job as efficiently as he would have done had those bands been gold braid on black cloth.

"On course, Skipper," he announced.

"Thank you, Commander Williams. All off duty personnel may stand down. Maintain normal deep space watches." Accompanied by his wife, he returned to his quarters.

It was, at first and in some respects, just another voyage.

In the Mannschenn Drive Room the complexity of spinning gyroscopes precessed, tumbled, quivered on the very edge of invisibility, pulling the ship and all her people with them down the dark dimensions, through the warped continuum, down and along the empty immensities of the rim of space.

But, reported Mayhew, they were not alone. There were other ships, fortunately distant, too far away for *Freedom's* wake through Space-Time to register on their instruments.

It was more than just another voyage. There was the hate and the fear with which they were surrounded, said Mayhew. He, of course, was listening only—the other operators were sending. There were warships in orbit about Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo and Thule; there were squadrons hastening to take up positions off Tharn, Mellise, Grollor and Stree. And the orders to single vessels and to fleets were brutally simple: *Destroy on sight.*

"What else did you expect?" said Sonya, when she was told.

"I thought," said Grimes, "that they might try to capture us."

"Why should they? As far as they know we're just a bunch of escaped slaves who've already tried their hand at piracy. In any case, I should hate to be captured by those . . . things."

"Xenophobia—from *you*, of all people?"

"No . . . not Xenophobia. Real aliens one can make allowances for. But these aren't real aliens. They're a familiar but dangerous pest, a feared and hated pest that's suddenly started fighting us with our own weapons. We have never had any cause to love them—human beings have gotten, at times, quite sentimental over mice, but never rats—and they've never had any cause to love us. A strong, mutual antipathy. . . ." Absently she rubbed the fading scar between her breasts with her strong fingers.

"What do you make of this squadron dispatched to Stree?"

"A precautionary measure. *They* think that we might be making for there, and that they might be able to intercept us when we emerge into normal Space-Time. But according to Mayhew, there have been no psionic messages to planetary authorities, as there have been to the military governments on Tharn, Mellise and Grollor." She said, a note of query in her voice, "We shall make it before they do?"

"I think so. I hope so. Our Mannschenn Drive unit is running flat out. It's pushed to the safety limits. And you know what will happen if the governor packs up."

"I don't know," she told him. "Nobody knows. I do know most of the spacemen's fairy stories about what *might* happen."

"Once you start playing around with Time, anything might happen," he said. "The most important thing is to be able to take advantage of what happens."

She grinned. "I think I can guess what's flitting through your apology for a mind."

"Just an idea," he said. "Just an idea. But I'd like to have

a talk with those saurian philosophers before I try to do anything about it."

"If we get there before that squadron," she said.

"If we don't, we may try out the idea before we're ready to. But I think we're still leading the field."

"What's that?" she demanded suddenly.

That was not a noise. *That* was something that is even more disturbing in any powered ship traversing any medium—a sudden cessation of noise.

The buzzer that broke the tense silence was no proper substitute for the thin, high keening of the Mannschenn Drive.

It was the officer of the watch, calling from Control. "Commodore, sir, O.O.W. here. Reporting breakdown of interstellar drive."

Grimes did not need to be told. He had experienced the uncanny sensation of temporal disorientation when the precessing gyroscopes slowed, ceased to precess. He said, "Don't bother the engineers—every second spent answering the telephone means delay in effecting repairs. I'll be right up."

"Looks as though our friends might beat us to Stree after all," remarked Sonya quietly.

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Grimes.

XVI

THE BREAKDOWN OF *Freedom's* Mannschenn Drive unit was a piece of bad luck—but, Grimes admitted, the luck could have been worse, much worse. The ship had made her re-entry into the normal continuum many light years from any focal point and well beyond the maximum range of the radar installations of the enemy war vessels. She had Space—or, at any rate, a vast globe of emptiness—all to herself. The odds had been in favor of her finding herself in just this situation. But, as an amateur of naval history, Grimes knew full well what an overly large part is played by sheer, blind mischance in warfare. Far too many times a hunted ship has

blundered into the midst of her pursuers when all on board have considered themselves justified in relaxing their vigilance—not that vigilance is of great avail against overwhelming fire power. And fire power, whether it be the muzzle loading cannon of the days of sail or the guided missile and laser beam of today, is what makes the final decision.

But, so far, there was no need to worry about fire power. A good look-out, by all available means, was of primary importance. And so, while *Freedom* fell—but slowly, slowly, by the accepted standards of interstellar navigation—towards the distant Stree sun the long fingers of her radar pulses probed the emptiness about her and, in the cubby hole that he shared with the naked canine brain that was a poor and untrained substitute for his beloved Lassie, Mayhew listened, alert for the faintest whisper of thought that would offer some clue as to the enemy's whereabouts and intentions.

After a while, having received no reports from the engineers, Grimes went along to the Mannschenn Drive Room. He knew that the engineroom staff was working hard, even desperately, and that the buzz of a telephone in such circumstances can be an almost unbearable irritation. Even so, as Captain of the ship he felt that he was entitled to know what was going on.

He stood for a while in the doorway of the compartment, watching. He could see what had happened—a seized bearing of the main rotor. That huge flywheel, in the gravitational field of an Earth type planet, would weigh at least five tons and, even with *Freedom* falling free, it still possessed considerable mass. Its spindle had to be eased clear of the damaged bearing, and great care had to be taken that it did not come into contact with and damage the smaller gyroscopes surrounding it. Finally Bronson, the Chief Engineer, pausing to wipe his sweating face, noticed the Commadore and delivered himself of a complaint.

"We should have installed one of our own units, sir."

"Why, Commander?"

"Because ours have a foolproof system of automatic lubrication, that's why. Because the bastards who built this ship

don't seem to have heard of such a thing, and must rely on their sense of smell to warn them as soon as anything even starts to run hot."

"And that's possible," murmured Grimes, thinking that the mutants had not been intelligent long enough for their primitive senses to become dulled. Then he asked, "How long will you be?"

"At least two hours. At least. That's the best I can promise you."

"Very good." He paused. "And how long will it take you to modify the lubrication system, to bring it up to our standards?"

"I haven't even thought about that, Commodore. But it'd take days."

"We can't afford the time," said Grimes as much to himself as to the engineer. "Just carry on with the repairs to the main rotor, and let me know as soon as the unit is operational. I shall be in Control." As he turned to go he added, half seriously, "And it might be an idea to see that your watchkeepers possess a keen sense of smell!"

Back in the control room he felt more at home, even though this was the nerve center of a crippled ship. Officers sat at their posts and there was the reassuring glow from the screens of navigational instruments—the chart tank and the radarscopes. Space, for billions of miles on every hand, was still empty, which was just as well.

He went to stand by Sonya and Williams, told them what he had learned.

"So they beat us to Stree," commented the Executive Officer glumly.

"I'm afraid that they will, Commander."

"And then what do we do?"

"I wish I knew just what the situation is on Stree," murmured Grimes. "*They* don't seem to have taken over, as they have on the other Rim Worlds. Should we be justified in breaking through to make a landing?"

"Trying to break through, you mean," corrected Sonya.

"All right. Trying to break through. Will it be a justified risk?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "As far as I can gather from Mayhew, our rodent friends are scared of Stree—and its people. They've made contact, of course, but that's all. The general feeling seems to be one of you leave us alone and we'll leave you alone."

"I know the Streen," said Grimes. "Don't forget that it was I that made the first landing on their planet when I opened up the Eastern Circuit to trade. They're uncanny brutes—but, after all, mammals and saurians have little in common, psychologically speaking."

"Spare us the lecture, John. Furthermore, while you were nosing around in the engineroom, Mayhew rang Control. He's established contact with the squadron bound for Stree."

"What! Is the man mad? Send for him at once."

"Quietly, John, quietly. Our Mr. Mayhew may be a little round the bend, like all his breed, but he's no fool. When I said that he had made contact with the enemy I didn't mean that he had been nattering with the officer commanding the squadron. Oh, he's made contact—but with the underground."

"Don't talk in riddles."

"Just a delaying action, my dear, to give you time to simmer down. I didn't want you to order that Mayhew be thrown out of the airlock without a spacesuit. The underground, as I have referred to it, is made up of the human brains that our furry friends use as psionic amplifiers."

"But it's still criminal folly. *They* will employ telepaths as psionic radio officers, just as we do. And those telepaths will read the thoughts of their amplifiers, just as Mayhew reads the thoughts of his dog's brain in aspic."

"But will they? Can they? Don't forget that our telepaths employ as amplifiers the brains of creatures considerably less intelligent than Man. Whoever heard of a dog with any sort of mental screen? *They* will be using the brains of humans who have been unlucky enough to be born with telepathic

ability. And any human telepath, any trained human telepath, is able to set up a screen."

