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The impossible route to a rebel universe

NEBULA ALERT

A. Bertram Chandler

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First Book Publication

BEYOND THE HORSEHEAD NEBULA

The Iralians were humanoid and technically free citizens of the Galactic Empire. But as slaves they were prized above all others, for they had the unique capacity to transmit acquired knowledge by heredity. And so when the space mercenary *Wanderer* was hired by GLASS (Galactic League for the Abolition and Suppression of Slavery) to take a cargo of Iralians home it was not going to be a simple task.

For one thing, they'd be hunted by interstellar slavers for their priceless passengers.

For another, the Iralians themselves had other ideas which included mutiny and high treason.

And for the third and worst, they were too close to the Horsehead Nebula, whose capacity for warping time, space, and the dimensions was a permanent Red Alert for all spacecraft.

Turn this book over for
second complete novel

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."

NEBULA ALERT

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

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THE RIVAL RIGELIANS

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I

THIS WAS KARAKELLA, a windy world, with katabatic gales sweeping down from sharp-peaked, snow-capped mountains, driving airborne torrents of golden leaves and crimson windflower blossoms through the steep-sided canyons that were the streets of the cities. This was Karakella, whose proud people rode the storms on wide-stretched wings, disdaining mechanical aids, shrieking their defiance to the forces of Nature.

And this was Port Karakel, a city small in area but with its buildings towering high into the turbulent sky, steeples of metal latticework, each topped with its weathervane wrought to the semblance of a crowing cock. It was set on a hilltop, buffeted by every wind, washed clean by the racing air currents that brought with them the sharp tang of the snows of the high places, that scoured the space-port apron of every scrap of debris, that were bitterly cold but invigorating, veritable elixir after the stale, cycled and recycled atmosphere of a spaceship.

This was Port Karakel—and there stood the ships. There were the locally owned merchantmen—featureless metal ovoids squatting in the skeleton eggcups of their landing gear. There were two frigates—cigars rather than eggs, their sleekness marred by the protuberances that proclaimed the possession of heavy armament. And there was that other alien. No spaceman, of whatever race, would need to look for the winged, green globe embossed upon her bows to know that she was Earth-built. Beneath the badge, in letters of golden metal, was her name—*Wanderer*.

There was work in progress about her hull—the intermittent flare of welding torches, a busy grouping of technicians, some of them the tall, avian natives, two of them human, clad in coveralls that had once been white but that were now grease-and soot-marked. Another human being, bundled up against the cold in heavy, drab gray clothing, leaning into the wind, was making his way slowly from the space-port administration buildings towards the ship.

The smaller of the two white-clad humans saw him first. He said respectfully, "Ma'am, we have company."

The woman carefully thrust the small testing hammer that she had been using into her belt, turned to look. The wind, blowing around the hull, whipped strands of yellow hair from under her cap, blew them across her eyes. Irritably she used her free hand to clear her vision, leaving a dirty smudge across the golden tan of her face. It was to her what a beauty spot is to other women, enhancing her handsomeness rather than marring it.

She remarked, her intonation sardonic, "Our Mr. Smith. The man from GLASS." She smiled briefly. "No doubt he has something for us. And I can't trust my everloving husband to handle ship's business by himself, even though he is on the Register as Master. . . . Will you carry on here, Mr. Bronheim, while I see what's cooking?"

Ignoring the ladder, she slid down one of the uprights of the scaffolding to the ground. The wind behind her, she advanced swiftly to meet the representative of the Galactic League for the Abolition of Suppression and Slavery.

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They were seated in the commodious Master's dayroom aboard *Wanderer*. There was Captain Trafford—a little, wiry man, with close-cropped sandy hair, sandy brows over bleak gray eyes, a seamed, rugged, deeply tanned face. He looked like a spaceman (as he should have done) and yet, somehow, did not look like a star-tramp Master. His uniform was too neat, too correct. Somehow, somehow the Imperial Navy had put its indelible stamp upon him.

There was Mrs. Irene Trafford, his wife, First Mate *and* owner. She had removed her coveralls and was now, like her husband, in uniform. She looked the part of a merchant officer far better than he did. It was not that her attire was in any way slovenly: the scarlet, polka-dotted cravat filling the open neck of her shirt added a touch of color to the severe black and gold of her dress—incorrect, nonregulation color, but color nonetheless.

Then there was the slender, auburn-haired Susanna, Radio Officer and Purser, correctly enough rigged—but conveying the impression that the rigging had been carried out by a Parisian couturier.

There was Irene, who had been Empress-Elect of the Federation (and who, prior to her accession to the purple, had been Mate of a Dog Star Line tramp); there was Trafford, her husband, who had held the rank of Commander in the Imperial Navy; there was Susanna, onetime Lady-in-Waiting to the Empress, who had stayed with her mistress after the abdication.

And there was Mr. Smith, the man from GLASS, the organization whose boast it was that it was transparently honest, the organization whose methods and motives were (according to its enemies) too dirty to see through.

There was Mr. Smith, that extraordinarily ordinary looking man. He was wearing, as always, a drab gray coverall (but well cut, and from cloth of excellent quality). There was Mr. Smith, with his face-shaped face, his hair-colored hair, his eye-colored eyes. Even so, his reputation was rather more flamboyant than his appearance. A latter day Robin Hood, he had been called by one sensational journalist—but

this Robin Hood hired his archers and had never been known to bend bow himself. Nonetheless, he and his organization were a thorn in the side of tyrants—and an even sharper thorn in the side of those ostensibly democratic governments that put policy before principles.

"Well?" demanded Irene, with a rising inflection. "Well?"

Rather pointedly Smith ignored her. "Captain Trafford," he said, "I may have another charter for you."

"Mrs. Trafford is the owner," replied Trafford, with a slight grin. "I'm only the Master."

Smith shrugged, turned to Irene. "As you please. Mrs. Trafford, I may have another charter for you."

"May have?" she echoed impatiently. "Have you or haven't you?"

"All right. I have another charter for you. If you want it."

"If it's worth our while," she said.

"I think that you'll find it so. Passengers, this time. Two dozen Italian nationals, surplus embassy staff, to be returned to their home world."

"We haven't the facilities," said Trafford.

"You have the space, Captain, as I recall it, ships of *Wanderer's* class are so designed that they may easily be converted to troop transports."

"The ships of *Wanderer's* class in the Imperial Navy are light cruisers. This is a private yacht."

"Don't be so stick-in-the-mud, Benjamin," Irene admonished her husband. "We're running this ship to make money. Anything that we can carry for profit we will carry. As Mr. Smith has pointed out, we have ample space. And the Kokreli dockyard workers are capable of making a fair job of the modifications required." She turned to Smith. "And who pays for that, by the way?"

"The Italian government."

"But," persisted Trafford, "What about stewardesses, and galley staff and all the rest of it? Personnel-wise we're running this ship on a shoe string. If we engage catering staff it will

cut into our profits. In any case, where should we get them from?"

"My husband has a point there," admitted Irene.

"It's already been considered," Smith told her. "The Italians will police their own quarters. Given galley facilities, they will prepare their own meals."

"And they will have their own galley," insisted Irene. "Airlocked off from the rest of the ship. I know what Italian cookery smells like."

"That can be arranged easily enough."

"Good. And, of course, steward's stores for the voyage will be supplied by the Embassy."

"Of course."

"Now we come to the sixty-four dollar question. How much do we get paid?"

"Standard First Class fares for the passage."

Irene turned to Susanna. "Do your sums, Sue. Allow for a voyage of, say, seven weeks subjective."

The girl busied herself with slipstick and scratch pad. "We might just show a profit, ma'am."

"Not good enough, Mr. Smith. Luxury Class fares it will have to be."

"With passengers making their own bunks and cooking their own meals?"

"And not a single ton of cargo or bag of mails earning freight. You can make money on passengers only if you carry 'em in bulk. And if these Italians want to get home in a hurry they'll not want to wait months for a conventional merchantman to drop in here. After all, the Kokreli are still officially at war with the Hallichecki . . ."

"You're a hard woman, Mrs. Trafford," sighed Smith. "All right, then. Luxury Class fares."

"And a War Risk Bonus to all hands until we're clear of this sector. To be paid by the charterers."

"Anything else?" asked Smith resignedly.

"I can't think of anything at the moment. And as far as the Luxury Class fares are concerned, it may have to be more. Susanna's no slouch at the pursering, but I'd like to

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be able to work things out in greater detail before we clinch the deal."

"As long as your facts and figures are reasonably convincing and your demands not too outrageous I think that the Italians will pay."

"One last question. What's the catch?"

"Catch?" repeated Smith innocently.

II

"KNOWING SMITH," grumbled Trafford, "I also know that there *must* be a catch. There must be some chestnuts, somewhere, that we're supposed to pull out of the fire for him. . . ."

"How right you are," agreed Irene. She looked around the wardroom at Tallentire, Second Mate and Gunnery Officer, slim and darkly intense, something of the hunting cat about him, something of the gangster, at the stocky, stolid Bronheim, *Wanderer's* Engineer, at Metzenthner, the gangling, wispy bearded Psionic Communications Officer, at Susanna. "Have any of you people any ideas on the subject?" she demanded.

There was a long silence.

"Mr. Metzenthner!" snapped Irene. "You knew that Mr. Smith came on board. Didn't you, er, find anything out while he was here?"

"I did not, madam." The telepath's voice was righteously smug. "You know that we are under oath never to pry into another's mind without his consent."

"You've done it, though."

"Only in battle conditions, when the safety of the ship and of my shipmates has been at stake."

"It could be at stake now."

"You could be right, madam." A faint smile flickered over Metzenthner's sparsely bearded lips. "That idea has also occurred to me. But Mr. Smith is not only not a telepath—he is a *non*-telepath. Or, one could say, an anti-telepath."

"I see. Thank you." Again she looked around the compartment. "Well?"

There was another silence.

"So," said Irene thoughtfully, "on the face of it, the

biggest catch is these bloody Irilians themselves. . . . They're an odd people, in more ways than one. This business of the 'surplus embassy staff', for example. It's due to natural fertility, a gestation period of weeks only, and only months, rather than years, required for maturation. Insofar as that's concerned, inherited memory is a big help. But make a note of it, Sue, to insert a clause in the contract that contraception is to be practised during the voyage. And another clause, too, to the effect that gravid females will not, repeat not, be given passage."

"Their home planet must be overcrowded," said Trafford.

His wife stared at him coldly. "I seem to recall," she remarked, "that when we first met you were supposed to be in Naval Intelligence. Correct me if I'm wrong—but shouldn't an Intelligence Officer be more than something of a xenologist?"

"I wasn't a *real* Intelligence Officer . . ." began Trafford.

"You can say that again, Benjamin."

"I was only on loan to the Intelligence Branch—and only because I had a personal acquaintance with Captain Jones and the other officers of *Starquest* . . ."

"Spare us the history." She sighed. "We've a ship full of specialists—in gunnery, and engineering, and navigation, and communications. You all know your specialties, and know them well. In the Merchant Service, of course, we didn't specialize. An officer was just supposed to know *everything*."

Her mood softened. "Of course, if I hadn't been to Irilia once—it was when I was Second Mate of the old *Dalmatian*—I shouldn't know anything about the dump myself. But I have been there—and as I knew, even then, of the ultimate promotion that lay in store for me I did not waste my leisure time on that world. I browsed around museums and libraries. I attended a course of lectures at the local university and, all in all, acquired quite fair grounding in the history and sociology of the planet.

"Irilia is *not* overcrowded. The rigorous enforcement of the family limitation laws sees to that. The laws *have* to be rigorously enforced, as the Irilians are a people to whom

the patter of little feet is the most beautiful music in the Universe. But even before the laws were passed, even before modern contraceptive techniques were evolved, there was no serious overcrowding."

"How was that?" asked Tallentire with a flicker of interest. "Wars?"

Irene looked at him sadly. "Mr. Tallentire, can't you think of anything but your dangerous toys? Still, I suppose that the limiting factor could be described as war, of a sort. The Irilians were in great demand as slave labor on quite a few planets—and, understandably, resisted the slave raiders to the best of their ability. It got to the stage where the number of casualties during each raid was out of all proportion to the number of slaves captured . . .

"But those days are over. Even a super-dreadnaught of the Imperial Navy could not hope to get past the orbital fortresses. But the most powerful weapon deployed against the slavers was not a military one . . ."

"What was it, ma'am?" asked Tallentire.

"Psychological!"

"But psychological weapons *are* military."

"This one wasn't. It was—and is—no more, and no less, than a conditioning of every Irilian from birth so that he dies if removed from his home world."

"Yes, but . . ." Tallentire was argumentative. "But what about their spaceships? What about their embassy staffs on other planets?"

"Apart from the orbital forts and the shuttles that service them, they have no spaceships—and the forts are not far enough out for the lethal compulsion to come into effect."

"But if they have no spaceships—why outworld embassies?"

"Trade, Mr. Tallentire. Trade. On-the-spot dickering is always more effective than bartering by Carlottigram. As for the embassy staffs themselves, they have been conditioned. Or reconditioned. But even with the reconditioning there's a deep and nagging feeling of guilt, a sort of voice of conscience telling them that they shouldn't be alive. To

compensate for that, the exiles are exempt from the family limitation laws and allowed the full exercise of their philo-progenitiveness. Hence the inevitable surplus of embassy staff."