"But why should *They* use human brains? The risk of sabotage of vital communications . . ."

"What other brains are available for their use? As far as *They* are concerned, both dogs and cats are out—repeat, out!"

"Why?"

"Far too much mutual antipathy."

"Wouldn't that also apply in the case of themselves and human beings?"

"No. I doubt if they really hate us. After all, we have provided their ancestors with food, shelter and transportation for many centuries. The rats would have survived if they hadn't had the human race to bludge upon, but they wouldn't have flourished, as they have, traps and poisons notwithstanding. Oh, all right. With the exception of the occasional small boy with his albino pets, every human being has this hatred of rats. But hate isn't the only mainspring of human behavior."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at it this way. Suppose you're a telepath, born on one of the Rim Worlds in this continuum. By the time that your talent has been noted, by the time that you're . . . conscripted, you will have come to love your parents and the other members of your family. You will have made friends outside the family circle. Without being overly precocious you may even have acquired a lover."

"I think I see. Play ball, or else."

"Yes."

"Then why should the poor bastards risk the 'or else' now?"

"Because Mayhew's peddled them a line of goods. Very subtly, very carefully. Just induced dreams at first, just dreams of life as it is on the Rim Worlds in *our* Universe—but a somewhat glamorized version."

"I can imagine it. Mayhew's a very patriotic Rim Worlder."

"First the dreams, and then the hints. The whisper that all that they have dreamed is true, that all of it could become

the way of life of their own people. The story of what actually happened to *Freedom* and to the escaped slaves. The message that we have come to help them—and the request for help for ourselves.”

“But I don’t understand how he could have done all this in so short a time.”

“How long does a dream take? It is said that a man can dream of a lifetime’s happenings in a few seconds.”

Already Grimes’ active mind was toying with ideas, with ruses and stratagems. Deceit, he knew, has always been a legitimate technique of warfare. Not that legalities counted for overmuch in this here-and-now. Or did they? If the Federation got dragged into the mess, he and his people might well find themselves standing trial for piracy. It was unlikely—but, bearing in mind the Federation’s pampering of various unpleasant nonhuman races on his time track, possible.

He grinned. The legal aspects of it all were far too complicated—and, at the moment, far too unimportant.

He said, “Send for Mr. Mayhew.”

XVII

GRIMES WENT INTO conference with Mayhew and certain others of his officers. There was Sonya, of course, and there was Williams, and there was Dangerford, the Chief Reaction Drive Engineer. Also present was one Ella Kubinsky, who held the rank of Lieutenant in the Rim Worlds Volunteer Naval Reserve. She was not a spacewoman. She was a specialist officer, and in civilian life she was an instructor at the University of Lorn, in the Department of Linguistics. Looking at her, Grimes could not help thinking that she was ideally suited for the part that she would be called upon to play. Her straggling hair was so pale as to be almost white; her chin and forehead receded sharply from her pointed nose. Her arms and legs were scrawny, her breasts meager. She had been nicknamed “The White Rat.”

To begin with, Grimes and Sonya questioned Mayhew closely, with Sonya playing the major part in the interrogation. They wished that they could have subjected the bodiless human telepaths aboard the enemy ships to a similar interrogation—but that, of course, was impossible. However, Mayhew said that they were sincere in their desire to help—and sincerity is almost impossible to simulate when you have thrown your mind open to another skilled, trained intelligence.

Then other, less recondite matters were discussed with Williams and Dangerford. These concerned the efficiency of various detergents and paint removers and, also, the burning off from the hull plating of certain lettering and its replacement with other letters, these characters to be fabricated in the Engineers' workshop by Dangerford and his juniors who, of course, were not involved in the repair work to the Mannschenn Drive unit. Mayhew was called upon to supply the specifications for these characters.

And then tapes were played to Ella Kubinsky. These were records of signals received from the mutants' ships. She repeated the words, imitating them in a thin, high, squeaking voice that exactly duplicated the original messages. Even Sonya expressed her satisfaction.

While this was being done, Mayhew retired to his cabin for further consultations with his fellow telepaths. There was so much that they could tell him. There was so much that they knew, as all psionic signals had to pass through their brains. When he came back to Grimes' cabin he was able to tell the Commodore what name to substitute for both *Freedom* and *Distriyir* when these sets of characters had been removed from the forward shell plating.

While Williams and his working party were engaged outside the ship, and Dangerford and his juniors were fabricating the new characters, Grimes, Sonya and Ella Kubinsky accompanied Mayhew to his quarters. It was more convenient there to rehearse and to be filled in with the necessary background details. It seemed, at times, that the disembodied presences of the human psionic amplifiers were crowded with

them into the cramped compartment, bringing with them the mental stink of their hates and fears. It has been said that to know is to love—but, very often, to know is to hate. Those brains, bodiless, naked in their baths of nutrient solution, must know their unhuman masters as no intelligence clothed in flesh and blood could ever know them. And Grimes found himself pitying Mayhew's own psionic amplifier, the brain of the dog that possessed neither the knowledge nor the experience to hate the beings who had deprived it of a normal existence.

Bronson had finished the repairs to the Mannschenn before Williams and Dangerford were ready. He was glad enough to be able to snatch a brief rest before his machinery was restarted.

And then the new name was in place.

Grimes, Sonya and Williams went back to Control where, using the public address system, the Commodore told his ship's company of the plan for the landing on Stree. He sensed a feeling of disappointment. Carter, the Gunnery Officer, and the Major and his Marines had been looking forward to a fight. Well, they could be ready for one, but if all went as planned they would not be getting it.

Cirsir-Corsair—as she had been renamed, set course for the Stree sun. The real *Corsair* had been unable to join the squadron, being grounded for repairs on Tharn. The real *Corsair's* psionic amplifier knew, by this time, what was happening, but would not pass on the information to the unhuman psionic radio officer who was his lord and master. And the psionic amplifiers aboard the other ships would let it be known that *Corsair* was hastening to join the blockade of Stree.

It was all so simple. The operation, said Sonya, was an Intelligence Officer's dream of Heaven—to know everything that the enemy was thinking, and to have full control over the enemy's communications. The pseudo *Corsair*—and Grimes found that he preferred that name to either *Freedom* or *Destroyer*—was in psionic touch with the squadron that she was hurrying to overtake. Messages were passing back and

forth, messages that, from the single ship, were utterly bogus and that, from the fleet, were full of important information. Soon Grimes knew every detail of tonnage, manning and armament, and knew that he must avoid any sort of show-down. There was enough massed fire-power to blow his ship into fragments in a microsecond, whereupon the laser beams, in another microsecond, would convert those fragments into puffs of incandescent vapor.

As *Corsair* closed the range the squadron ahead was detected on her instruments, the slight flickering of needles on the faces of gauges, the shallow undulation of the glowing traces in monitor tubes, showed that in the vicinity were other vessels using the interstellar drive. They were not yet visible, of course, and would not be unless temporal precession rates were synchronized. And synchronization was what Grimes did not want. As far as he knew, his *Corvair* was typical of her class (as long as her damaged side was hidden from view) but the humans (if bodiless brains could still be called human) aboard the ships of the squadron were not spacemen, knew nothing of subtle differences that can be picked up immediately by the trained eye.

Grimes wished to be able to sweep past the enemy, invisible, no more than interference on their screens, and to make his landing on Stree before the squadron fell into its orbits. That was his wish, and that was his hope, but Bronson, since the breakdown, did not trust his Mannschenn Drive unit and dare not drive the machine at its full capacity. He pointed out that, even so, they were gaining slowly upon the enemy, and that was evidence that the engineers of those vessels trusted their interstellar drives even less than he, Bronson did. The Commodore was obliged to admit that his engineer was probably right in this assumption.

So it was when *Corsair*, at last, cut her Drive and re-entered normal Space-Time that the blockading cruisers were already taking up their stations. Radar and radio came into play. From the transceiver in *Corsair's* control room squeaked an irritable voice: "*Heenteer tee Ceerseer, Heenteer tee Ceerseer, teeke eep steeten ees eerdeered.*"

Ella Kubinsky, who had been thoroughly rehearsed for just this situation, squeaked the acknowledgment.

Grimes stared out of the viewports at the golden globe that was Stree, at the silver, flitting sparks that were the other ships. He switched his regard to Williams, saw that the Executive Officer was going through the motions of maneuvering the ship into a closed orbit—and, as he had been ordered, making a deliberate botch of it.

"*Heenteer tee Ceerseer. Whee ees neet yeer veeseen screen een?*"

Ella Kubinsky squeaked that it was supposed to have been overhauled on Tharn, and added some unkind remarks about the poor quality of humanoid labor. Somebody—Grimes was sorry that he did not see who it was—whispered unkindly that if Ella did switch on the screen it would make no difference, anyhow. The ugly girl flushed angrily, but continued to play her part calmly enough.

Under Williams' skilled handling, the ship was falling closer and closer to the great, expanding globe of the planet. But this did not go unnoticed for long. Again there was the enraged squeaking, but in a new voice. "*Thees ees thee Eedmeereel. Wheet thee heell eere yee plee-eeng et, Ceerseer?*"

Ella told her story of an alleged overhaul of reaction drive controls and made further complaints about the quality of the dockyard labor on Tharn.

"*Wheree ees yeer Cepteen? Teell heem tee speak tee mee.*"

Ella said that the Captain was busy, at the controls. The Admiral said that the ship would do better by herself than with such an illegitimate son of a human female handling her. Williams, hearing this, grinned and muttered, "I did *not* ride to my parents' wedding on a bicycle."

"*Wheree ees thee Ceepteen?*"

And there was a fresh voice: "*Heeveec tee Heenteer. Wheree deed shee geet theet deemeeger?*"

"All right," said Grimes. "Action stations. And get her downstairs, Williams, as fast as Christ will let you!"

Gyroscopes whined viciously and rockets screamed, driv-

ing the ship down to the exosphere in a powered dive. From the vents in her sides puffed the cloud of metallic particles that would protect her from laser—until the particles themselves were destroyed by the stabbing beams. And her launching racks spewed missiles, each programmed for random action, and to seek out and destroy any target except their parent ship. Not that they stood much chance of so doing—but they would, at least, keep the enemy laser gunners busy.

Corsair hit the first, tenuous fringes of the Streen atmosphere and her internal temperature rose fast, too fast. Somehow, using rockets only, taking advantage of her aerodynamic qualities, such as they were, Williams turned her, stood her on her tail. Briefly she was a sitting duck—but Carter's beams were stabbing and slicing, swatting down the swarm of missiles that had been loosed at her.

She was falling then, stern first, falling fast but under control, balanced on her tail of incandescence, the rocket thrust that was slowing her, that would bring her to a standstill (Grimes hoped) when her vaned landing gear was only scant feet above the surface of the planet.

She was dropping through the overcast—blue-silver at first, then gradually changing hue to gold. She was dropping through the overcast, and there was no pursuit, although when she entered regions of denser atmosphere she was escorted, was surrounded by great, shadowy shapes that wheeled about them on wide wings, that glared redly at them through the control room ports.

Grimes recognized them. After all, in his own continuum he had been the first human to set foot on Stree. They were the huge flying lizards, not unlike the pterosauria of Earth's past—but in Grimes' Space-Time they had never behaved like this. They had avoided spaceships and aircraft. These showed no inclination towards doing so, and only one of the huge brutes colliding with the ship, tipping her off balance, could easily produce a situation beyond even Williams' superlative pilotage to correct.

But they kept their distance, more or less, and followed *Corsair* down, down, through the overcast and through the

clear air below the cloud blanket. And beneath her was the familiar landscape—low, rolling hills, broad rivers, lush green plains that were no more than wide clearings in the omnipresent jungle.

Yes, it was familiar, and the Commodore could make out the site of his first landing—one of the smaller clearings that, by some freak of chance or nature, had the outline of a great horse.

Inevitably, as he had been on the occasion of his first landing, Grimes was reminded of a poem that he had read as a young man, that he had tried to memorize—*The Ballad of the White Horse*, by Chesterton. How did it go?

*For the end of the world was long ago
And all we stand today
As children of a second birth
Like some strange people left on Earth
After a Judgment Day.*

Yes, the end of their world had come for the Rim colonists, in this Universe, long ago.

And could Grimes and his crew of outsiders reverse the Judgment?

XIX

SLOWLY, CAUTIOUSLY *Corvair* dropped to the clearing, her incandescent rocket exhaust incinerating the grasslike vegetation, raising great, roiling clouds of smoke and steam. A human-built warship would have been fitted with nozzles from which, in these circumstances, a fire-smothering foam could be ejected. But *Corsair's* builders would have considered such a device a useless refinement. Slowly she settled, then came to rest, rocking slightly on her landing gear. Up and around the control room ports billowed the dirty smoke and the white steam, gradually thinning. Except for a few desert areas, the climate of Stree was uniformly wet and nothing would burn for long.

Grimes asked Mayhew to—as he phrased it—take psionic

soundings, but from his past experience of this planet he knew that it would be a waste of time. The evidence indicated that the Streen practiced telepathy among themselves but that their minds were closed to outsiders. But the saurians must have seen the ship land, and the pillar of cloud that she had created would be visible for many miles.

Slowly the smoke cleared and those in the control room were able to see, through the begrimed ports, the edge of the jungle, the tangle of lofty, fern-like growths with, between them, the interlacing entanglement of creepers. Something was coming through the jungle, its passage marked by an occasional eruption of tiny flying lizards from the crests of the tree ferns. Something was coming through the jungle, and heading towards the ship.

Grimes got up from his chair and, accompanied by Sonya, made his way down to the airlock. He smiled with wry amusement as he recalled his first landing on this world. *Then* he had been able to do things properly, had strode down the ramp in all the glory of gold braid and brass buttons, had even worn a quite useless ceremonial sword for the occasion. *Then* he had been accompanied by his staff, as formally attired as himself. *Now* he was wearing scanty, dirty rags and accompanied by a woman as nearly naked as he was. (But the Streen, who saw no need for clothing, had been more amused than impressed by his finery.)

The airlock door was open and the ramp was out. The Commodore and his wife did not descend at once to the still slightly smoking ground. One advantage of his dress uniform, thought Grimes, was that it had included half-Wellington boots. The couple watched the dark tunnel entrance in the cliff of solid greenery that marked the end of the jungle track.

A Streen emerged. He would have passed for a small dinosaur from Earth's remote past, although the trained eye of a paleontologist would have detected differences. There was one difference that was obvious even to the untrained eye—the cranial development. This being had a brain, and not a small one. The little, glittering eyes stared at the hu-

mans. A voice like the hiss of escaping steam said, "Greetings."

"Greetings," replied the Commodore.

"You come again, man Grimes." It was a statement of fact rather than a question.

"I have never been here before," said Grimes, adding, "Not in this Space-Time."

"You have been here before. The last time your body was covered with cloth and metal, trappings of no functional value. But it does not matter."

"How can you remember?"

"I cannot, but our Wise Ones remember all things. What was, what is to come, what might have been and what might be. They told me to greet you and to bring you to them."

Grimes was less than enthusiastic. On the occasion of his last visit the Wise Ones had lived not in the jungle but in a small, atypical patch of rocky desert, many miles to the north. Then he had been able to make the journey in one of *Faraway Quest's* helicopters. Now he had no flying machines at his disposal, and a spaceship is an unhandy brute to navigate in a planetary atmosphere. He did not fancy a long, long journey on foot, or even riding one of the lesser saurians that the Streen used as draught animals, along a rough track partially choked with thorny undergrowth. Once again he was acutely conscious of the inadequacy of his attire.

The native cackled. (The Streen were not devoid of a sense of humor.) He said, "The Wise Ones told me that you would not be clad for a journey. The Wise Ones await you in the village."

"Is it far?"

"It is where it was when you came before, when you landed your ship in this very place."

"No more than half an hour's walk," began Grimes, addressing Sonya, then fell suddenly silent as an intense light flickered briefly, changing and brightening the green of the jungle wall, the gaudy colors of the flowering vines. Involuntarily he looked up, but the golden overcast was unbroken. There was another flare behind the cloud blanket, blue-

white, distant, and then, belatedly, the thunder of the first explosion drifted down, ominous and terrifying.

"Missiles . . . whispered the Commodore. "And my ship's a sitting duck . . ."

"Sir," hissed the saurian, "you are not to worry. The Wise Ones have taken adequate steps for your—and our—protection."

"But you have no science, no technology!" exclaimed Grimes, realizing the stupidity of what he had said when it was too late.

"We have science, man Grimes. We have machines to pit against the machines of your enemies. But our machines, unlike yours, are of flesh and blood, not of metal—although our anti-missiles, like yours, possess only a limited degree of intelligence."

"These people," explained Grimes to Sonya, "are superb biological engineers."

"I know," she said. "And I have little doubt that their air umbrella of pterodactyls will last longer than our furry friends' supply of missiles. So I suggest that we leave them to it and go to see the Wise Ones." She looked dubiously at the jungle, then turned to call to a woman inside the ship, "Peggy! Bring us out a couple of machetes!"