"This slavery business," put in Tallentire. "What sort of slavery? Surely in these days of automation . . ."

"There are still machines that require skilled attendance. And if your slave-attendants pass their skills on to their offspring, it will cut down the amount of time wasted in training."

Trafford chuckled grimly. He said quietly, "The penny has dropped. I think that Mr. Tallentire had better maintain his armament in a state of readiness."

"What the hell do you mean?" demanded his wife.

"It should be obvious—even to people who were never intelligence officers."

"Come on. Out with it."

"Twenty-four Irilians," Trafford stated. "Presumably twelve male and twelve female—not that it matters all that much, as long as they're not all the same sex. A majority of females would, in fact, be advantageous. Twenty-four fertile Irilians, psychologically and physiologically capable of living *and* breeding anywhere. How many rabbits were ancestors to the hordes that became a serious menace to the Australian economy?"

"Yes . . ." murmured Irene. "I think you have something."

"I don't think he has," said Susanna flatly. "I was never an intelligence officer, but I can see the flaws in his thinking." She turned to Trafford. "We all know how fantastically fertile these Irilians are. Surely the worlds of the original raiders, or their customers, are by this time overrun with excess slave labor."

"But they're not, Sue," Irene told her. "To the best of my knowledge and belief there's not a single Irilian, with the exception of Embassy personnel and the like, on any planet other than Italia. There was a plague on each of the slave-owning worlds, and the evidence indicates that

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the virus causing it was cooked up in laboratories on Iralia itself."

"So . . ." whispered Trafford. "So . . ."

The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were falling very nicely into place. "All that remains is to find out if any ships carrying Iralians as passengers have gone missing recently."

"That bastard Smith!" swore Irene—not without admiration.

III

THE ITALIANS were humanoid and, to judge from the appearance of the fourteen females, indubitably mammalian. Humanoid they were—but not quite human. That difference, outwardly subtle, gave them a considerable exotic charm, the women especially. Trafford watched them appreciatively as they filed up on the ramp to the after airlock. Tall they were, and slender, moving with supple grace, each clad in a short, brightly colored tunic that left one shoulder bare and that fell only to mid thigh, that was molded to the body contours by the blustering wind; each with her lustrous hair piled high and intricately atop her narrow head. And their faces, their glamorously alien faces—the noses, prominent, almost beaky, the wide mouths, the slightly receding chins should have been unbeautiful by Terran standards, would have been unbeautiful had it not been for the fineness of bone structure.

“You can look, Benjamin,” said Irene tartly, “but you mustn’t touch.”

Tallentire muttered something about a lovely dollop of trollops, and was silenced by a glare from Susanna that was almost as lethal as one of his own laser beams. Bronheim and Metzenthner were silent—but Trafford, glancing sideways at them, could see that even they were impressed.

The leader of the passengers reached the head of the ramp. He was a little taller than his womenfolk, but as slender. His plain black tunic was of heavier material than their clothing, revealed far less. His thick bush of almost white hair was in vivid contrast to the dark olive skin of his face. His features, although fine, conveyed the impression of strength. Trafford was aware that Irene and

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Susanna were eying him appraisingly, was sorry that he was unable, at the moment, to repeat to her his wife's admonition.

He said, "Glad to have you aboard, Desinka Kankoran."

"You must be," replied Kankoran in almost faultless English, "when considered are the fares that we have paid."

There was no malice in the remark; Trafford knew, by now, that the Iralians were not a people to restrain their rather dry sense of humor. He allowed himself a very slight chuckle, then introduced Kankoran—the *Desinka* was a title, roughly midway between *Sir* and *Mister*—to Tallentire and Susanna, Bronheim and Metzenthier.

Irene, of course, he had already met during the business discussions in the Embassy. He decided that further introductions could wait until the voyage had commenced. "Mrs. Tallentire," he said to Susanna, "will you show the passengers to their quarters, please?" He was amused by the slight flicker of disappointment on the faces of Bronheim and Metzenthier—amused, then almost immediately apprehensive. He realized that the Masters of passenger vessels had other problems besides the straightforward ones of navigation and spacemanship. He turned to his wife. "Mrs. Trafford, please secure for Space."

"Ay, ay, sir!" she responded somewhat too smartly.

Outward clearance obtained from Port Control, *Wanderer* lifted to the full thrust of her Inertial Drive. Trafford, compensating for drift, made a vertical ascent and, in minutes only, was driving through the last wisps of wind-attenuated cirrus, the long mares' tails of the upper atmosphere of Karakella.

Ahead, the sky deepened in color from blue to purple, then to a fathomless black in which gleamed the brightening beacons of the distant stars, one of which was the target for the first leg of the voyage. A direct run from Karakella to Iralia was impossible. Between the two worlds lay the unexplored dust clouds of the Horsehead Nebula, marked on

the star charts with the understatement, *Dangerous To Navigation*.

Trafford let his attention stray briefly to the screen upon which he could see the world that he had just left. It was already a globe, a sphere upon which continents, seas and mountain ranges were clearly marked. He wasn't sorry to be leaving it, although neither he nor his officers could complain about the hospitality they had enjoyed. It was just that they and their hosts had so very little in common—after all, the thought processes of a mammal are bound to be different from those of an avian, even when both are warm-blooded, oxygen breathers, and fellow spacefarers to boot. Those bloody prizefights, for example, invariably fatal to at least one of the contestants. . . . There were, he knew, humans who enjoyed cockfighting—long illegal—but he was not one of them.

"Set course, Captain?" Irene's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Yes." He looked up through the control room dome, the graticuled transparency. A deviation of only a few degrees would bring the target star, Alpha Lepus, directly ahead. He adjusted his seat so that he could watch the spider web of the cartwheel sight in comfort, saw that Irene had done likewise. He said, "You have the con."

"I have the con, Captain," she repeated formally. "Will you give the word to secure?"

"I will."

He brought his intercom microphone to a convenient position, said quietly, "Your attention, please. Stand by for alterations of trajectory, for deceleration and acceleration. Stand by for switch to Interstellar Drive."

Bronheim, from his engineroom, reported readiness, as did Metzenthier from his cabin—although all that the telepath had to do was to ensure that his psionic amplifier, the living dog's brain culture in its tank of nutrient fluid, was physically secure and psychologically prepared. Finally Susanna, playing nursemaid to the Italian passengers, said over the intercommunication system that they were as ready as they ever would be.

"Executel" ordered Trafford.

"Executel" repeated Irene.

Directional gyroscopes whined briefly, and the throbbing hum of the Inertial Drive generators abruptly ceased. For a few seconds the auxiliary rockets delivered their screaming thrust, then were silent. Trafford steeled himself for the moment that every spaceman hates and fears, that brief—objectively, but not subjectively—transition from normal Space-Time to the warped Continuum induced about a ship by the operation of her Mannschenn Drive, the long, long second of temporal disorientation during which Past, Present and Future are stirred up together in one mess.

He tried, as many spacemen have tried, to seek for some faint glimmer of possible useful prognostication—and failed. Or almost failed. There was a hint, but no more than a hint, of peril to come, a vague foreboding. But in all the long history of Man the Shipbuilder, Man the Shiphandler and Man the Navigator there have been very few voyages (if any) without danger of some kind.

"That's it," said Irene smugly, restarting the Inertial Drive. "You can tell the customers that they can relax."

"I'll do that," he said, suiting the action to the words. He added, making sure that the microphone was switched off, "I wish that *we* could. It's time that Mr. Tallentire learned the normal duties of a Second Mate."

The Gunnery Officer, who had been seated at his fire control console—after all, Karakella was still officially under blockade by the Hallichecki—turned, grinning, to face them. "I like things the way they are," he said.

"I don't," Trafford told him curtly. "In the past Earth standard year seven ships have carried Italian passengers—and only three of them have arrived at their destinations. The others?" He shrugged. "No one knows." To Irene he added, "Not even your Intelligence Service knows."

"Not mine any longer, my dear—not since I made the switch from Imperial Majesty to plain Mrs. Trafford. But they don't know—or so Mr. Smith tells us, and I think he's speaking the truth. He seems to have his agents everywhere."

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"Including here," said Trafford.

"Yes. Including here." She brightened. "But at least we persuaded him to pay the War Risk Bonus for the entire duration of the voyage."

IV

FOR THE FIRST DAY or so the Italians kept to themselves—and then, inevitably, there was a certain intermingling of crew and passengers. Trafford, making his daily rounds, was obliged to admit that the smells from the passenger galley were not as bad as Irene had prognosticated. They were pungent and pervasive, and a bulb not dissimilar to garlic was used overmuch—but the Captain had always liked his food highly spiced and seasoned and, in fact, had complained more than once about the overly bland meals turned out by *Wanderer's* autochef. He soon found himself on very friendly terms with the Italian woman who had been appointed cook for her people and could not resist the temptation to sample the savory dishes that she was preparing. This engendered ill feeling.

"It's bad enough," stormed Irene, "when you only pick at your food, but when you come to the lunch table reeking of garlic . . ." Her eyes narrowed. "Come to that, Medisinka Trialanne is a rather attractive female—if you like 'em skinny and slinky, as you so obviously do."

She savagely thrust a forkload of tissue-culture steak into her mouth, chewed it viciously. "Yes. This Trialanne wench is one of the unattached ones, isn't she?"

"Is she?" asked Trafford innocently.

"Yes, Captain, she is," put in Metzenthler.

"You seem to know a lot about it," snarled Irene, turning her attention to the telepath. "I suppose that you've broken your sacred oath and been snooping in the customers' minds."

"No, madam," averred Metzenthler virtuously. "She speaks rather good English, as a matter of fact. Also she has the talent herself, which helps considerably . . ."

"Indeed?" Irene made an unnecessary clatter with her knife and fork. "No doubt that could be the firm foundation of a beautiful friendship. But haven't you forgotten that Imperial Regulations take a dim view of miscegenation?"

"And have *you* forgotten," asked Trafford nastily, "that Imperial Regulations no longer apply to any of us? We are no longer officers of the Imperial Navy and, come to that, *Wanderer* is a merchant vessel, her armament notwithstanding. We're bound only by the Articles of Agreement and by the Shipping and Spacemen Act. We don't even have any company's regulations."

"That," declared Irene, "I must do something about. As Owner I have the right—the duty, in fact—to draw up regulations to govern the conduct of *my* personnel aboard *my* ship."

"And as Master," Trafford told her, "I shall apply the regulations as I see fit."

Abruptly Irene laughed. "I'm sorry," she apologized to the table at large. "It's just that I'm a bit edgy. It's just that I thought that some of us were being a little too lighthearted about this assignment. After all, we're the goat that's been staked out to lure the tiger within range of the hunter's gun."

"We're a hunter in goat's clothing," corrected Tallentire.

"Yes. Could be." She turned again to Metzenthler. "But do you think that you're being altogether wise?"

"Don't you think, Irene," put in Trafford, "that the luncheon table is hardly the place to deal with these matters?"

"It's as good a place as any. We're all of us in this, and we're all of us present except Susanna, and I've no doubt that Mr. Tallentire will give her a full report. Mr. Metzenthler, I asked you a question."

The telepath flushed, but as he looked around the table at his shipmates he seemed singularly free from embarrassment. He said slowly, "With all due respect, you people don't know what it's like. To be a telepath, I mean. Isn't there an old saying: In the country of the blind the one eyed man is king? It's not true, you know. To begin with,

you're not king. And, furthermore, you're damned lonely. There are so few of us with the talent that our chances of finding somebody compatible, of either sex, are small. Bloody small. When you *do* find somebody, well . . ." He shrugged expressively.

"Even an alien?" asked Irene quietly.

"An alien, madam? What *is* an alien? I am far less an alien to Trialanne than her fellow passengers are, and she is far less an alien to me than you. I intend no disrespect—but that's the way of it. And she's a women. Make no mistake about that. She's a woman—and a very attractive one."

"I'm sure that Benjamin will agree with you," said Irene, a little acidly.

"She's a good cook," said Trafford. He sipped thoughtfully from his coffee cup. "Well, since we're all of us here except Susanna—but don't you think, Mr. Tallentire, that it's time you relieved your wife for her meal?—since we're all here, with the exception of the watchkeeper, we may as well have a general discussion. First of all, though, will you put Sue into the picture, Irene?"

As Susanna took her place at the table Irene told her briefly of what had been said and learned.

"Now, Mr. Metzenthler," Trafford went on. "I'm not asking you to break any of your oaths. But you seem to be on friendlier terms with the customers than any of us . . ."

"In *your* case," Irene told him, "it's just cupboard love."

"There's no secrecy involved, Captain," said the telepath. "They know the situation as well as we do. They kept quiet about it because, after all, they are loyal servants of their government and did not wish to incur the expense of extra War Risk Bonuses and all the rest of it."

"I wish," said Irene, "that I'd had such loyal servants when I was head of state . . ."

"Yes," went on Metzenthler. "They know. They know about the ships that have gone missing, and they know the risk that they are taking in making this voyage back to their home planet. The women have more to fear than the men."

"Why?" asked Irene.

"There's more than one kind of slavery, madam. There's more than a life-long drudgery as a machine minder, with the knowledge that your children will inherit your skills, such as they are, to follow you at the conveyor belt or whatever. There are, on some worlds, the so-called Pleasure Palaces. And a woman will know that the skills that have, as like as not, been beaten into her will be inherited by her daughters, and *their* daughters.