"You will not need them," commented the Streen, "even though your skins are too soft."

They did need them, even though their guide went ahead like a tank clearing the way for infantry. The vines and brambles were springy, reaching out with taloned tentacles as soon as the saurian had passed. Grimes and Sonya slashed until their arms were tired, but even so, their perspiration smarted painfully in the fresh scratches all over their bodies. They were far from sorry when they emerged into another clearing, a small one, almost completely roofed over with the dense foliage of the surrounding trees.

There were the usual huts, woven from still-living creepers. There was the steaming compost pile that was the hatchery. There were the domesticated lizards, large and small,

engaged in their specialized tasks—digging the vegetable plots, weeding and pruning. There were the young of the Streen, looking absurdly like plucked chickens, displaying the curiosity that is common to all intelligent beings throughout the Galaxy, keeping a respectful distance from the visitors, staring at them from their black, unwinking eyes. There were the adults, equally curious, some of whom hustled the community's children out of the path of the humans, clearing a way to the door of a hut that, by Streen standards, was imposing. From the opening drifted blue eddies of smoke—aromatic, almost intoxicating. Grimes knew that the use of the so-called sacred herbs, burned in a brazier and the smoke inhaled, was confined to the Wise Ones.

There were three of the beings huddled there in the semi-darkness, grouped around the tripod from the top of which was suspended the cage in which the source of the smoke smoldered ruddily. The Commodore sneezed. The vapor, as far as he could gather, was mildly euphoric and, at the same time, hallucinogenic—but to human beings it was only an irritant to the nasal membranes. In spite of his efforts to restrain himself he sneezed again, loudly.

The Streen around the tripod cackled thinly. The Commodore, his eyes becoming accustomed to the dim lighting, could see that they were old, their scales shabby and dulled with a lichenous growth, their bones protuberant beneath their armored skins. There was something familiar about them—sensed rather than visually recognized. One of them cackled, "Our dream smoke still makes you sneeze, man Grimes."

"Yes, Wise One."

"And what do you here, man Grimes? Were you not happy in your own here-and-now? Were you not happy with the female of your kind whom you have acquired since last we met, otherwhen-and-where?"

"You'd better say 'yes' to that!" muttered Sonya.

Again the thin cackling. "We are lucky, man Grimes. We do not have the problems of you mammals, with your hot blood. . . ." A pause. "But still, we love life, just as you do. And we know that out there, falling about our world, are

those who would end our lives, just as they would end yours. Now they have not the power, but it is within their grasp."

"But would it matter to you?" asked Sonya. "I thought that you were—how shall I put it?—co-existent with yourselves in all the alternative universes. You must be. You remember John's first landing on this planet—but that was never in *this* here-and-now."

"You do not understand, woman Sonya. You cannot understand. But we will try to explain. Man Grimes—in *your* here-and-now what cargoes do your ships bring to Stree?"

"Luxuries like tea and tobacco, Wise One. And books. . . ."

"What sort of books, man Grimes?"

"History. Philosophy. Novels, even . . . poetry."

"And your poets say more in fewer words than your philosophers. There is one whom I will quote to you:

And he who lives more lives than one

More deaths than one shall die.

Does that answer your question, woman Sonya?"

"I can *feel* it," she murmured. "But I can't understand it."

"It does not matter. And it does not matter if you do not understand what you are going to do—as long as you understand how to do it."

"And what is that?" asked Grimes.

"To destroy the egg before it hatches," was the reply.

XX

ANYBODY MEETING the seemingly primitive Streen for the first time would never dream that these saurians, for all their obvious intelligence, are engineers. Their towns and villages are, to the human way of thinking, utterly innocent of machines. But what is a living organism but a machine—an engine that derives its motive power from the combustion of hydro-carbons in an oxygen atmosphere? On Stree, a variety of semi-intelligent lizards perform the tasks that on man-colonized worlds are performed by mechanisms of metal and plastic.

Yes, the Streen *are* engineers—biological and psychological engineers—of no mean calibre.

In their dim hut, what little light there was further obscured by the acrid fumes from the brazier, the Wise Ones talked and Grimes and Sonya listened. Much of what they were told was beyond them—but there was emotional rather than intellectual acceptance. They would not altogether understand—but they could *feel*. And, after all, the symbiosis of flesh-and-blood machine and machine of metal and plastic was not too alien a concept. Such symbiosis, to a limited extent, has been known ever since the first seaman handled the first ship, learning to make that clumsy contraption of wood and fiber an extension of his own body.

Then, convinced although still not understanding, the Commodore and his wife returned to the ship. With them—slowly, creakingly—walked Serressor, the most ancient of the Wise Ones, and ahead of them their original guide did his best, as before, to clear a way for them through the spiny growths.

They came to the clearing, to the charred patch of ground already speckled with the pale green sprouts of new growth. And already the air ferns had begun to take root upon protuberances from the ship's shell plating, from turrets and sponsons and antennae; already the vines were crawling up the vaned tripod of the landing gear. Williams had a working party out, men and women who were hacking ill-humoredly at the superfluous and encroaching greenery.

From the corner of his eye the Executive Officer saw the approach of the Commodore, ceased shouting directions to his crew and walked slowly to meet his superior. He said, "The game's crook, Skipper. What with lianas an' lithophytes we'll be lucky to get off the ground. An' if we do, we've had it, like as not."

"Why, Commander Williams?"

"Mayhew tells me that *They* have cottoned on to what their psionic amplifiers have been doing. So—no more psionic amplifiers. Period."

"So we can't give them false information through their own communications system," said Sonya.

"You can say that again, Mrs. Grimes."

Serressor croaked, "So you depend upon misdirection to make your escape from our world."

"That is the case, Wise One," Grimes told him.

"We have already arranged that, man Grimes."

"You have?" Williams looked at the ancient saurian, seeing him for the first time. "You have? Cor stone the bleedin' lizards, Skipper, what is this?"

"This, Commander Williams," said Grimes coldly, "is Serressor, Senior Wise One of the Streen. He and his people are as interested in disposing of the mutants as we are. They have told us a way in which it may be done, and Serressor will be coming with us to play his part in the operation."

"An' how will you do it?" demanded Williams, addressing the saurian.

Serressor hissed, "Destroy the egg before it is hatched."

Surprisingly, Williams did not explode into derision. He said quietly, "I'd thought o' that myself. We could do it—but it's iffy, iffy. Too bloody iffy. There're all the stories about what happens when the Drive gets out o' kilter, but nobody's ever come back to tell us if they're true."

"If we're going to use the Drive as Serressor suggests, it will have to be fitted with a special governor."

"That makes sense, Skipper. But where're we gettin' this governor from?"

"We have it—or him—right here."

"Better him than me. There're better ways o' dyin' than bein' turned inside out." He shifted his regard to the working party, who had taken the opportunity to relax their efforts. "Back to yer gardenin', yer bunch o' drongoes! I want this hull clean as a baby's bottom!"

"Shouldn't you have said 'smooth', Commander?" asked Sonya sweetly.

Before an argument could start Grimes pulled her up the ramp and into the ship. Following them slowly came the aged and decrepit saurian.

Grimes and his officers were obliged to admit that the

Streen had planned well and cunningly. When *Corsair* was ready for blasting off a veritable horde of the winged lizards assembled above her, most of them carrying in their talons fragments of metal. Obedient to the command of their masters—it seemed that the Streen were, after all, telepathic, but only insofar as their own kind were concerned—the pterosaurs grouped themselves into a formation resembling a spaceship, flapped off to the eastward. To the radar operators of the blockading squadron it would appear that *Corsair* had lifted, was navigating slowly and clumsily within the planetary atmosphere.

There were missiles, of course.

Some were intercepted by the suicidal air umbrella above the decoys, some, whose trajectory would take them into uninhabited jungle regions, were allowed to continue their fall to the ground. They had been programmed to seek and to destroy a spaceship, winged lizards, even metal-bearing lizards, they ignored.

Meanwhile, but cautiously, cautiously, with frequent and random shifts of frequency, *Corsair's* radio was probing the sky. It seemed that the mutants' squadron had swallowed the bait. Ship after ship broke from her orbit, recklessly expending her reaction mass so as to be advantageously situated when *Corsair*, the pseudo-*Corsair*, emerged from the overcase into space.

And then the way out was as clear as ever it would be. The mutants' cruisers were hull down, dropping below the round shoulder of the world. Aboard *Corsair* all hands were at their stations, and the firing chambers were warmed up in readiness.

Grimes took her upstairs himself. With a deliberately dramatic flourish he brought his hand down to the keys, as though he were smacking a ready and willing steed on the rump. It was more like being fired from a gun than a conventional blast-off. Acceleration thrust all hands deep into the padding of their chairs. The Commadore was momentarily worried by a thin, high whistling that seemed to originate inside the ship rather than outside her hull. Then, had it not

been for the brutal down-drag on his facial muscles, he would have smiled. He remembered that the Streen, normally coldly unemotional, had always expressed appreciation of a trip in a space-vessel and had enjoyed, especially, violent maneuvers such as the one that he was now carrying out. If Serressor was whistling, then he was happy.

Corsair whipped through the cloud blanket as though it had been no more than a chiffon veil, and harsh sunlight beat through the control room viewports like a physical blow. From the speaker of the transceiver came a shrill gabble of order and counter-order—evidently some alert radar operator had spotted the break-out. But *Corsair* was out of laser range from the blockading squadron, was almost out of missile range. And by the time the enemy were able to close her, she would be well clear of the Van Allens, would be falling into and through the dark, twisted dimensions created about herself by her own interstellar drive.

It was time to get Serressor along to the Mannschenn Drive room. Grimes handed over to Williams, waited until he saw the Commander's capable hands resting on his own control panel, and then, slowly and painfully, levered himself out of his seat. He found it almost impossible to stand upright under the crushing pseudo-gravity—but speed had to be maintained, otherwise the ship would be englobed by her enemies. Already Carter was picking off the first missiles with his laser. The Commodore watched two burly Marines struggle to get the aged saurian to his feet. They were big men, and strong, but the task was almost beyond them.

Then, with every shuffling step calling for an almost superhuman effort, Grimes led the way to the interstellar drive compartment. There—and how long had it taken him to make that short journey?—he found Bronson, Chief Interstellar Drive Engineer, with his juniors. And there was the ship's Doctor, and the telepath Mayhew. Extending from the complexity of rotors, now still and silent, was a tangle of cables, each one of which terminated in a crocodile clip.

The wall speaker crackled: "Commander to M.D. room. Calling the Commodore."

"Commodore here, Commander Williams."

"Clear of Van Allens. No immediate danger from enemy fire."

"Then carry on, Commander. You know what you have to do."

"Stand by for Free Fall. Stand by for course correction."

The silence, as the rocket drive was cut, fell like a blow. Then, as the whining directional gyroscopes took over, the Doctor, assisted by Bronson's juniors, began to clip the cable ends to various parts of Serressor's body.

The old saurian hissed gently, "You cannot hurt me, man Doctor. My scales are thick."

And then it was Mayhew's turn, and a helmet of metal mesh was fitted over his head. The telepath was pale, frightened-looking. Grimes sympathized with him, and admired him. He, as had every spaceman, heard all the stories of what happened to those trapped in the field of a malfunctioning Drive—and even though this would be (the Commodore hoped) a controled malfunction, it would be a malfunction nonetheless. The telepath, when the situation had been explained to him, had volunteered. Grimes hoped that the decoration for which he would recommend him would not be a posthumous one.

The gentle, off-center gravitational effect of centrifugal force abruptly ceased, together with the humming of the directional gyroscope. Then the ship trembled violently and suddenly, and again. A hit? No, decided the Commodore, it was Carter firing a salvo of missiles. But the use of these weapons showed that the enemy must be getting too close for comfort.

Williams' voice from the bulkhead speaker was loud, with a certain urgency.

"On course for Lorn, Skipper!"

"Mannschenn Drive on remote control," ordered Grimes. "Serressor will give the word to switch on."

Already the Doctor and the junior engineers had left the Mannschenn Drive room, making no secret of their eagerness to be out of the compartment before things started to happen.

Bronson was making some last, finicking adjustments to his machinery, his heavily bearded face worried.

"Hurry up, Commander," Grimes snapped.

The engineer grumbled, "I don't like it. This is an interstellar drive, not a Time Machine. . . ."

Again came the violent trembling, and again, and again.

Bronson finished what he was doing, then reluctantly left his domain. Grimes turned to Serressor, who now looked as though he had become emeshed in the web of a gigantic spider. He said, "You know the risk. . . ."

"I know the risk. If I am . . . everted, it will be a new experience."

And not a pleasant one, thought the Commodore, looking at Mayhew. The telepath was paler than ever, and his prominent Adam's apple wobbled as he swallowed hard. And not a pleasant one. And how could this . . . this non-human philosopher, who had never handled a metal tool in his long life, be so sure of the results of this tampering with, to him, utterly alien machinery? Sure, Serressor had read all the books (or his other-self in Grimes' own continuum had read all the books) on the theory and practice of Mannschenn Drive operation—but book knowledge, far too often, is a poor substitute for working experience.

"Good luck," said Grimes to the saurian and to Mayhew.

He left the compartment, carefully shut the door behind him.

He heard the whine, the wrong-sounding whine, as the Drive started up.

And then the dream-filled darkness closed about him.

XXI

IT IS SAID that a drowning man relives his life in the seconds before final dissolution.

So it was with Grimes—but he relived his life in reverse, experienced backwards the long history of triumphs and disasters, of true and false loves, of deprivations and shabby

compromises, of things and people that it was good to remember, of things and people that it had been better to forget. It was the very unreality of the experience, vivid though it was, that enabled him to shrug it off, that left him, although badly shaken, in full command of his faculties when the throbbing whine of the ever-precessing gyroscopes ceased at last.

The ship had arrived.

But where?

When?

Ahead in Space and Astern in Time—that was the principle of the Mannschenn Drive. But never Full Astern—or, never *intentionally* Full Astern. Not until now. And what of the governors that had been fitted to the machine, the flesh-and-blood governors—the human telepath and the saurian philosopher, with his intuitive grasp of complexities that had baffled the finest mathematical brains of mankind?

What of the governors? Had they broken under the strain?

And what of himself, Grimes? (And what of Sonya?)

He was still Grimes, still the Commodore, with all his memories (so far as he knew) intact. He was not a beardless youth (his probing hand verified this). He was not an infant. He was not a tiny blob of protoplasm on the alleyway deck.

He opened the door.

Serressor was still there, still entangled in the shining filaments. But his scales gleamed with the luster of youth, his bright eyes were unfilmed. His voice, as he said, "Man Grimes, we were successfull" was still a croak, but no longer a senile croak. "We did it!" confirmed Mayhew, in an oddly high voice.

The telepath was oddly shrunken. The rags that had been his loin clout were in an untidy bundle about his bare feet. No, shrunken was not the word. He was smaller, younger. Much younger.

"That was the hardest part," he said. "That was the hardest part—to stop the reversal of biological time. Serressor and I were right in the field, so we were affected. But the

rest of you shouldn't be changed. You still have your long, gray beard, Commodore."

But my beard wasn't gray, thought Grimes, with the beginning of panic. *Neither was it long*. He pulled a hair from it, wincing at the sudden pain, examined the evidence, (still dark brown) while Serressor cackled and Mayhew giggled.

"All right," he growled. "You've had your joke. What now?"

"We wait," Mayhew told him. "We wait, here and now, until *Sundowner* shows up. Then it's up to you, sir."

Sundowner, thought Grimes. *Jolly Swagman . . . Waltzing Matilda*. Names that belonged to the early history of the Rim Worlds. The battered star tramps of the Sundowner Line that had served the border planets in the days of their early colonization, long before accession from the Federation had been even dreamed of, long before the Rim Worlds government had, itself, become a shipowner with the Rim Runners fleet.

Sundowner . . . She had been (Grimes remembered his history) the first ship to bring a cargo of seed grain to Lorn. And that was when this alternative universe, this continuum in which Grimes and his people were invaders, had run off the historical rails. *Sundowner . . .* Serressor knew his history too. The Wise One had planned this rendezvous in Space and Time, so that Grimes could do what, in his universe, had been accomplished by plague or traps, or, even, cats or terrier dogs.

"I can hear her. . . ." murmured Mayhew distantly. "She is on time. Her people are worried. They want to get to port before their ship is taken over by the mutants."

"In this here-and-now," said Serressor, "she crashed—will crash?—in the mountains. Most of the mutants survived. But go to your control room, man Grimes. And then you will do what you have to do."

They were all very quiet in the control room, all shaken by the period of temporal disorientation through which they had passed. Grimes went first to Williams, hunched in his

co-pilot's chair. He said softly, "You are ready, Commander?"
 "Ready," answered the Executive Officer tonelessly.

Then the Commodore went to sit beside his wife. She was pale, subdued. She looked at him carefully, and a faint smile curved her lips. She murmured, "You aren't changed, John. I'm pleased about that. I've remembered too much, things that I thought I'd forgotten, and even though it was all backwards it was . . . shattering. I'm pleased to have you to hold on to, and I'm pleased that it is you, and not some puppy. . . ."