"Earlier on you used the analogy of the goat staked out to lure the tiger into the hunters' guns. It's worse for the Italians. They're the cheese in the mousetrap. At least we have the comforting knowledge that we are the trap itself."

"We hope," said Trafford.

"We *know*," Irene corrected him firmly. She turned from him to the Psionic Communications Officer and her regard, although stern, was not unkindly. "Mr. Metzenthler, you've got yourself a new job. From now on, you're Liaison Officer, between ourselves and the passengers."

Trafford thought of the implications of the word "liaison" but said nothing. He rather hated himself for the slight twinge of envy that he felt for the telepath. Trialanne was more than merely attractive; she was beautiful. (And she could cook.) That was Metzenthler's good luck—while it lasted.

V

THROUGH THE WARPED Continuum drove *Wanderer*, her structure vibrating to the pulse of her Inertial Drive and Mannschenn Drive generators. Through her own distorted Space-Time she dove, and ahead the shimmering spiral that was the target star waxed with every passing day. And there, too, ominously black against the glimmering drift, was the Horsehead Nebula. Oddly, frighteningly, there was no anamorphosis—but within that vast, swirling mass there was a deformation of radiation and gravity, of all the laws by which the physical universe is governed, that countered and overrode the minor deformations induced by the ship's Mannschenn Drive Unit. It stood there, monstrous against the opalescent haze, a veritable nightmare. It compelled the eye and the mind behind the eye, forcing upon the unwilling senses a false orientation, an emotional *up* and *down* that did not jibe with the *up* and *down* resultant from the ship's trajectory and acceleration. The spectacle never ceased to be frightening.

Trafford found it better not to look through the viewports, found it better to concentrate upon the control instruments. *Wanderer* was approaching the focal point, the corner that she would have to turn before setting course for Iralia. If there were to be an attack, it would be here, during the brief minutes of maneuvering in the normal Continuum, with the Interstellar Drive shut down, with the ship exposed to fire from missiles.

If there were to be an attack, it would be here—assuming that there was an enemy to do the attacking, assuming that whoever it was that had revived the slave trade knew about *Wanderer*, knew that she was bound from

Karakella to Iralia by the shortest and most economical route. There could be agents on that planet; there certainly were agents, representing more than a few powers. Some would be natives, no doubt; some would be apparently innocuous members of the staffs of the various embassies, even the Italian Embassy itself. Every intelligent being in the universe has his price.

Too, thought Trafford, he wouldn't put it past Smith to leak information in the right (or the wrong) quarters. There is no point in baiting a mousetrap—a rat-trap, he corrected himself—if the rats don't know that it is there.

But the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator remained blank, apart from the occasional flicker of interference, and Metzenthler made no reports of any vessels in the near vicinity. Metzenthler . . . Yes, thought Trafford, the telepath was now the weak link in the chain. While he was his normal, frustrated self he could be expected to function efficiently—but now, how much frustration was there? How much sublimation?

He discussed matters with Irene in the privacy of their quarters. "Should I clamp down?" he asked. "After all, Psionic Communications Officers are expected to be a bit weird, and a man who's leading a normal life just isn't weird."

"Isn't he?" countered his wife. "You'd be surprised. I sailed with one Master in the Dog Star Line and it was common knowledge that the Catering Officer was laying on all home comforts for him, but he was still as nutty as a fruit cake."

"Yes, yes. But there's nuttiness *and* nuttiness. And it's a widely held belief that a normal sex life interferes with the exercise of what used to be called psychic talents."

"This is a ship you're running, Benjamin, not a Sunday School Outing."

"Yes, my dear. This is a *ship* I'm running. I know damn well that in a merchant vessel I have no right to interfere in the private lives of my officers—but I have the right to demand that my officers do their jobs."

"Then have him on the carpet," said Irene. "Better still—have them both on the carpet. Now."

"All right." Trafford punched Metzenthers' number and, after the telepath had answered, said, "Come up to my day room, will you?" He added, as though by an afterthought, "Oh, by the way, is Medisinka Trialanne with you? She is? Good. Then ask her to come along with you." He replaced the microphone, said to Irene, "And you, my dear, were the first to take a dim view of what seemed to be a liaison between the pair of them."

"Was I? A girl can change her mind. But it'll be interesting to see what they have to say for themselves."

As soon as she had finished speaking there was a tap on the door. "Come in!" called Trafford.

The door opened. Medisinka Trialanne was the first to enter. She was tall, slim, supple, and her high-piled ash-blond hair contrasted vividly with the olive of her skin. She was simultaneously alien and human—very human. Trafford realized suddenly that his wife was regarding the Italian woman with something akin to envy. Then Metzenthers came in. There was nothing especially alien about him—in fact, Trafford thought, he looked more human than usual.

"You wish to see us, Captain?" asked the Psionic Communications Officer.

"Why the hell do you think I sent for you?" Trafford made a major production of filling and lighting his pipe. Then—"Mr. Metzenthers, I am not happy about the sort of watch you are keeping these days. Not at all happy."

"And why not, Captain?"

"It's that I feel that you should be picking something up now. From somebody. We are fast approaching a focal point, and if there is to be an attack on this vessel it will be as soon as we emerge into Normal Space-Time to reset the trajectory."

"And why did you send for Trialanne as well as myself, sir?"

"Damn it all, we all know the facts of life. I . . . I was

thinking that a more normal life might have led to a weakening of your powers."

"On the contrary, sir. It has enhanced them. For example, as you look at Trialanne you are wondering what it would be like with her. That's a deeply buried thought and I assure you, sir, that I have not snooped. But with Trialanne's mind hooked up with mine there was no need to snoop—not that I would dream of doing so. That thought stands out like the Horsehead Nebula toward which we are at present heading."

"Is that true, Benjamin?" asked Irene ominously.

"Of course, ma'am," went on Metzenthler, "you've entertained similar thoughts about Desinka Kankoran . . ."

"Have I?" asked Irene quietly. "Have I? I suppose I have. But you've proven nothing by these accusations. My husband's reaction towards a display of exotic pulchritude was quite natural—as was my own. I don't see why the word shouldn't be applied to the male of any species. What my husband and I are trying to find out is if you are doing your job properly."

"I am, madam. I think that I can say, truthfully, that, thanks to Trialanne, my efficiency has been doubled."

Trafford said nothing, but envied those captains of the days of sail, on Earth's seas, who had been able to do any man's work aboard their ships, who had not been at the mercy of their technicians, their specialist officers. He was not a telepath; Metzenthler was. Trialanne was. They told him that this region of space was empty—as did his own electronic and mesonic instruments. Yet, notwithstanding the negative evidence, there was this hunch, this nagging hunch, this strong hunch.

"You maintain a continuous watch?" he demanded.

"Yes." The two telepaths replied as one.

"Are you satisfied?" asked Irene a little tiredly. "In less than twelve hours subjective we turn the corner, and then it'll be a straight run to Iralia and the protection of the orbital forts."

"No. I'm not satisfied. Mr. Metzenthler, you said that

Mr. Smith was a *non*-telepath. What exactly did you mean by that?"

"How shall I put it, Captain? I shall have to use electronic radio as an analogy. The majority of living beings are transmitters. A few—but only a few—are transceivers. And even a smaller minority are psionically *dead*."

"So . . . and are there any who cannot transmit but who can receive?"

"Yes. Not many."

"So . . . and would it be possible to man a ship with these psionically dead people?"

"Yes. It would be—if you had an almost unlimited number of qualified spacemen to choose from."

Trialanne broke in. She said, "Then there is the Panseflan—how do you call it?—technique . . ."

"And what is that?" demanded Trafford.

"It was worked out on my planet, Captain. Essentially it is the artificial induction of psionic talents. Drugs employed are."

"And would it be possible to use the same technique—or a reversal of it—for the artificial suppression of psi talents?"

"It has not been done, Captain, that I know of. But yes. It should be possible."

"H'm." Trafford turned to Irene. "I've got this feeling that somebody—or something—is laying in wait for us, waiting to pounce."

"The Captain has precognitive talent," said Trialanne. "I . . . I can feel it."

"But there's still the Mass Proximity Indicator," demurred Irene. "It's still not indicating the proximity of any mass."

"Agreed. But if you'd kept up with the Imperial Navy's technical publications while you were still Empress and Commander-in-Chief, you'd know that research has been carried out, for quite some years, on the subject of the artificial propagation of anti-mesons . . ."

"Non-telepaths and anti-mesons!" She made it sound like bad language. "And one of your precious hunches!

And which world, may I ask, has produced the outstanding physicists *and* psionics necessary for the first two?"

"I hope that we don't find out," Trafford said. "But I rather fear that we shall."

"Cheerful bastard, aren't you?" she said. She turned to Metzenthier and the Italian woman. "I have hunches too—and *my* hunch is that you're doing your job, and doing it well. It's a well known fact that marriage—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—does enhance the psionic talents of the partners. We're relying on you, on the pair of you. Don't let us down, that's all."

Metzenthier did not reply. He and Trialanne had stiffened, were staring, both of them, into nothingness. Almost imperceptibly Trialanne's lips moved, and her voice was the faintest of whispers. "Did you . . . ?" she asked.

"Yes. . . ." Metzenthier's voice was only a little louder. "Yes. . . ."

"Yes *what?*" demanded Irene impatiently.

"It's gone now. . . . There was a feeling of anticipation . . . a *strong* feeling, although it could have come from all the way across the Galaxy. But I don't think so."

"Nothing definite?"

"No. It was . . . vague. But it was there."

"And we *must* correct trajectory," murmured Trafford. "The alternative is to plunge into and through the Horsehead Nebula."

"Into . . ." emended Irene.

VI

AHEAD THE TARGET STAR still blazed, a pulsing, convolution of distorted luminescence, and beyond it loomed the menacing shape of the vast nebula. Still the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator was blank—but Tallentire, working with a sort of grim joyfulness, had ensured that all his weaponry was in a state of instant readiness. Metzenthler and Trialanne were working together—although not in a physical sense. The Psionic Communications Officer stayed in his own quarters so as to be close to his organic amplifier while the woman, maintaining close telepathic contact with him, sat with Trafford, Irene and Tallentire in the control room. Bronheim, although all machinery could be handled by remote control from the ship's nerve center, kept his lonely watch in his engineroom, alert for any malfunction, ready, in a split second, to switch to manual control should it be required.

Trafford, strapped in his pilot's chair, looked at Trialanne. He wanted to ask her if she "heard" anything—but was too experienced a commander to interfere with his specialists. If anything came through she would let him know at once. He hoped. He turned his regard from her to Tallentire. The Gunnery Officer lounged at the console of his battle organ, humming softly under his breath. The Captain strained his ears to hear and to identify the tune, was absurdly irritated when he had trouble in so doing.

Then he recognized it. It was one of the archaic Terran national songs—the words and music of which persisted all down man's long and too often disastrous history. *Mine eyes have seen the Gospel writ in fiery rows of steel . . .* The sort of thing, thought Trafford, that Tallentire *would* like. "Stop it!" he wanted to say—and repressed the impulse.

Last of all he looked at Irene. She was outwardly calm, was sitting in her chair as though in readiness for no more than a routine alteration of trajectory. So she must have looked in her younger days when she was an officer in the Dog Star Line. (But at one stage of her career in that employ the Dog Star Line tramps had been armed, had successfully fought off the attacks of pirates.)

Suddenly he realised that Trialanne was speaking. She was trying to make her voice emotionless, but she was not succeeding, could not suppress the undertones of shocked incredulity. She whispered tautly, "They are Irilians. They are close now, and their artificial conditioning is ineffective at short range. They are close, and three ships there are, and armed heavily . . ." She paused. "They . . . they intend to break through into normal space as we do. Missiles and laser at once directed at control room and engineroom."

"As long as we know . . ." said Trafford.

"Yes, but *they* know too. They know what we are to do, shall do. . . . They . . . how shall I put it? Their conditioning has made them powerful receivers and . . . and pre . . . pre . . . ? Precognitive."

"You heard, Mr. Tallentire?" asked Trafford.

"Yes, Captain. I heard."

"Three ships, heavily armed, with precognitive telepaths at their fire control systems."

Perhaps, amended Trafford in his mind. *Per-bloody-haps*. Laser to slash out at the enemy missiles, a cloud of reflective vapor to destroy the effectiveness of the enemy's own laser—and of *Wanderer's* anti-missile-laser. And every move of Tallentire's countered before it was made, every defense circumvented. *The game's crook*, thought the Captain. *Bloody crook. But I have to give Tallentire his chance. But how?*

"Irilians?" Irene was asking Trialanne, discussing the matter as though a naval action were not imminent.

"It is . . . shocking, Medisinka Irene. But there have been hearsays. Perhaps Desinka Kankoran knows about it."

"Does he, now?" She picked up the intercom microphone from the armrest of her chair, pressed the stud that would

put her in touch with the passenger accommodation. "Susanna? Could you get hold of Kankoran for me?"

"Delay that!" snarled Trafford. "We've enough on our plates without worrying about inessentials."

His wife looked at him coldly. "It might be of help if we knew just whom we were fighting."

"It would have been of still greater help if that bastard Smith had put us properly in the picture before we shoved off. There's no time for academic details now."

He was conscious, as he tried desperately to work out some sort of plan of campaign, that Irene was carrying on a low-voiced conversation with Susanna and Kankoran. He heard his wife say: "Yes, it might work. It might just work. It'll be just too bad for all of us if it doesn't."

"What is all this?" he asked irritably.

"Telepathic psychological warfare," she said sweetly. "We've used it before. Remember? The idea is to get the enemy so mad that he's not his usual, rational self. Now, as soon as we're ready to break out, I want all hands to concentrate on two words—and on all that those two words imply: *dirty slaves*. Got that? *Dirty slaves*. Put all the contempt you can into it. I'll explain later."

"If there is a later," growled Trafford.

"There will be."

"All right. Try anything once," he said grudgingly. Meanwhile, he was still trying to formulate his own battle plan—and, at the same time, trying not to concentrate too hard upon it. He did not know how good the enemy telepaths were, of what feats of reception they were capable.

The use of drugs, he did know, could at times bring a fantastic stepping up of psionic abilities. All that he could hope for was that, at the moment, Tallentire would be the one whose thoughts and intentions were being monitored. In the average warship the Captain, in the final analysis, was only the chauffeur who drove the Gunnery Specialist to his date with Death.

Ahead, the writhing spiral of the target star filled all of Space—and then, when the shutters slid over the viewports,

occupied the entire extent of the vision screen. It was possible for a ship running under interstellar drive to plunge through a planet—*Wanderer* herself had done it—but not through a sun. The breakout could be delayed no longer.

Trafford nodded to Irene, who gave the necessary warnings over the intercom, adding, "And don't forget my orders. Concentrate, hard. *Dirty slaves!* Now!"

The high keening of the Mannschenn Drive, the hum of the Inertial Drive, died, ceased abruptly as the enormously powerful electro-magnetic brakes took hold. Trafford, barely conscious of the inevitable sensation of temporal disorientation, snapped to Irene, "Take the con!" and to Tallentire, "I assume fire control. Carry out my orders!"

He knew Tallentire. He knew that Tallentire, like any other Imperial Navy gunnery officer, had been brought up to attack, attack, always attack. A purely defensive action would, with him, go against the grain. The enemy—that mysterious enemy!—would know what to expect from Tallentire, would be prepared for brilliance and audacity with missiles and laser, for tactics conceived for destruction rather than protection, for selective, deadly fire. And the enemy vessels were now in plain view on the radar screens, each at an angle of an equilateral triangle in the exact center of which was *Wanderer*. They had her at their mercy—or they should have done, but their initial fire was oddly wild. Was Irene's telepathic barrage taking effect?

"Anti-laser screen!" ordered Trafford. "Anti-missile missiles—full salvoes!"

The ship shuddered as the little rockets snapped out of their launching tubes, her structure groaned as Irene slammed her around to her new heading, using full power on the directional gyroscopes. The air in the control room was suddenly hot, like a scorching blast from an open furnace door. The anti-laser screen was effective enough—but with beams playing upon it from three warships it could not achieve the impossible. Too, Trafford realised, the anti-missile missiles would be tearing holes in the reflective vapor,

rifts through which the hellish rays could strike. And destroy.

Wanderer was holed—somewhere abaft the control room. Airtight doors thudded shut, red lights blinked into ominous being on indicator panels. *Wanderer* was holed—but the damage to her shell plating, the slight loss of internal atmosphere, were of no great importance. What was of importance was the cutting of control cables from control room to engineroom and, freakishly, the welding of new, erroneous connections in those same cables before the alternative control circuits could come into operation.

One man, Bronheim, knew at once what had happened and, in his engineroom, made a wild leap for the master switch of the original circuit. It was too wild a leap for Free Fall conditions. The engineer struck his head upon a projecting bracket, rebounded, then floated there, among his misbehaving machinery, stunned and bleeding.

"The bitch!" Irene was snarling as she tried, in vain, to make some sort of sense of her controls. "The bitch! She won't handle!"

She wouldn't handle. The directional gyroscopes were useless and then, unexpectedly and disconcertingly, the Inertial Drive started at full power with the auxiliary rockets adding their thrust. The rockets cut, luckily, as the Mannschenn Drive whined into motion—that one safety device was still operative. *Wanderer* was losing no mass as she fell back into her self-induced cockeyed Continuum. Normally she would have been safe enough, with her and her personnel running no risk of being lost in Time.

Normally she would have been safe enough—but conditions inside the Horsehead Nebula were far from normal.

VII

FIRST OF ALL there were repairs to be made and, once Bronheim had been revived and his own minor contusions and abrasions doctored, these did not take long. And then there was the inquest. The enemy ships were, if Metzenth and Trialanne were to be believed, still following—but there was nothing that they could do to *Wanderer*, and nothing that *Wanderer* could do to them. If—but it was a big if—temporal synchronization could be achieved and held, it would be a different story. Then both sides would be able to use their laser weapons. But to synchronize with a ship whose Mannschenn Drive controls are set to random precession is a near impossibility.

So the repairs had been made, the damaged circuits sorted out and patched up. Susanna had the watch, and in *Wanderer's* wardroom there was a meeting of departmental heads. Desinka Kankoran, as the senior passenger, was held to rank as such.

Irene sat at the head of the table. Insofar as the ship's Articles of Agreement were concerned she was only the Mate—but her name was on the Register as Owner. And, as Owner, she was determined to find out what had gone wrong, in which ways her employees had erred.

She looked long and coldly at her husband. "Captain Trafford," she said at last, "would you mind telling us why you, a non-specialist, took over the fire control at the crucial moment?"

Trafford had been asking himself the same question. He licked his lips nervously, swallowed. "I had reason to believe," he stated, "that the enemy had the advantage of us insofar as precise location of their target was concerned.

I assumed that their Mass Proximity Indicators were functioning normally, although ours was not . . .”

“Go on. You still haven’t explained why you interfered with Mr. Tallentire in the execution of his duties.”

“And I’d like an explanation, too,” put in Tallentire sulkily.

“That will do!” snapped Irene to the Gunnery Officer. After all, Trafford was Master, and Tallentire only the Second Mate.

“I could have been wrong,” admitted Trafford, “but I did what I thought was right. In any naval action a captain has to try to outguess the enemy. He doesn’t guess right all the time . . .”

“You can say that again,” muttered Tallentire.

“Be quiet, Mr. Tallentire! You may speak when and if I have anything to ask you. Go on, Captain Trafford.”

“Well, it had been hinted that the enemy telepaths were not only receivers—although not transmitters—but, also, were exercising some sort of precognitive talent.”

“Is that so, Mr. Metzenthert?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And so,” continued Trafford, “rightly or wrongly I decided to throw a spanner into their machinery. It seemed to me that their gunnery officers would know in advance what Mr. Tallentire was going to do, and would take the necessary countermeasures not at once, but *before*. I hoped that they, the enemy, would be concentrating their attention upon Mr. Tallentire rather than myself, and that my assumption of fire control would confuse the issue.”

“It did,” grumbled Tallentire. “And how!”

Irene contented herself with a glare in his direction. “Mr. Metzenthert, is there any substance in what the Captain has been telling us?”

“There is, ma’am. The enemy were mentally geared for defense as well as for attack; consequently we got off relatively lightly.”

“There’s been nobody killed,” admitted Irene. “Yet.”

“The Captain should have foreseen,” persisted Tallentire,

"that his reckless use of anti-missile missiles would disrupt our anti-laser defense."

"He should have done—but he did not. Even so, I am inclined to think that he acted correctly. Of course, my own small use of psychological warfare may have helped to confuse the issue still further."

"Yes," said Trafford, "it *may* have done. But may I presume to ask just what the hell it was all about? This 'dirty slave' business."

"There are some insults, Captain, which, while enhancing the combative spirit, cloud the judgment. I hoped that 'dirty slave' would come into that category." She paused ominously. "And now, Desinka Kankoran, I think that you owe us both explanations. You knew, just as Mr. Smith knew, what we were running into. Did you condescend to tell us? Did you hell! And why not?"

"I . . ." The Italian was obviously embarrassed, his speech hesitant, the olive skin of his face paling to an unpleasantly yellowish tinge. "I . . . I was ashamed, madam. I did mean to tell you, but I hoped that I never would have to. When the time did come, almost too late it was."

"Ashamed?" demanded Trafford.

"Yes, Captain. Ashamed that my own people should the vile trade revive."

"But surely your government . . ."

"It is not *their* government."

"Let the man tell the story in his own words, Captain," ordered Irene.

"Thank you, Medisinka. You know, of course, how the slave trade at last stopped was. The building up of impregnable planetary defenses, and the delivery of our people from their servitude on other worlds. Those whom we could buy back we did, those whom we could rescue by force we did. And the others. . . . There was this virus produced in our laboratories. A quick death and a painless one. A release merciful for hopeless captives.

"But on one, on only one planet the Italian slaves survived. Somehow, a mere handful of them were immune to

the virus. They bred. And bred. In time they outnumbered their masters and not only did they outnumber them, but over the generations the real power had acquired. You can imagine it. Government, civil and military. Industry. The slaves the power had, and the masters were decadent. There was a revolt—but a revolt of the masters against their slaves. It was repressed bloodily, and now only a handful of the Grohen, the original owners of the planet, miserably survive on reservations.

"And they hate us. These New Irilians hate us. We responsible are, they say, for the capture of their ancestors. But that is not all. Having allowed them to be taken into servitude, we then tried to wipe them out. This revival of the slave trade is their revenge. For everything."

"It doesn't make sense," said Trafford bluntly. "This selling of people of your own race into slavery."

"Read your history, Benjamin," Irene told him. "Read your Terran history. There's ample precedent. For anything and everything. If there's anything dirty to be done for a large profit, somebody has always done it."

"I suppose so. But the economics of it seem rather fantastic. Three warships—and they don't come a dime a dozen—out on the hunt for one ship and a handful of passengers . . ."

"Not so fantastic," said Irene. "Ships of any kind don't come a dime a dozen, and the slavers try to do as little damage to the vessels they capture as possible. And a ship like this one, with her armament and equipment, would be a real prize. As for the Irilians themselves . . . we've only twenty-four of them, but. . . . Imagine a chessboard. Put twenty-four grains of, say, wheat on the first square, forty-eight on the second, ninety-six on the third . . . and so on. Anybody mug enough wanting to evolve a planetary economy based on slave labor would pay a handsome price for our cargo." She grinned at Kankoran. "Sorry, Desinka. Passengers."

"Yes," mused Trafford. "Mug enough, as you say. You'd think that after what happened to the Grohen . . ."

"But we're all of us smarter than the other fellow, aren't we? It's one of *the* laws of human nature—and by 'human' I mean any race whose members can be classed as fire-making, tool-using animals."

"Those renegades not human are," muttered Kankoran bitterly.

"But they are, they are. Very human. Out for revenge and a profit."

"And more," whispered Metzenth. "Much more. Very much more."

"What do you mean?" demanded Irene.

"During the action, madam, Trialanne and I were receiving, after a fashion. It was more on an emotional level than on one of conscious thought. There was the impression of blazing righteousness."

"That means nothing. People who seek revenge are usually in a blazingly self-righteous mood."

"But it wasn't revenge, madam, that was making them tick. It was patriotism."

"Patriotism!" Desinka Kankoran made it sound like a dirty word. "To capture and to sell your own people into slavery!"

"Yes, patriotism. Crude—but isn't it that all too often? Crude, but sincere. And that is why they hate the people of their home world, Desinka, not so much because they slaughtered the slaves they could not rescue, but because, by so doing, they destroyed the beginnings of what might have been a far-spread Italian Empire. What happened to the Grohen could have happened, almost certainly would have happened to the other slave-owning races."

"But we are not a power hungry people," said Kankoran at last.

"You may not be," Irene told him. "You may not be—but racial psychology changes over the generations, especially in a new environment."

"No, Medisinka Irene. No. I not believe it will. It is revenge that they wanting. It must be. Why else should they pursue, even into this dangerous region of Space?"

"They are pursuing," said Irene, "because we know

too much. We can wash out both revenge and patriotism as motivations, and substitute just plain, old-fashioned self-preservation."

VIII

TRAFFORD AND IRENE, accompanied by Tallentire, went back up to Control. Susanna was unashamedly glad to see them. *Wanderer* was now well into the nebula, was plunging through a dense mist, a dim-gleaming fog that was utterly formless, the stuff of which suns and their planets are made, the raw material from which stars and worlds might, possibly, be formed at some time in the remote future, but not now ever perhaps. Here, somehow, the laws regulating the normal Universe were inoperative. There were swirls and eddies but no coagulation, no condensation. Time, somehow, was standing still—or, even, running backwards.

The girl said, "I tried the radar. I know that it shouldn't work when the ship is running under interstellar drive, but . . . it does." She gestured towards the globular screen.

Yes, it was working. There, in the center of the spherical, graticuled transparency was the spindle of luminosity that represented *Wanderer*—and there, astern of her, still in their equilateral triangle formation, were the blips that were the New Italian warships.

Tallentire, his lean, dark face suddenly animated, looked first towards Irene, then, reluctantly, to Trafford. He murmured, "Shall I? Looks as though we have temporal synchronization whether we like it or not. Might as well take advantage of it before our little friends know about it."

Irene, who had been studying the screen closely, said, "They've already found out." She adjusted the control, setting the instrument to minimum range. "Look. At ninety green forty-five, and at ninety red one-oh-three . . ."