"I shouldn't have minded losing a few years in the wash," grunted Grimes.

He looked at the officers at their stations—radar, gunnery, electronic radio. He stared out of the ports at the Lorn sun, its brightness dimmed by polarisation, at the great, dim-glowing Galactic lens. Here, at the very edge of the Universe, the passage of years, of centuries was not obvious to a casual glance. There were no constellations in the Rim sky that, by their slow distortions, could play the part of clocks.

"Contact," announced the radar officer softly.

The Commodore looked into his own repeater screen, saw the tiny spark that had appeared in the blackness of the tank.

The radio officer was speaking into his microphone. "*Corsair* to Sundowner. *Corsair* to Sundowner. Do you read me? Over."

The voice that answered was that of a tired man, a man who had been subjected to considerable strain. It was unsteady, seemed on the edge of hysteria. "I hear you, whoever you are. What the hell did you say your name was?"

"*Corsair*. This is *Corsair*, calling *Sundowner*. Over."

"Never heard of you. What sort of name is that, anyhow?" And there was another, fainter voice, saying, "*Corsair*? Don't like the sound of it, Captain. Could be a pirate.

"A pirate? Out here, on the Rim? Don't be so bloody silly. There just aren't the pickings to make it worth while." A pause. "If she is a pirate, she's welcome to our bloody cargo."

"*Corsair* to Sundowner. *Corsair* to Sundowner. Come in, please. Over."

"Yes, *Corsair*. I hear you. What the hell do you want?"

"Permission to board."

"Permission to board? Who the bloody hell do you think you are?"

"R.W.C.S. *Corsair* . . ."

"R.W.C.S.?" It was obvious that *Sundowner's* Captain was addressing his Mate without bothering either to switch off or to cover his microphone. "What the hell is *that*, Joe?" "Haven't got a clue," came the reply.

Grimes switched in his own microphone. He did not want to alarm *Sundowner*, did not want to send her scurrying back into the twisted continuum generated by her Mannschenn Drive. He knew that he could blow the unarmed merchantman to a puff of incandescent vapor, and that such an action would have the desired result. But he did not want to play it that way. He was acutely conscious that he was about to commit the crime of genocide—and who could say that the mutated rats were less deserving of life than the humans whom, but for Grimes' intervention, they would replace?—and did not wish, also, to have the murder of his own kind on his conscience.

"Captain," he said urgently, "this is Commodore Grimes speaking, of the naval forces of the Rim Worlds Confederacy. It is vitally important that you allow us to board your ship. We know about the trouble you are having. We wish to help you."

"You wish to help us?"

"If we wished you ill," said Grimes patiently, "we could have opened fire on you as soon as you broke through into normal Space-Time." He paused. "You have a cargo of seed grain. There were rats in the grain. And these rats have been multiplying. Am I correct?"

"You are. But how do you know?"

"Never mind that. And these rats—there are mutants among them, aren't there? You've been coming a long time from Elsinore, haven't you? Mannschenn Drive breakdowns . . . and fluctuations in the temporal precession fields to speed up the rate of mutation."

"But, sir, how do you *know*? We have sent no messages. Our psionic radio officer was killed by the . . . the mutants."

"We know, Captain. And now—may we board?"

From the speaker came the faint voice of *Sundowner's* Mate. "Rim Ghosts are bad enough—but when they take over Quarantine it's a bit rough."

"Yes," said Grimes. "You may regard us as Rim Ghosts. But we're solid ones."

XXII

HIS BIG HANDS playing over his console like those of a master pianist, Williams, with short, carefully timed bursts from the auxiliary jets, jockeyed *Corsair* into a position only yards from *Sundowner*, used his braking rockets to match velocities. Grimes and his people stared out through the ports at the star tramp. She was old, old. Even now, at a time that was centuries in the past of *Corsair's* people, she was obsolete. Her hull plating was dull, pitted by years of exposure to micrometeorites. Two of the embossed letters of her name had been broken off and never replaced, although somebody had replaced the missing U and W with crudely painted characters. Grimes could guess what conditions must be like on board. She would be one of those ships in which, to give greater lift for cargo, the pile shielding had been cut to a minimum, the contents of her holds affording, in theory, protection from radiation. And her holds were full of grain, and this grain supported pests that, through rapid breeding and mutation, had become a menace rather than a mere nuisance.

"Boarders away, sir?" asked the Marine officer.

"Yes, Major. Yourself and six men should do. I and Mrs. Grimes will be coming with you."

"Side arms, sir?"

"No. That crate'll have paper-thin bulkheads and shell plating, and we can't afford any playing around with laser."

"Then knives and clubs, sir?"

"It might be advisable. Yes."

Grimes and Sonya left Control for their quarters. There, helping each other, they shrugged into their modified spacesuits. These still had the tail sheaths and helmets designed to accommodate a long-muzzled head. This had its advantages, providing stowage for a full beard. But Grimes wondered what *Sundowner's* people would think when they saw a party of seeming aliens jetting from *Corsair* to their airlock. Anyhow, it was their own fault. They should have had their vision transmitter and receiver in order.

The boarding party assembled at the main airlock which, although it was cramped, was big enough to hold all of them. The inner door slowly closed and then, after the pumps had done their work (*Corsair* could not afford to throw away atmosphere) the outer door opened. Grimes could see, then, that an aperture had appeared in the shell plating of the other ship, only twenty feet or so distant. But it was small. It must be only an auxiliary airlock. The Captain of *Sundowner*, thought Grimes, must be a cautious man: must have determined to let the boarding party into his ship one by one instead of in a body. *And he'll be more cautious still*, thought Grimes, *when he sees these spacesuits*.

He shuffled to the door sill. He said into his helmet microphone, "There's room for only one at a time in that airlock of theirs. I'll go first."

He heard the Major acknowledge, and then he jumped, giving himself the slightest possible push-off from his own ship. He had judged well and did not have to use his suit reaction unit. Slowly, but not too slowly, he drifted across the chasm between the two vessels, extended his arms to break his fall and, with one hand, caught hold of the projecting rung above *Sundowner's* airlock door.

As he had assumed, the compartment was large enough to hold only one person—and he had to act quickly to pull his dummy tail out of the way of the closing outer valve. There were no lights in the airlock—or, if there were lights, they weren't working—but after a while he heard the hissing that told him that pressure was being built up.

Suddenly the inner door opened and glaring light blinded

the Commodore. He could just see two dark figures standing there, with what looked like pistols in their hands. Through his helmet diaphragm he heard somebody say, "What did I tell you, Captain? A bleeding kangaroo in full armor, no less. Shall I shoot the bastard?"

"Wait!" snapped Grimes. He hoped that the note of authority would not be muffled from his voice. "Wait! I'm as human as you."

"Then prove it, mister!"

Slowly the Commodore raised his gloved hands, turning them to show that they were empty. He said, "I am going to remove my helmet—unless one of you gentlemen would care to do it for me."

"Not bloody likely. Keep your distance."

"As you please." Grimes manipulated fastenings, gave the regulation half turn and lifted. At once he noticed the smell—it was like the stink that had hung around his own wardroom for days after the attempted interrogation of the prisoner.

"All right," said one of the men. "You can come in."

Grimes shuffled into the ship. The light was out of his eyes now and he could see the two men. He did not have to ask who or what they were. Uniform regulations change far more slowly than do civilian appearance. He addressed the grizzled, unshaven man with the four tarnished gold bars on his shoulder boards, "We have already spoken with each other by radio, Captain. I am Commodore Grimes . . ."

"Of the Rim Worlds Confederacy's Navy. But what's the idea of the fancy dress, *Commodore*?"

"The fancy dress?" Then Grimes realized that the man was referring to his spacesuit, so obviously designed for a non-human. What would be his reaction to what Grimes was wearing underneath it—the scanty rags and the rank marks painted on to his skin? But it was of no importance. He said, "It's a long story, Captain, and I haven't time to tell it now. What I am telling you is that you must not, repeat not, attempt a landing on Lorn until I have given you clearance."

"And who the hell do you think you are, Mister so-called

Commodore? We've had troubles enough this trip. What is your authority?"

"My authority?" Grimes grinned. "In my own space and time, the commission I hold, signed by the President of the Confederacy . . ."

"What did I say?" demanded the Mate. "And I'll say it again. He's some sort of bloody pirate."

"And, in the here-and-now," continued Grimes, "my missile batteries and my laser projectors."

"If you attempt to hinder me from proceeding on my lawful occasions," said the tramp Master stubbornly, "that will be piracy."