They looked, and saw the groups of tiny sparks hanging

there, less than a kilometer distant on either side of the ship. Trafford went to a viewport and looked out, using a pair of powerful binoculars. At first he could see only the formless mist and then he made out a shoal of dark, fish-like shapes. "Missiles, Anti-Vessel," he muttered.

"They don't seem to be closing," stated Irene.

"Perhaps not. But they're not the sort of company I like. Mr. Tallentire, you may use your anti-missile laser."

"Very good, sir," replied the Gunnery Officer stiffly.

He took his seat at the fire control console, activated his laser weapons. The others watched with rather more than ordinary interest. There was, of course, the delight taken by mankind in any sort of fireworks display—and, too, there was the desire to see something, anything, that would break the monotony of the formless mists through which the ship was falling.

"The group at ninety green forty-five first," announced Tallentire, still sullen, adding, "if the Captain is agreeable."

"Get on with it!" growled Irene.

"Very good, madam."

Tallentire, not hurrying himself, made his last adjustments, closed his firing switch. Then, with something akin to horror, he and the others stared at the uncanny, impossible spectacle outside the viewports, the frightening violation of all the known laws of physics. A pencil of intense light should have flashed into being instantaneously and, a microsecond later, the first of the missiles should have exploded into incandescent vapor. But that was not the way of it. Slowly, slowly a rod extended from the ship, seeming to bend away from the targets even as it crawled towards them.

Tallentire cursed, made further adjustments. The beam wavered all along its tardily extending length—wavered, and still was reluctant to home upon its objective. Again Tallentire swore, and his long-fingered hands fluttered over the console like those of a frenzied pianist. The probing antenna of light twisted upon itself, became a warped U.

All too obviously the lethal beam was returning to its point of origin.

"Switch off!" ordered Trafford.

"But . . . but I think I can . . ."

"Switch off!"

Slowly, far too slowly, the dull-gleaming track faded.

"Let him try again," suggested Irene. "We may learn something."

"We may establish a norm, too. I've heard of ships destroying themselves with their own missiles, but never of one that's sliced herself into small pieces with her own laser."

"Let him try again," said Irene—and this time it was more than a mere suggestion.

"Oh, all right, then." There were moments when Trafford actively disliked his wife, and this was one of them. Not only did she know too much, but she had become too used to the exercise of power, too much power. There was more to it all than the age-old discord between Master and Owner. "All right, then. You may try again, Mr. Tallentire."

"Thank you, Captain." The Gunnery Officer was altogether too polite.

Again the wavering beam crept out, but this time Tallentire had it under better control. He condescended to explain. "It's obvious that our radar is giving us absolutely false readings—rangewise and relative bearingwise. So I'm ignoring the screen entirely and playing by ear."

"And if that doesn't work, you can always try the next street corner," said Susanna tartly. Trafford was grimly pleased to note that other people's marriages had their bad patches.

After an exchange of glares with his wife the gunnery specialist continued. "I have to do it by *feel*, as it were. It's . . . it's like trying to fish something up from the bottom of a pond with a long boathook, one with a too flexible shaft, and with refraction lousing things up still further . . ."

As he spoke his fingers were busy. He suddenly exclaimed: "Got it!"—and through his binoculars Trafford could

see that the beam had, indeed, found one of the missiles. But nothing was happening. Nothing was happening yet. Tallentire stole a hasty glance at his meters, muttered something about there being nothing wrong with the power output—and still nothing was happening.

Then, almost imperceptibly at first, the thing began to glow—dull red, then orange, then yellow. It burst at last, but not suddenly. It was more of a gradual blossoming than an explosion, a flower of flame that burgeoned with deliberation. Before it had faded, there sounded, from somewhere aft, a series of metallic clangs, not violent, not overly loud, no more than the rapping of a surveyor's testing hammer. *Wanderer* had been designed to withstand far more violent impacts. Even so . . .

"That was close," said Trafford. "Too close."

"I told you that the radar was misleading," said Tallentire. "Do you want me to carry on, sir?"

"Yes. If we're going to blow those bloody things up we'll blow them up now. For all we know, the present conditions may be local ones only, peculiar to this part of the nebula. A little further on we might get real explosions—or the missiles might decide to home on us."

"Yes. Get it over and done with," said Irene.

They got it over and done with, although it was a long job, a task that taxed Tallentire's patience and skill to the utmost. With each leisurely explosion there was the gentle pattering on the shell plating—and, before each one, Trafford feared that the pattern would not be repeated. He tried to remember what he had learned, what he had read and been told of conditions inside the nebula. But so little had been written on the subject. Commodore von Hagen, in *Star Scout*, had essayed the passage of this region of space all of a hundred and fifty years ago—and Commodore von Hagen, together with his crew and his ship, had never been heard of again.

Then there had been Captain Leclerc, in *Explorer*. Leclerc had been less ambitious, had set his course so as to

do no more than skim through the tenuous fringe of the mane. Leclerc had reported electro-magnetic anomalies. And Leclerc, thought Trafford, could say that again. Captain Faraday, in *Investigator*, had been sent to continue Leclerc's investigations but, possibly, had been too ambitious. No one knew, no one would ever know.

After this the Survey Branch of the Imperial Navy, although not before having lost a series of expensive, unmanned probes, had decided to leave well enough alone. So far as Trafford knew, no merchant vessels, or survey ships belonging to other starfaring races, had ever tried to follow in the footsteps of *Star Scout*, *Explorer* and *Investigator*.

Until now.

But not from choice.

He turned to Irene, asked, "What do we do now?"

"You're the Master."

"And you're the Owner."

She laughed, not altogether pleasantly. She gestured towards the radar screen, back on extreme range, in which the three blips that were the pursuing vessels (but were they ahead, or were they astern, or were they as close or as distant as they seemed?) still floated. "My heart fair bleeds for those captains. They've nobody to pass the buck to."

"I'm not passing the buck." He tried not to lose his temper. "I'm not passing the buck."

"Then what the hell are you doing?"

He spoke patiently—or thought that he was speaking patiently. "You're so fond of telling us what a marvelous spacewoman you used to be when you were Mate in the wonderful Dog Star Line—a crumby outfit if there ever was one! Perhaps you can come up with some solution to our problems that's far too obvious to be grasped by a mere naval officer like myself."

"Ex-naval officer," she sneered. "And even if things hadn't turned out the way they did, you'd still be 'ex.' Having got to know you, do you think that I'd have let you stay in my Navy?"

"Not yours any longer, dearie. Come to that, they're

bloody lucky now to have an empress who knows just enough about naval matters to keep her interfering little paws to herself."

"Interfering little paws!" It was Susanna, her face working with vicious hostility. "You don't know the half of it, Benjamin. It wasn't only your precious Navy she used to interfere with—it was with every goddamned thing in the goddamned Universe." She continued with false sweetness. "Of course, I admit that the Navy needed interfering with, otherwise it would have been quite incapable of dedigitation."

"Talk about something you know something about, you stupid little bitch!" growled Tallentire. "The Gunnery Branch didn't need to pull its finger out. Of course, the Spacemen were always a pretty dim crowd. The mess that we're in now is evidence enough of that."

"That's enough from you, *Mr. Tallentire!*" roared Trafford. "Even as a merchant captain I have the power to deal with insubordination, and don't forget it!"

"Twenty dollars for the first offence, forty for the second, and a Bad Discharge when we get to port!" sneered the Second Mate. "You're assuming, of course, that you're competent to navigate us to port. Any port. Personally, I have my doubts."

"Unless you pipe down you'll be out of the bloody airlock without a spacesuit!"

"And who's putting me out? You, and who else?"

"Me!" cried Susanna.

"Keep out of this, you half-witted slut!" yapped Tallentire.

"I supersede you!" screamed Irene to Trafford. "Here and now, before witnesses. It's obvious that you're incapable of maintaining discipline. Where's the Official Log, somebody? I want the entry made, at once!"

"And I demote *you* . . ."

Then Trafford became aware that the intercom speaker had been babbling, unheeded, for quite some time. He picked up a microphone, said, "Control here."

NEBULA ALERT

"Captain!" It was Trialanne's voice. "Captain! Will you come down to the passenger quarters? At once, please. They're fighting."

IX

THIS WAS an emergency, a blessedly normal emergency (thought Trafford) with which he could cope. It was what was sorely needed at this juncture to snap his officers, his friends (but not any longer), his wife (but he must have been certifiable when he married *her*) back into line. "All right," he barked. "You, Mr. Tallentire, have the watch. Irene and Susanna, come with me."

"And why the hell should we?" asked Irene. "Afraid to go down there by yourself? Do you want two women to hold your hand?"

"Cut that out. You're supposed to be the Mate, and Susanna's the Purser . . ."

"*Supposed* to be the Mate? When I was with the Dog Star Line . . ."

"Cut that out I said!" The ferocity of Trafford's roar amazed even himself. "Cut that out, and come with me!"

Without waiting to see if his order was being obeyed he dropped through the hatch in the control room deck, ran down the companionways, through the officers' quarters, through the storerooms and auxiliary machinery compartments, down to the passenger accommodation. He could hear the noise of shouting and screaming, louder and louder as he approached the part of the ship given over to the Italians. He could hear, too, the sound of hurrying feet following him—and felt a sudden surge of gratitude that Irene and Susanna had, after all, come with him.

He hurried along the last, short alleyway, flung open the door that gave access to what was now the Italians' saloon and recreation room. He paused there, looking on. It was not a pretty sight. He had seen more than one rough-house,

now and again had been a participant—but in the normal rough-house there is a ferocious joyfulness, a reveling in unbridled physical activity, however dangerous. But here there was a cold, sick viciousness. Four of the men had cornered a woman, and they had stripped her, but the infliction of pain and humiliation was their intention, not rape. (Rape would have been lighthearted playfulness compared with what they were doing to her.) And three women had a man flung on top of a table, and they had pulled away his nether garments, and a knife gleamed in the hand of one of his attackers. Then Metzenthler was there, knocking the weapon from the woman's grasp. Metzenthler was there, and Triallanne was with him. They were fighting hard to prevent the infliction of serious damage, but there were only two of them against twenty-three. They were telepaths, which gave them a slight anticipatory edge over the others—but it was only a slight one. They were, amazingly, still rational—which the others were not—and this helped. Too, Metzenthler had, while he was in the Imperial Navy, taken the obligatory courses in unarmed combat and, out of character though it was, had profited from them. Even so, he and the woman were considerably the worse for wear, their clothing torn, their faces bruised and battered, their expressions desperate.

Trafford roared at the top of his voice, "Order!"

It might have worked, it probably would have worked had he been dealing with brawling spacemen, just as the sight of gold-braided astronautical authority might have worked. It probably would have worked with normal civilian passengers who, in their innocence, hold Captains in much greater awe than do their officers.

But these passengers were not normal.

These passengers were not normal, and they turned to glare at Trafford, and the cold ferocity in their eyes was like that of ravenous beasts. He wanted to turn and run, but he did not. He could not. He advanced into the compartment demanding inanely, "Now, what's all this in aid of?"

He received his answer soon enough—a knee in the groin. It was a smooth, shapely female knee and in happier circumstances he would have appreciated the sight of it. And then as he stood there, helpless, struggling to remain on his feet, fighting down the waves of nausea, long, sharp fingernails flashed at his eyes. He could do nothing to avoid them, was only dimly conscious that at the last moment another hand, a female one, had closed on the wrist of the menacing claw and jerked it viciously away. He heard Irene mutter, “If anybody scraggs the little bastard it’s going to be me!” saw her chop down the Italian woman with a vicious blow to the neck.

Then both Irene and Susanna were in the thick of the fight. They converged upon the hapless Kankoran who, naked and bleeding, had just staggered to his feet. He went down again, huddling into a foetal posture to protect himself from their punishing feet.

“This won’t do, Captain,” somebody was shouting into Trafford’s ear. “This won’t do at all . . .”

It was a blinding glimpse of the obvious, but nobody could dispute its truth. Trafford looked into Metzenthler’s battered face. “You’re right,” he said. “You’re right.”

“But what shall we do about it?”

“Let ’em kill each other off. That goes for Irene and Sue, too.”

“Captain! Captain Trafford!”

Damn the man. Couldn’t he go and play by himself in some quiet corner?

“Captain Trafford!”

The telepath’s voice was insistent—but it was not his voice that got through to Trafford’s mind—it was his eyes. They held Trafford’s wavering regard, were a focusing point for his attention. There was a power in them—a power that Trafford had never dreamed that his Psionic Communications Officer possessed. There was a power—the power to invade and to violate mental privacy, the power, never before exercised, to command.

And it was power without knowledge.

"Captain, you must *do* domething. *Now*."

Trafford knew that there was only one thing that could be done. With Metzenthier protecting him he walked unsteadily to the nearest intercom speaker-microphone, depressed the switch. "Control? Captain here, Mr. Tallentire. Anesthetize Compartment J."

"I suppose you know what you're doing?" Tallentire's voice was insolent.

"Anesthetize Compartment J, damn you!"

"Lethalize if you like, Skipper. *And* with pleasure."

"Damn you, Tallentire, do as you're bloody well told!"

Tiredly, boredly, "Oh, all right, all right. What's all the flap about, anyhow?"

Trafford, watching disinterestedly while Metzenthier fought off a couple of Italian harpies, vaguely hoped that the gas-injection equipment, a standard fitting in all Terran warships and transports, was still working. Not so vaguely he hoped that Tallentire would open the correct cylinders. He detected a faint tang in the air—faint, yet strong enough to be noticeable in spite of the reek of blood and perspiration.

Metzenthier was dragging him to the door. Tallentire should have shut it—but luckily he had not. Trialanne was hustling Irene and Susanna towards the exit, pulling them away from an unfortunate man whom they seemed intent upon dismembering. Somehow all of them were through, and then Metzenthier slid the door shut and fumbled with the manual lock. At last there was a decisive *click*, just as from the other side of the panel came the sound of a scuffle, the noise of violent hammering.

Then the muffled clamor subsided, fast. The gas pumped in through the ducts had taken effect.

Irene turned on Trafford. "A fine shipmaster you've turned out to be, you little twirp. You can't keep your passengers in order, so you have to gas 'em. I'd hate to be with you in any *real* emergency."

"And I'd hate to be with you. You were supposed to

help me keep order, not to fling yourself into the brawl as though you enjoyed it."

"And why shouldn't I enjoy it? It's high time that all you men got smacked down to size."

"Too right," agreed Susanna. "Too bloody right."

"Captain Trafford"—Metzenthers voice was authoritative as well as pleading—"please make an end to this futile antagonism and listen to me."

"She started it," said Trafford.

"Like hell I did!"

"Captain Trafford!" That power was there again, and Trafford could feel it damping his irrational fury, inhibiting him from any further exchange of angry words with Irene and Susanna. He fought it—but he knew, in one sane corner of his mind, that the telepath (but more than just a telepath) was right.

Irene was silent now, and so was Susanna, and the two of them were standing there, somehow cowed, dominated by the tall figure of the Italian woman. And she, Trialanne, was beside Metzenthers, close to him, and it was more than a physical closeness. There was a . . . oneness, a unity possible only on a psychological plane. The power that Metzenthers had exercised was not from himself alone. Joined with Trialanne's it was more than merely doubled, much more than only complemented.

"Can't you see what has been happening?" asked the telepath.

"No . . ."

"Then I will explain—or try to explain. You know, of course, that conditions inside the nebula play hell with the laws of physics. And they do, too, with those of psychology. But, as far as they are concerned, the main effect has been one of . . . amplification? Or aggravation. As long as there is more than one sex there is a natural hostility between the sexes. Normally it is kept under control. We have just learned, all of us, what happens when it is not. Added to this, there are the natural frictions and jealousies that exist between people of the same sex,

especially in the little, artificial world of a ship. And there is that resentment of authority felt, but buried deep in the subconscious, by even the most loyal officers."

"Yes," said Trafford, "I think I see what you're getting at. But how is it that you and Trialanne haven't been affected?"

"Because," Metzenthertold him, with an uncharacteristic lack of embarrassment, "the honeymoon isn't over. Because we are still sublimating our hostilities, both sexual and racial. Because, as far as we're concerned, every difference between us, every psychological and physiological difference, is still glamorous and wonderful and not infuriating."

"How do you sublimate hostilities?" asked Trafford—then blushed as he realized the stupidity of his question. "Don't bother to answer," he added quickly.

"And don't be a prude!" snapped Irene. "All right, all right. I'm still not convinced. According to you, Mr. Metzenthert, we should be sitting pretty. Unlike the survey ships that were lost in the nebula, we have an exact balance of sexes aboard. Surely all should be harmony—not riot and bloodshed. *And* mutiny."

"There is still an imbalance," Metzenthert said. "As you know, our own original complement was four men and two women. Then Trialanne's people boarded—twelve men and fourteen women. On paper it all cancels out very nicely—and Trialanne and I have initiated the actual cancelling out process. But, as far as the ship's personnel are concerned, there's still Bronheim living alone and liking it, and there's still one unattached woman among the passengers. In the passenger accommodation what happened was this: the women outnumbered the men, and so the ganging-up process was initiated . . ."

"But in the control room there was no imbalance of sexes," Trafford point out.

"Agreed. But you, as Captain, were outnumbered by your officers. Irene, as Owner, was outnumbered by her employees. Tallentire, as Gunnery Officer, was outnumbered by non-specialists . . ."

"So if we achieve harmony, we achieve harmony," said Trafford. "It's as simple as all that."

"No, Captain, it's not simple, and you're well aware of it. But you *know* what has been going wrong. And you know, ma'am, and you, Susanna. Surely three intelligent people such as yourselves can be on your guard against any future outbreaks of irrationality."

"I'm not so sure that it was irrationality," murmured Irene, but she was smiling as she said it.

"And that leaves us, Captain, with only one loose end—or two loose ends. Bronheim and Denelleen . . ."

"Denelleen?"

"The unattached passenger."

"Damn it all!" exploded Trafford. "I can't marry them by force. And I can't order them to live in sin."

"To use compulsion there will be no need," said Trialanne. "Denelleen is lonely. Too, she is trained as an engineer . . ."

"Also," contributed Metzenthler, "Bronheim has been racking his brains to try to work out some way of becoming acquainted. But he's painfully shy."

"And you really think that this will work?" Trafford was still not convinced. "This nice, tidy pairing off, this all-living-happily-ever-after business? It's all right for *you*, perhaps—but for the rest of us, ship's people and passengers, for whom the original glamor has worn off . . ."

"Of course," said Metzenthler, "a change of partners might be of help . . ."

"And it might not," Irene said firmly. "And you, Benjamin, can douse that hopeful glint in your eye." She turned to Susanna. "Get back to the control room, Sue, and put your everloving in the picture. Tell him, too, to maintain the anesthesia until further notice. And you, Mr. Metzenthler and Trialanne, had better come with us to the engineroom. I fear that Mr. Bronheim's own, private hate session may be taking a dangerous turn."

X

YES, BRONHEIM was having his troubles—and, had he not been disturbed by Irene and the others, the whole ship would have been in trouble. He was sitting there, in the Mannschenn Drive room, staring fixedly at the complexity of spinning gyroscopes. His expression was not pleasant. A large, heavy hammer dangled in one big hand. He was muttering: "I'll fix the bastard. I'll *fix* the bastard . . ." And yet he was still holding back. As an engineer he knew, deep down in his mind, that the machines were not, after all, his servants; he was their slave. He knew this—but he was too good an engineer wantonly to destroy.

Yet.

He would come to it, though. Rational thought processes were being superseded by the blind hate engendered by the dreadfully warped region of Space through which the ship was driving. He would come to it. The knuckles of the hand grasping the destructive tool were white, and his forearm was twitching, in time with the tic that perturbed the frozen immobility of his heavy face.

"Drop that!" ordered Irene sharply.

Slowly he turned to face her, and then recognition dawned suddenly in his eyes. "Like hell I will!" he growled. "After I've smashed this mechanized cat's cradle it'll be your turn, you jumped-up trollop! And that control room ornament with you!"

He got to his feet, moving with speed, turning as he rose to face again the Mannschenn Drive unit. His hammer hand was uplifted to throw. Trafford jumped, getting himself between the machine and the forward driving arm. The blow fell hard and painfully on his right shoulder and

he heard from somewhere behind him the clatter of metal on metal. But there was no interruption to the thin, high keening of the machinery, no cessation of its beat.

Bronheim had his thick arms about Trafford's body then, had lifted him from the deck. The Captain's right arm was still useless, and his left one was trapped. He struggled desperately, kicking with his feet, trying to butt the engineer's face, but Bronheim seemed impervious to pain. His intention was obvious—to throw Trafford into the Drive. And people trapped in those Time-and Space-twisting fields died horribly.

Suddenly the crushing grip of the powerful arms relaxed. Trafford, his own left arm now free, managed to push violently. He broke away, staggered backwards. Behind him he could hear the whine of the machine into which he was falling, fought to recover his balance, to halt his stumbling descent to certain and hideous death. Already he was feeling the effect of the temporal precession field; already his mind was being swamped by memories, some of them long-forgotten incidents, of his entire past life. And yet he could still see through his eyes, could somehow register what he was seeing. He saw Bronheim sitting there, the hammer in his hand, and saw the door to the compartment open and admit Irene, Metzenthler, Trialanne—and himself. He saw himself jump to grapple with the engineer and saw the hammer fly wide of its mark to crash harmlessly against the bulkhead. He saw Irene chop viciously with the edge of her hand, and Bronheim slump into unconsciousness.

He watched himself staggering backwards—and knew, with a dreadful certainty, that when the two selves merged that would be the finish.

And then, apparently from nowhere, a long arm reached out and dragged him back into normal Space-Time, to the continuance of living.

He looked dazedly into Metzenthler's bearded face. "Thanks . . ." he muttered stupidly.

The telepath laughed grimly. "We have to maintain the

balance," he said, "now that we know how important it is."

"I hope that I haven't destroyed it," commented Irene. "I tried not to hit too hard." She was down on her hands and knees beside Bronheim. "He'll live," she said, after a second or so, "with nothing worse than a stiff neck for a couple of days."

"What shall we do with him?" asked Trafford, rubbing his sore shoulder with his left hand. He looked from the unconscious engineer to the machine that he had almost destroyed, the machine that, conversely, could destroy the ship and all her people. His attention was drawn and held by the shimmering, spinning, ever-precressing gyroscopes, and by the gleaming rotors turning and tumbling down the dark infinities, compelling the vision, morbidly fascinating.

"Break it up!" ordered Irene harshly, grasping him and turning him so that he was facing her. "If you aren't careful you'll be walking into the bloody thing of your own free will and accord. Well, have you thought of an answer to your question yet?"

"As things are at the moment," said Trafford slowly and carefully, "the Drive's better left to run by itself. I suggest that we remove Mr. Bronheim to the sick bay." He went on, after a pause. "And if there's anything in Mr. Metzenthers' theory this woman—what was her name? Denelleen?—can be revived and put in there with him, as a nurse. Or whatever."

"And let nature take its course," said Irene tartly. "Nature's been taking its course rather too much already."

"It will work, ma'am," Metzenthers told her. "Trialanne and I have already discussed it . . ."

When? thought Trafford, then realized that a discussion between telepaths is a very private one.

". . . and think that, with the aid of a little hypnosis before either Mr. Bronheim or Denelleen is fully conscious, everything will work out properly."

"Or improperly," said Irene. Then, "Do you think that you

could use the same technique on *everybody* before they're brought round?"

"Yes. On everybody, both Italian and Terran."

"Leave us Terrans out of it. We're intelligent people, and now we know what to guard against."

"Intelligent people, ma'am," the telepath pointed out, "often do sillier things, insofar as personal relationships are concerned, than the unintelligent."

"Too true, Mr. Metzenthier. But some of us have to run the ship, and it'll be better for all concerned if our vision is not obscured by a rosy haze. And now, if you'll fix up Mr. Bronheim and his inamorata, acting, temporary, unpaid, the Captain and I will get back up top. I hope that we don't find Tallentire and Susanna in the middle of sublimating their hostilities."

They, Tallentire and Susanna, were standing very close together, but their attention was not for each other but for the spherical radar screen. Trafford asked quietly, "What is it?" The two of them started, then Tallentire answered, "Our little friends seem to be having trouble."

The pursuing ships had been in an equilateral triangle formation. Now there was no longer a triangle; now there were only two blips instead of three.

"Did you . . . ?" asked Trafford.

"No, Captain," replied the Gunnery Officer. "Not guilty this time. I've no intention of wasting ammo as long as these abnormal conditions persist."

"Perhaps she's just desynchronized."

"I don't think so. We were watching the screen when it happened. It was an explosion all right. I've seen too many not to recognize one. The blip just expanded and fragmented before vanishing."

"What happened to them could have happened to us," said Trafford soberly. He could imagine it all too well. Mutiny, and a suicidal last stand of senior officers in the magazine, or a withdrawal of damping rods from the micro-pile. Or both. He wondered how effective the two surviving

ships were as fighting machines—and if he would ever be given the chance to find out.

"They," Tallentire sounded frightened, "they must have run wild and destroyed themselves. The same as we almost did."

"The same as we did," Irene told him, "except that we didn't quite reach the stage of self-destruction."

"But it was close," said Trafford.

"Yes, too close. Let this be a lesson to you, to all of us."

"Yes, teacher," murmured Susanna.

"That's enough from you, you insolent little . . ." flared Irene—and then, before she could finish the sentence, her anger subsided. "Think!" she ordered. "Think before you speak, before you act. Keep a tight rein on yourselves at all times. Don't go striking matches in the powder magazine."

"And that goes for you, too," said Trafford.

"Yes. It does."

XI

THEY KEPT A tight rein on themselves—Trafford and Irene, Tallentire and Susanna. For Metzenthier and Trialanne, for Bronheim and Denelleen, it was easier. As Metzenthier had said, the glamor had yet to wear off, the honeymoon had just started. They could afford the affectionate insult that might be misconstrued, the playful slap that could be mistaken for an angry blow. Bronheim, after a very short spell off duty, was back with his beloved engines, with the Italian woman as his adoring disciple. The two telepaths seemed to be wandering around in a happy daze—but Trafford knew that their linked minds were alert for any vagrant wisps of thought and that they, by more than example, had brought peace to the passenger accommodation. It was an odd sort of peace—and the two Terran couples at times envied it. But somebody had to look after the shop.

Watch succeeded watch as *Wanderer* drove through the nebula, still with the two remaining New Italian ships keeping station upon her. Watch succeeded watch, and still the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator registered nothing but the interference to be expected from the vast dust clouds, still the radar screen showed nothing but the two pursuers. And, beyond the unshuttered viewports, there was nothing to be seen but the omnipresent pearly light, broken (but infrequently) by the merest hint of an eddy.