Grimes looked at him, not without sympathy. It was obvious that this man had been pushed to the very limits of human endurance—the lined face and the red-rimmed eyes told of many, too many, hours without sleep. And he had seen at least one of his officers killed. By this time he would be regarding the enemies infesting his ship as mutineers rather than mutants, and, no longer quite rational, would be determined to bring his cargo to port come Hell or High Water.

And that he must not do.

Grimes lifted his helmet to put it back on. In spite of the metal with which he was surrounded he might be able to get through to Williams in *Corsair's* control room, to Williams and to Carter, to give the order that would call a laser beam to slice off *Sundowner's* main venturi. But the Mate guessed his intention, swung viciously with his right arm and knocked the helmet out of the Commodore's hand. He growled to his Captain, "We don't want the bastard callin' his little friends do we, sir?"

"It is essential that I keep in communication with my own ship," said Grimes stiffly.

"So you can do somethin' with all the fancy ironmongery you were tellin' us about!" The Mate viciously swatted the helmet which, having rebounded from a bulkhead, was now drifting through the air.

"Gentlemen," said Grimes reasonably, looking at the two

men and at the weapons they carried, automatic pistols, no more than five millimeter calibre but deadly enough. He might disarm one but the other would fire. "Gentlemen, I have come to help you. . . ."

"More of a hindrance than a bloody help," snarled the Mate. "We've enough on our plates already without having to listen to your fairy stories about some non-existent Confederacy." He turned to the Master. "What say we start up the reaction drive an' set course for Lorn? This bloke's cobsers'll not open fire so long as he's aboard."

"Yes. Do that, Mr. Holt. And then we'll put this man in irons."

So this was it, thought Grimes dully. So this was the immutability of the Past, of which he had so often read. This was the inertia of the flow of events. He had come to where and when he could best stick a finger into the pie—but the crust was too tough, too hard. He couldn't blame the tramp Captain. He, as a good shipmaster, was displaying the utmost loyalty to his charterers. And (Grimes remembered his Rim Worlds history) those consignments of seed grain had been urgently needed on Lorn.

And, more and more, every word was an effort, every action. It was as though he were immersed in some fluid, fathoms deep. He was trying to swim against the Time Stream—and it was too much for him.

Why not just drift? After all, there would be time to do something after the landing at Port Forlorn. Or would there? Hadn't somebody told him that this ship had crashed in mountainous country?

He was aroused from his despairing lethargy by a sudden clangor of alarm bells, by a frightened, distorted voice that yammered from a bulkhead speaker, "Captain! Where are you, Captain? They're attacking the control room!"

More as the result of years of training than of conscious thought he snatched his drifting helmet as he followed the Captain and his Mate when they dived into the axial shaft, as they pulled themselves hand over hand along the guidelines to the bows of the ship.

XXIII

"THEY'RE ATTACKING the control room!"

The words echoed through Grimes' mind. *They* must be Sonya and the Major and his men. They must have breached the ports. So far there was no diminishing of air pressure—but even such a sorry rustbucket as *Sundowner* would have her airtight doors in reasonably good working order. All the same, he deemed it prudent to pause in his negotiation of the axial shaft to put his helmet back on. Luckily the rough treatment that it had received at the hands of the Mate did not seem to have damaged it.

Ahead of him, the two *Sundowner* officers were making rapid progress. It was obvious that they were not being slowed down by emergency doors and locks. The Commodore tried to catch up with them, but he was hampered by a spacesuit.

Then, faintly through his helmet diaphragm, he heard the sounds of a struggle, a fight. There were shots—by the sharpness of the cracks fired from small calibre pistols such as the Captain and his Mate had been carrying. There were shouts and screams. And there was a dreadful, high squeaking that was familiar, too familiar. He thought that he could make out words—or the repetition of one word only:

"Kill! Kill!"

He knew, then, who *They* were, and pulled himself along the guideline with the utmost speed of which he was capable. Glancing ahead, he saw that *Sundowner's* Master and his second in command were scrambling through the open hatch at the end of the shaft, the hatch that must give access, in a ship of this type, to Control. He heard more shots, more shouts and screams. He reached the hatch himself, pulled himself through, floundered wildly for long seconds until his magnetized boot soles made contact with the deck.

They ignored him at first. Perhaps it was that they took him—in his tailed suit with its snouted helmet—for one of

their own kind, although, by their standards, a giant. *They* were small, no larger than a terrier dog, but there were many of them. They were fighting with claws and teeth and pieces of sharpened metal that *They* were using as knives. A fine mist of blood fogged the face plate of Grimes' helmet, half blinding him. But he could see at least two human bodies, obviously dead, their throats torn out, and at least a dozen of the smaller corpses.

He did not give himself time to be shocked by the horror of the scene. (That would come later, much later.) He tried to wipe the film of blood from his visor with a gloved hand, but only smeared it. But he could see that the fight was still going on, that in the center of the control room a knot of spacemen was still standing, still struggling. They must either have lost their pistols or exhausted their ammunition; there were no more shots.

Grimes joined the fight, his armored fists and arms flailing into the mass of furry bodies, his hands crushing them and pulling them away from the humans, throwing them from him with savage violence. At first his attack met with success—and then the mutants realized that he was another enemy. Their squeaking rose to an intolerable level, and more and more of them poured into the control room. They swarmed over the Commodore, clinging to his arms and legs, immobilizing him. *Sundowner's* officers could not help him—they, too, were fighting a losing battle for survival.

There was a scratching at Grimes' throat. One of his assailants had a knife of sorts, was trying to saw through the fabric joint. It was a tough fabric, designed for wear and tear—but not such wear and tear as this. Somehow the man contrived to get his right arm clear, managed, with an effort, to bring it up to bat away the knife wielder. He succeeded—somehow. And then there was more scratching and scraping at the joint in way of his armpit.

He was blinded, helpless, submerged in a sea of furry bodies, all too conscious of the frantic gnawings of their teeth and claws and knives. His armor, hampering his every movement even in ideal conditions, could well contribute to

his death rather than saving his life. He struggled still—but it was an instinctive struggle rather than one consciously directed, no more than a slow, shrugging, a series of laborious contortions to protect his vulnerable joints from sharp teeth and blades.

Then there was a respite, and he could move once more.

He saw, dimly, that the control room was more crowded than ever, that other figures, dressed as he was, had burst in, were fighting with deadly efficiency, with long, slashing blades and bone-crushing cudgels. It was a hand-to-hand battle in a fog—and the fog was a dreadful cloud of finely divided particles of freshly shed blood.

But even these reinforcements were not enough to turn the tide. Sooner or later—and probably sooner—the mutants would swamp the humans, armored and unarmored, by sheer weight of numbers.

“Abandon ship!” somebody was shouting. It was a woman’s voice, Sonya’s. “Abandon ship! To the boats!” And then the cry—fainter this time, heard through the helmet diaphragm rather than over his suit radio—was repeated. It is no light matter to give up one’s vessel—but now, after this final fight, *Sundowner’s* people were willing to admit that they were beaten.

Somehow the armored Marines managed to surround the crew—what was left of them. The Captain was still alive, although only half conscious. The Mate, apart from a few scratches, was untouched. There were two engineers and an hysterical woman with Purser’s braid on her torn shirt. That was all. They were hustled by *Corsair’s* men to the hatch, thrust down the axial shaft. Grimes shouted his protest as somebody pushed him after them. He realized that it was Sonya, that she was still with him. Over their heads the hatch lid slammed into its closed position.

“The Major and his men . . .” he managed to get out. “They can’t stay there, in that hell!”

“They won’t,” she told him. “They’ll manage. Our job is to get these people clear of the ship.”

“And then?”

"Who's in charge of this bloody operation?" she asked tartly. "Who was it who told the Admiral that he was going to play by ear?"

Then they were out of the axial shaft and into a boat bay. They watched the Mate help the woman into the small, torpedo-like craft, then stand back to allow the two engineers to enter. He tried to assist the Captain to board—but his superior pushed him away weakly, saying, "No, Mister. I'll be the last man off *my* ship, if you please." He noticed Grimes and Sonya standing there. "And that applies to you, too, Mr. Commodore whoever you say you are. Into the boat with you—you and your mate."

"We'll follow you, Captain. It's hardly more than a step across to our own ship."

"Into the boat with you, damn you. I shall be . . . the . . . last . . ."

The man was obviously on the verge of collapse. His Mate grasped his elbow. "Sir, this is no time to insist on protocol. We have to hurry. Can't you hear *Them*?"

Through his helmet Grimes, himself, hadn't heard them until now. But the noise was there, the frenzied chittering, surely louder with every passing second. "Get into that bloody boat," he told the Mate. "We'll handle the doors."