Watch succeeded watch uneventfully—until Trafford was called from his bed cabin by Tallentire. The Second Mate sounded worried, saying, "I think you'd better come up, Captain."

Trafford threw on a light robe and then, accompanied

by Irene, made his way to the control room. There was something ahead—*something*. It appeared on both radar and Mass Proximity Indicator screens. It did not convey the impression of a solid target, and yet it was more than mere interference. On neither detecting device did the range seem to be closing—but such readings, Trafford knew, were valueless in these circumstances. There was something there, and it appeared to be ahead.

Prudence dictated an alteration of trajectory—and that as soon as possible. But—these were wartime conditions, even though no war had been declared. In apparently close proximity to *Wanderer* were two heavily armed vessels, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to pounce. Even so . . . Trafford, who had picked up the microphone to order maneuvering stations, put it back into its clip.

"Make your mind up!" snapped his wife.

"I am making it up," he replied, speaking with deliberate mildness. "But I'm not letting myself be rushed. Mr. Tallentire, will you ask Medisinka Trialanne to come up here? And will you, Irene, see if you can get any joy out of the RT? It *may* be working again—after all, the radar is—and our friends could be nattering among themselves."

He studied his screens. Yes, it was still there, that . . . disturbance, analogous to the sea clutter that is picked up and displayed by a surface ship's radar. It was still there, and even though the range was not closing, it was brighter, more definite. Damn it! How far away was it? Light years? Kilometers? Fractions of a kilometer?

"I don't like it," said Trafford aloud. "I don't like it . . ." And he thought, *I'm only assuming that the New Italians are ready for battle. For all I know, mutiny may have destroyed their effectiveness. And for all I know we could be well outside the range of even their most powerful weapons. And for all I know, even if we are within range, and even if their weapons are manned and operative, they won't work any better than our own anti-missile laser did.*

Trialanne came into the control room just as Irene succeeded in coaxing a thin, faraway voice from the transceiver.

It was speaking in the peculiar sing-song that Trafford had come to associate with the Italians. Another voice, even fainter, answered it.

"What do they say?" demanded Trafford.

The girl translated rapidly. "They see something ahead. They of it are frightened, but they are waiting for us to break into normal Space-Time before they so do. All weapons are ready . . ."

They would be, thought Trafford. *Two against one—but not impossible odds . . . But—damn Mr. Smith—he*, Trafford, was Master of a passenger liner, was no longer Captain of a fighting ship of the Imperial Navy. Had he only his own crew to consider he would have accepted the challenge nonetheless, but . . .

The transceiver was silent now.

"Trialanne," asked Trafford, "can you still hear them? Telepathically, I mean . . ."

"No. There is too much—how do you say?—interference."

"Then perhaps you might talk to them by radio. If we can raise them." Irene beckoned the girl to the equipment, handed her the microphone. "Call them. Tell them that I suggest a temporary truce to enable all three ships to pull clear of whatever it is ahead . . ."

"And what," asked Irene, "if they *say* that they agree, and still open fire as soon as we all drop back into the normal Continuum? And what if they're thinking the same about us?"

"We'll dicker," said Trafford. "If nothing better comes of it, we might learn something. And if they should agree, we shall be able to work out some way by which all parties can demonstrate their *bona fides*."

"You hope. Anyhow, we have to raise them first."

Trialanne was speaking rapidly into the microphone. A thin, high voice replied. The Italian translated even as the other was speaking. "Their Captain says that it is unthinkable, impossible. All that he will consider is surrender unconditional . . ."

"Painfully honest," commented Irene drily.

Trafford grunted. He was still studying the screens. The area of disturbance was brighter still, was . . . spreading, was blotting out the external graticules in the transparent spheres. He looked away from the instruments, out through the forward viewport. There was a suggestion of form, now, in the pearly mists, a hint of color. Conditions outside were changing—and not necessarily for the better. Suddenly, inexplicably, the ship began to shudder, unrhythmically to vibrate. Bronheim's voice sounded from the intercom speaker. "Control room? What's happening? I'm getting the revs on the Inertial Drive generator, but she's laboring . . ."

Laboring! Yes, that was the word. Trafford could feel it. As is the case with all good shiphandlers, the vessel was an extension of his own body. He *knew*, emotionally rather than intellectually, that the mighty engines were trying to push *Wanderer* through a medium that was no longer a near-vacuum but a fluid, a dense fluid. And the tide was against her. And yes, speed (relative speed? relative to *what?*) was dropping. The needle of the accelerometer quivered, then jerkily began to move anti-clockwise. Yet there was no loss of apparent weight, no sensation of Free Fall. It was all part and parcel of the craziness of physical conditions inside the nebula.

"Captain here," snapped Trafford into the intercom microphone. "Increase your revolutions, Mr. Bronheim."

"But, sir, she'll tear herself apart."

"Increase revolutions, and we'll see what happens."

"You're the Captain."

The irregular vibration increased, and with it came a new, snarling noise from the Inertial Drive, the mounting protest of the overdriven generator. And still the accelerometer needle retrogressed by nervous twitches. Trafford did not know why he should feel the way that he did, but it was vitally important to him that he should not let his ship become the plaything of unknown, unknowable, perhaps, forces. It was the age-old dread of all Captains, in all ships, everywhere of losing steerage way.

"More revs!" he ordered.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but she's flat out."

"All right. Stand by for emergency rocket acceleration."

Irene muttered something about reserves of reaction mass, but Trafford ignored her. He saw the *Ready* lights set in his arm-rest console flash on, his fingers found the firing key. Belatedly—but Trafford should have issued instructions—Irene was giving the order for maneuvering stations over the intercom. The needle of the accelerometer was almost at Zero, and what would happen when the ship lost her relative way was anybody's guess. Trafford felt neither like guessing nor finding out. Surely everybody should be in a position of safety by now, even the passengers, with Susanna to chivvy them.

He pushed the button.

The back of his acceleration chair slammed him hard and viciously and the padding literally squeaked, a thin, high screech that was audible above the screaming thunder of the venturis, above the crash and clatter of unsecured objects falling down the long axis, flung contrary to the line of flight by the sudden accession of pseudo gravity. The accelerometer needle slammed against its limiting stop, snapped. Alarm bells and buzzers added their quota to the general turmoil.

Trafford cut the rocket drive, lifted his head and looked about him dazedly. Irene, Tallentire and Trialanne returned his stare.

"It could have been worse," admitted Irene at last. "It could have been worse. There doesn't seem to be any serious damage—apart from the fact that the Inertial Drive seems to have had it. And, of course, we don't know how many people have been killed or injured below decks . . ."

"Look!" exclaimed Tallentire.

He was pointing up and out, through the transparent dome that was *Wanderer's* stem. "Look!"

They all looked—and saw, instead of the featureless mists, a black sky, a vast darkness in which glimmered a pitiful few dim and distant luminosities, far away and long ago island universes.

"Well," said Irene flatly, "a most remarkable feat of navigation, Captain. But before we stage a mutiny, Mr. Tallentire, would you mind switching on a rear vision screen?"

Tallentire did so.

The situation was not as bad as it had seemed at first glance. Astern of the ship was the Galactic lens, distorted by the Time- and Space-twisting fields of the Mannschenn Drive, warped to the likeness of a Klein flask blown by a drunken glass blower, but still recognizable.

"We can find our way back," said Tallentire.

"If it is our Galaxy," Irene told him.

"The first thing we have to do," announced Trafford, making it more of an order than a suggestion, "is to assess damage, to ship and personnel."

"Nobody is badly hurt . . ." Trialanne whispered. "There were few who were not in their beds when you the rockets used . . ."

"You know?"

"I know, Captain."

Telepaths have their uses, he thought. "All right," he said. "Get hold of Bronheim and ask him for a report. Tell him not to shut the Mannschenn Drive down yet until we're sure that we haven't got company . . ."

"I'm afraid we have, sir," Tallentire reported. "There's nothing on the radar, but our two friends are showing on the Mass Proximity Indicator. Whatever it was that they were using as an anti-detection device must have broken down." He swore softly. "Damn it, there are *three* ships, not two. I could have sworn that the third one blew up."

"Perhaps she did. Irene, switch on the Carlotti communicator. If it's working."

It was. From its speaker came a strange voice. The owner of it was unmistakably Terran, and he was talking in English. "Calling three unidentified vessels. *Faraway Quest* calling three unidentified vessels. Identify yourselves, please. Identify yourselves."

XII

UNLESS THERE IS a common language, communication between vessels running under interstellar drive is practically impossible. There is nothing analogous to the various International Codes used on many worlds by seamen and airmen who, although they do not have a common language, do share a common alphabet. There is a grouping of symbols made by flag, or flashing lamp, or sound, or radio telegraphy. The receiver looks it up in his code book and he has the message. But the spacefaring races are many, and their written and printed languages are manifold still. A crude code does exist, using combinations of colored lights, but it does not go much beyond *Heave to or I open fire*. In any case, it cannot be employed unless vessels are within sight of each other. Things were much better before the Carlotti Direction Finding and Communication System began to supersede the telepaths, the Psionic Communications Officers—although many a message was seriously garbled both in transmission and reception. Luckily for the linguistically slothful Anglo-Saxons, English has been adopted, although unofficially, as a *lingua franca*, just as, centuries ago, it was the *lingua franca* of Earth's seas.

Trafford unbuckled his seat belt and pushed off, rather clumsily, in the direction of the transceiver. He did not like Free Fall, always had trouble coordinating his movements in these conditions. But Free Fall it would have to be until Bronheim repaired the Inertial Drive. Irene caught him before he could crash into the apparatus, held him with one hand, handed him the microphone with the other. The strange ship was talking again.

"Rim Worlds Confederacy Cruiser *Faraway Quest* calling unidentified vessels. Please identify yourselves."

Trafford paused before pressing the transmitting stud. "Rim Worlds Confederacy?" he asked. "And who the hell are *they*?"

"No such people," replied Irene definitely. "The Rim Worlds are no more than sparsely settled hunks of rock on the edge of nowhere. They don't own so much as a single armed lighter, although they do have a two ship company calling itself Rim Runners . . ."

"*Faraway Quest* calling unidentified vessels . . ."

Irene took the microphone from Trafford, saying, "I'll handle this, if you don't mind." When she spoke into the instrument she was no longer the Mate of *Wanderer*, authoritative though she could be in that role. She had assumed the voice that went with what Susanna called, but only when she could do so in jest, the Queen Bitch manner. "Imperial Yacht *Wanderer* here. Please identify yourself."

There was a long pause, and then a new voice made itself heard, deeper than the first one, and one that seemed to go, somehow, with gold braid up to the elbows. It said, "We have checked the Waverley Fleet Directory, and there is no *Wanderer* listed."

"Waverley? My good man, what does that petty duchy have to do with it? I suggest that you check the Imperial Fleet List."

"My good woman, I have. Waverley is the only Terran empire, and I assume that you are not Shaara."

It was obvious that Irene did not like what she had been called. The words themselves imply commendation, but the way in which they are used rarely does. She snapped, "I wish to talk to your Captain."

"You are doing so, madam. Commodore Grimes, Rim Confederacy Naval Reserve, at your service."

"Rim Confederacy? There is no such nation. And the Rim Worlds have no navy. Please identify yourself."

Trafford looked from his wife to Trialanne. The telepath seemed to be concentrating. Her lips were moving, almost imperceptibly, as though she were forming words. Then she whispered something, but was obviously afraid of

interrupting Irene who, even more obviously, was on the verge of losing her temper. All that the Captain could make out was: "It is true . . ."

The strange Commodore was saying, "We hold jurisdiction over this sector of Space. Identify yourself. That is an order."

"And how will you enforce it? Even though you are, obviously, some kind of pirate armed to the teeth with a defective laser cannon and a couple of misguided missiles."

Yes, so far all four ships were safe from each other's intentions. But they could not continue under Interstellar Drive indefinitely, falling out and away from the Galaxy, driving unchecked into the ultimate night. Sooner or later a reversal of trajectory would have to be carried out—and that was impossible without a breakthrough into the normal Continuum.

Bronheim called from the Mannschenn Drive Room, "somebody has a powerful field out there. They're trying to synchro-nize!"

"You know what to do, Mr. Bronheim," said Trafford. He looked at the Mass Proximity Indicator screen. Two of the blips, presumably the New Irilians, were maintaining range and relative bearing. The third one, the stranger, was on a converging course. But as long as synchronization could be avoided, there was no danger.

Irene was saying, "Somebody's crazy, and I don't think it's us. Rim Worlds Confederacy . . . Empire of Waverley . . . Damn it all, Benjamin, I should know something about what used to be *my* Empire!"

"Used to be? What about saying that we were the Imperial Yacht *Wanderer*?"

She laughed. "To impress the natives. Out here, on the Rim of the Galaxy, precious few ships, if any, will run to an up-to-date Fleet list."

"And is *our* information about this neck of the woods up-to-date?"

"Up-to-date enough. Empires and confederacies don't spring up overnight, from nothing. And neither do navies, let alone

naval reserves. As I said, the Rim Worlds would panic if they were offered self-government on a silver tray."