"I . . . insist . . ." whispered the Captain. "I shall . . . be . . . the last . . . to leave . . ."

"You know what to do," Grimes told the Mate.

"And many's the time I've wanted to do it. But not in these circumstances." His fist came up to his superior's jaw. It was little more than a tap, but enough. The Master did not fall, could not fall in these conditions of zero gravity. But he swayed there, anchored to the deck by his magnetic boot soles, out on his feet. The two engineers emerged from the lifecraft, lugged the unconscious man inside.

"Hurry!" ordered Sonya.

"Make for your ship, sir?" asked the Mate. "You'll pick us up?"

"No. Sorry—but there's no time to explain. Just get the hell out and make all speed for Lorn."

"But . . ."

"You heard what the Commadore said," snapped Sonya. "Do it. If you attempt to lay your boat alongside we open fire."

"But . . ."

Grimes had removed his helmet so that his voice would not be muffled by the diaphragm. "Get into that bloody boat!" he roared. And in a softer voice, as the Mate obeyed, "Good luck."

He replaced his helmet and, as he did so, Sonya operated the controls set into the bulkhead. A door slid shut, sealing off the boat bay from the rest of the ship. The outer door opened, revealing the black emptiness of the Rim sky. Smoothly and efficiently the catapult operated, throwing the boat out and clear. Intense violet flame blossomed at her blunt stern, and then she was away, diminishing into the distance, coming around in a great arc on to the trajectory that would take her to safety.

Grimes didn't watch her for long. He said, "We'd better get back to Control, to help the Major and his men. They're trapped in there."

"They aren't trapped. They're just waiting to see that the boat's escaped."

"But how will they get out?"

"The same way that we got into this rustbucket. We sent back to the ship for a laser pistol, burned our way in. Luckily the airtight doors were all in good working order."

"You took a risk . . ."

"It was a risk we had to take. And we knew that *you* were wearing a spacesuit. But it's time we weren't here."

"After you."

"My God! Are you going to be as stuffy as that Captain?"

Grimes didn't argue, but pushed her out of the boat lock. He jumped after her, somersaulting slowly in the emptiness. He used his suit reaction unit to steady himself, and found himself facing the ship that he had just left. He saw an explosion at her bows, a billowing cloud of debris that expanded slowly—broken glass, crystallizing atmosphere, a

gradually separating mass of bodies, most of which ceased to struggle after a very few seconds.

But there were the larger bodies, seven of them, space-suited—and each of them sprouted a tail of incandescence as the Marines jettied back to their own ship. The Major used his laser pistol to break out through the control room ports—but all the mutants would not be dead. There would be survivors, sealed off in their airtight compartments by the slamming of the emergency doors.

The survivors could be disposed of by *Corsair's* main armament.

XXIV

"WE WERE WAITING for you, Skipper," Williams told Grimes cheerfully as the Commodore re-entered his own control room.

"Very decent of you, Commander," Grimes said, remembering how the Mate of *Sundowner* had realized his long standing ambition and clobbered his Captain. "Very decent of you."

He looked out of the viewports. The grain carrier was still close, at least as close as she had been when he had boarded her. The use of missiles would be dangerous to the vessel employing them—and even later might touch off a mutually destructive explosion.

"You must still finish your task, man Grimes," Serressor reminded him.

"I know. I know." But there was no hurry. There was ample time to consider ways and means.

"All armament ready, sir."

"Thank you. To begin with, Commander Williams, we'll open the range . . ."

Then suddenly, the outline of *Sundowner* shimmered, shimmered and faded. She flickered out like a candle in a puff of wind. Grimes cursed. He should have foreseen this. The mutants had access to the Mannschenn Drive machinery—

and how much, by continuous eavesdropping, had they learned? How much did they know?

"Start M.D.," he ordered, "Standard precession."

It took time—but not too long a time. Bronson was already in the Mannschenn Drive room, and Bronson had been trained to the naval way of doing things rather than the relatively leisurely procedure of the merchant service. (Himself a merchant officer, a reservist, he had always made it his boast that he could beat the navy at its own game.) There was the brief period of temporal disorientation, the uncanny feeling that time was running backwards, the giddiness, the nausea. Outside the ports the Galactic Lens assumed the appearance of a distorted Klein flask, and the Lorn sun became a pulsing spiral of multi-colored light.

But there was no sign of *Sundowner*.

Grimes was speaking into the telephone. "Commander Bronson! Can you synchronize?"

"With *what*?" Then—"I'll try, sir. I'll try . . ."

Grimes could visualize the engineer watching the flickering needles of his gauges, making adjustments measured in fractions of microseconds to his controls. Subtly the keening song of the spinning, precessing gyroscopes wavered—and, as it did so, the outlines of the people and instruments in the control room lost their sharpness, while the colors of everything momentarily dulled and then became more vivid.

"There's the mucking bastard!" shouted Williams.

And there she was, close aboard them, a phantom ship adrift on a sea of impossible blackness, insubstantial, quivering on the very verge of invisibility.

"Fire at will!" ordered Grimes.

"But, sir," protested one of the officers. "If we interfere with the ship's mass while the Drive is in operation . . ."

"*Fire at will!*" repeated the Commodore.

"Ay, ay, sir!" acknowledged Carter happily.

But it was like shooting at a shadow. Missiles erupted from their launchers, laser beams stabbed out at the target—and nothing happened. From the bulkhead speaker of the inter-

com Bronson snarled, "What the hell are you playing at up there? How the hell can I hold her in synchronization?"

"Sorry, Commander," said Grimes into his microphone. "Just lock on, and hold her. Just hold her, that's all I ask."

"An' what now, Skipper?" demanded Williams. "What now?"

"We shall use the Bomb," said Grimes quietly.

"*We shall use the Bomb,*" he said. He knew, as did all of his people, that the fusion device was their one hope of a return to their own Space and Time. But *Sundowner* must be destroyed, the Time Stream must, somehow, be diverted. Chemical explosives and destructive light beams were, in these circumstances, useless. There remained only the Sunday Punch.

The ships were close, so close that their temporal precession fields interacted. Even so, it was obvious why all the weapons so far employed had failed. Each and every discharge had meant an appreciable alteration of *Corsair's* temporal precession rate, so that each and every missile and beam had missed in Time rather than in Space. Had *Corsair* been fitted with one of the latest model synchronizers her gunnery might have been more successful—but she was not. Only Bronson's skill was keeping her in visual contact with her prey.

Getting the Bomb into position was not the same as loosing off a missile. Slowly, gently, the black-painted cylinder was eased out of its bay. The merest puff from one of its compressed air jets nudged it away from *Corsair* towards the target. It fell gently through the space between the two ships, came finally to rest against *Sundowner's* scarred hull.

At an order from Grimes the thick, lead shutters slid up over the control room ports. (But the thing was close, so close, too close. Even with the radar on minimum range the glowing blob that was *Sundowner* almost filled the tank.) Carter looked at Grimes, waiting for the order. His face was pale—and it was not the only pale face in Control. But Ser-

ressor—that blasted lizard!—was filling the confined space with his irritating, high, toneless whistling.

Sonya came to sit beside him.

She said quietly, "You have to do it. We have to do it."

Even her presence could not dispel the loneliness of command. "No," he told her. "I have to do it."

"Locking . . ." came Bronson's voice from the bulkhead speaker. "Locking . . . Holding . . ."

"Fire," said Grimes.

XXV

TIME HAD passed.

How long, Grimes did not know, nor would he ever know. (Perhaps, he was often to suspect later, this was the next time around, or the time after that.)

He half opened his eyes and looked at the red haired woman who was shaking him back to wakefulness—the attractive woman with the faint scar still visible between her firm breasts. What was her name? He should know. He was married to her. Or had been married to her. It was suddenly of great importance that he should remember what she was called.

Susan . . . ?

Sarah . . . ?

No . . .

Sonya . . . ?

Yes, Sonya. That was it. . . .

"John, wake up! Wake up! It's all over now. The Bomb blew us back into our own continuum, back to our own Time, even! We're in touch with Port Forlorn Naval Control, and the Admiral wants to talk to you personally."

"He can wait," said Grimes, feeling the fragments of his prickly personality click back into place.

He opened his eyes properly, saw Williams sitting at his controls, saw Serressor, near by, still youthful, and with him the gangling adolescent who was Mayhew.

CONTRABAND FROM OTHERSPACE

For a moment he envied them. They had regained their youth—but at a dreadful risk to themselves. Even so, they had been lucky.

And so, he told himself, had been the human race—not for the first time, and not for the last.

He thought, *I hope I'm not around when our luck finally does run out.*

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