The Carlotti receiver was still silent, and Trafford could imagine a similar conversation taking place in *Faraway Quest's* control room. Then it came to life again—this time in a woman's voice. "Commander Verrill here. Intelligence Branch, Interstellar Federation Survey Service. Please tell us, as simply as possible, who you are and where you are from. Meanwhile, I suggest that our Psionic Radio Officers—I have been told that you run to at least one—confer in their own way. Over."

"How many bloody navies do they have?" swore Irene. Then, into the microphone, "All right, Commander Verrill. Stand by to record. This is the armed yacht *Wanderer*, Ter-ran registry, currently engaged in transporting twenty-four Iralian nationals from Karakella back to their home planet."

"Iralian nationals, did you say?"

"Yes. Who else?"

"But the Iralians are . . . extinct. They were wiped out by a plague, on their own world and on all the worlds to which they had been taken, over a hundred standard years ago."

"That's impossible."

"But it happened, all the same. Just as what's so obviously happened to you has happened to us—to Commodore Grimes and myself—more than once. But we were expecting it, and we helped it to happen." The voice was softer now, sympathetic. "You'd better break through into the normal Continuum so that we can board you—or so that you can board us—to talk things over."

"Sorry, duckie," said Irene, suddenly reverting to an all-girls-together manner, "but we can't."

"And why not?"

"Those other two ships aren't friends of ours. They're heavily armed, and they're manned by New Iralians who, by this time, will be in a very bad temper. If we cut our Drive they'll cut theirs—and . . . *blam!*"

"Then we shall synchronize temporal precession, if you're

agreeable. On our present trajectories we shall be suitably situated about thirty minutes from now."

"Agreed."

"And that will give you time to get a full report from your telepaths. Over and standing by."

"Over and standing by," repeated Irene. She said to Trafford, "At least they've a woman there to whom I can talk sense—not like that stuffed-shirt of a so-called Commodore."

"Not so so-called, perhaps. This is the Rim—and odd things have always happened here. One of the oddest was our getting here in the first place."

XIII

THIS WAS THE RIM. This, insofar as Mankind was concerned, was the end of the penny section, just as it was for all the other spacefaring races of the Galaxy. Sooner or later, perhaps, some genius would come up with an Intergalactic Drive and Man and his friends (and enemies) would push out to the distant Island Universes. But that day was not yet. Meanwhile—odd things happened on the Rim.

How odd, Trafford and his officers did not know until the telepaths in the two ships had conferred and had made their reports to their superior officers. *Wanderer's* people had heard of Rim Ghosts, had read reports of the odd artifacts, the pieces of wreckage drifting in from somewhere—but Rim Ghosts, they had always assumed, were of psychological rather than physical nature, and an expanding Galaxy is bound, during its dilation, to incorporate within itself the odd clumps of debris that have drifted out and away from other expanding galaxies. In the accounts of Rim phenomena that Trafford and the others had read, everything was explained—or explained away—very neatly.

"Sir," announced Metzenthler formally when he came up to the control room, "Trialanne and I have been in contact with *Faraway Quest's* Psionic Communications Officer, a Mr. Mayhew. He is the only person aboard that ship with any talent. But he is good. To save time, Mr. Mayhew threw his mind open to ours, without reservations, and we accorded him the same courtesy . . ." Metzenthler's stiff formality was wearing thin. "But it's fantastic. There's a flourishing civilization here—the four Man-colonized Rim planets: Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo and Thule, and the four worlds of the so-called Eastern Circuit: Tharn, Mellise, Grol-

lor and Stree, with their non-human natives. And then, to the Galactic West, there are the anti-matter systems—but even with those there is communication *and* trade . . .”

“It’s not only fantastic,” said Irene. “It’s impossible.”

“No, ma’am. It’s not. Impossible, I mean. How did Mayhew put it to me? ‘Here, at the very rim of the expanding galaxy, the very structure of Space-Time is attenuated, flimsy. You have slipped through from your Continuum to ours. You aren’t the first to have done so.’”

“Are you convinced?” asked Irene.

“Yes.”

“Intellectually—or emotionally?”

Metzenthler looked embarrassed. “Emotionally . . .” he mumbled at last.

“So. . . . But continue, please.”

“This ship, *Faraway Quest*, is the Rim Confederacy’s survey ship. Commodore Grimes, the officer commanding, was, in his youth, an officer of the Survey Service of the Interstellar Federation—analogue, ma’am, to our Imperial Navy and Terran Empire. His wife, Sonya Verrill, although now married to a Rim Worlds citizen still holds her commission in the Survey Service . . .”

“All very complicated. But go on.”

“*Faraway Quest* is out here to investigate reports of wreckage found drifting in this sector of Space, debris believed to have originated from one of the Alternative Universes. There was a lifeboat, and it bore the name *Star Scout*, and it obviously came from a ship of the Imperial Navy. *Our* Imperial Navy . . .”

“Yes,” said Trafford. “There was a *Star Scout*. She was the first ship to attempt the passage of the Horsehead Nebula, and she vanished without trace.”

“It seems,” went on Metzenthler, “that these Rim Confederacy people have had trouble, in the past, with intrusions from other versions of this Galaxy. Now, they waste no time before investigating . . .”

“But,” Trafford was murmuring, “*Star Scout*. . . . It

doesn't make sense. So great a time lag. . . . But did *anything* in that bloody nebula make sense?"

"Go on," Irene was saying to the telepath. "Go on."

"But there's so much, madam, and such an amazing mixture of the familiar and the utterly unfamiliar. There's the phrase that Mayhew used—'the worlds of If . . .' And in all Time and Space there must be an infinitude of them."

Irene glanced at the instruments—the chronometer and the Mass Proximity Indicator. It would soon be time for the rendezvous. She said regretfully, "I'm afraid we shall have to cut this short. A brand new version of Galactic History, even though it is no more than a work of imagination, would be of great interest. Obviously your opposite number has made an emotional convert of you."

"I would have known if he had been lying, ma'am. In any case, telepaths cannot lie to their own kind."

"Oh? Well, then, do you honestly think that we can trust them? Can you assure me that this man Grimes is not a pirate or a slaver, or both?"

"I cannot speak for Commodore Grimes, ma'am, but I am convinced of Mr. Mayhew's integrity."

"How touching. And you, Trialanne? What do you say?"

"This man Mayhew. . . . He is . . . one of us."

"A telepath, you mean?"

"No. He. . . . How shall I put it? There are peoples, races, that . . . that think alike, that have the same . . . standards? Moral standards? You know what I mean, Medisinka Irene."

"Do I?" She turned to Trafford. "Well, *Captain*, what do you say?"

"Make the rendezvous," he said. "With safeguards." He turned to the telepaths. "I suppose you have us blanketed? There's no chance of your friend Mayhew monitoring all we say and think?"

"You are blanketed."

"Good. Well, this is the way I see it. If this fantastic story is true, we are one lonely ship in a Universe of potential enemies. We cannot afford to deplete our strength. Commodore Grimes, on the other hand, is playing on his

own home ground. He will have to come across to us. Unarmed. I have no doubt that he will bring some of his people with him, including his Psionic Communications Officer. But all—and I mean all—conversation must be vocalized. I rely upon you, Mr. Metzenthler, to maintain the blanket. And you, Medisinka Trialanne, can try to pick up what you can.”

“It makes sense,” admitted Irene grudgingly.

“Of course it makes sense.”

The Carlotti speaker burped, then said in what Trafford had identified as the Commodore’s voice, “*Faraway Quest to Wanderer*. Am about to synchronize, and request that you cooperate. Intend to board you as soon as physical contact has been established. If you are agreeable I shall use *my* mooring gear.”

Trafford looked hard at Metzenthler, wondering if the blanketing were as effective as Metzenthler had claimed. He decided that it was. After all, it is always the challenging ship that sends away the boarding party, not the challenged.

He said into the microphone, “*Wanderer to Faraway Quest*. We are agreeable. Over.”

Meanwhile, Irene had instructed Bronheim to assist rather than to hinder the synchronization and Tallentire (but of course) had his weaponry in a state of readiness.

The Mass Proximity Indicator was almost useless now; the other ship was too close, the blip that represented her filling one hemisphere of the screen. But there was clearance, no more than a hair-thin crack of darkness between the images of the two vessels. Trafford listened to the whine of the Mannschenn Drive. It had an odd beat to it, seemed, as it were, to be changing step. That, in the circumstances, was as it should be. *Any moment now*, he thought, and directed his attention to the emptiness beyond the viewport. There—slowly, slowly—a ghost ship was taking form, a shimmering, insubstantial vessel almost alongside *Wanderer*. The image coalesced, solidified. This *Faraway Quest*, thought Trafford with relief, was nowhere heavily as

armed as his own command. She was no more than a converted merchantman, a tramp at that. There were a few—but only a few—sponsons, the smooth lines of her hull were almost unbroken by protruding weapons.

Temporal synchronization had been achieved, but spatial velocities were not exactly matched. Trafford wondered why the Commodore did not use his Inertial Drive—then decided that he had enough trouble running his own ship without worrying about the way that other people ran theirs. He saw the padded electro-magnets drifting out from the *Quest* at the ends of their cables, heard the thuds as they made contact with his own shell plating. Whoever was controlling the winches was a first-class spaceman—with this discrepancy in relative speeds contact, if not the cables themselves, could easily have been broken. And then, at last, with a minimum of jerking, the two ships were running side by side. Somebody in *Faraway Quest's* control room waved—the Commodore himself, thought Trafford, seeing through his binoculars the single, broad gold band on the man's shoulder-boards. He replied to the gesture.

"Please stand by for the boarding party," said a woman's voice from the Carlotti speaker.

XIV

SUSANNA, who had been stationed at the airlock, ushered the boarding party into the control room. There were two men and one woman. They were spacesuited still, had removed only their helmets. They were looking around with curiosity—but, after all, Trafford and his officers were looking at them with at least equal interest.

"Captain Trafford," said Susanna, "may I present Commodore Grimes?"

Trafford looked at the Commodore, and the Commodore looked at him. Trafford saw a man of medium height, gray-haired and gray-eyed, with a seamed, deeply tanned face, with slightly protuberant ears. He was, obviously, a man with the habit of command deeply engrained. He was not, Trafford decided, either pirate or slaver; there was that aura of respectability that is acquired only after years of servitude to an establishment. *And yet, thought Trafford, this same Commodore Grimes is capable of throwing the book of regulations into the garbage disposal unit if it so suits him.*

"Happy to have you aboard, Commodore."

"Happy to be aboard, Captain."

". . . and Commander Verrill . . ." went on Susanna.

So this was Sonya Verrill—or Sonya Grimes. She was tall, taller than her husband. Her bulky spacesuit hid her bodily contours, but Trafford knew, somehow, that without it she would be graceful. Her thin, intelligent face was topped by gleaming, high-piled auburn hair.

"Happy to have you aboard, Commander."

"Happy to be aboard, Captain."

". . . and Mr. Mayhew."

Give this Mayhew an apology for a beard, thought Trafford, and he would pass for Metzenthers' twin brother. He was annoyed when the telepath almost ignored him, seemed to have attention only for Metzenthers and Trialanne.

"Happy to have you aboard, Mr. Mayhew."

"Oh . . . yes. Yes. Thank you, Captain."

Trafford introduced Irene and the other officers. His wife, he could see, did not think much of Commodore Grimes, and thought even less of Sonya Verrill. He hoped that she would not give free rein to her prejudices. But alcohol, that unsurpassed lubricant for the wheels of diplomacy and business, might help.

"Shall we adjourn to the wardroom?" he suggested. Then, to Tallentire, "The watch is yours, Mr. Tallentire. Act as you see fit."

"Your Gunnery Officer," said Grimes. It was more of a statement than a question.

"My Second Officer," said Trafford. He glared in the direction of Metzenthers who already was talking to Mayhew as though to a long lost brother. *Blast these telepaths!*

"This way, Commodore," Susanna was saying. "This way, Mrs. Grimes."

Trafford stood back and watched Susanna escorting the visitors from the control room. The three of them moved with easy grace, handled themselves well in Free Fall, better than any of *Wanderers*' people. And did this, Trafford asked himself, mean anything? Was it possible that inventions had been made in his, Trafford's Universe, and not in this Universe of Commodore Grimes? For example, the Mikimoto Governor, which ingenious device enabled a vessel to use her Inertial Drive even with the Interstellar Drive in operation. Without the governor, any ship using Mannschenn Drive would, of necessity, be falling free . . . And *Faraway Quest's* personnel were obviously at home in Free Fall, whereas *Wanderers*' crew were not.

Confident that the boarding party was now out of earshot he told Irene of his suspicions. She said, "You have something, Benjamin. I really think you have something. It gives

us an ace up the sleeve—as long as Bronheim is able to repair our wobbler.”

“What I thought. Shall we join the guests?”

“Let us do just that.”

“And if either of us gets the chance, we’ll warn Susanna and Metzenthner not to spill any beans.”

“Too right,” she said.

Luckily Susanna hadn’t yet gotten around to serving drinks, otherwise she would have apologized for the use of bulbs. And luckily the quality of the liquor was more a topic than the containers in which it was served.

“Scotch,” said Grimes appreciatively, “no matter what Time Track it comes from, is Scotch . . .”

“So you’re still trying to peddle your Alternative Universe theory,” said Irene.

“Not a theory, madam, but a fact. Thanks to the services of our telepaths we know that the Universe from which you have come is an altogether different one from ours. And, thanks again to our telepaths, I am able to make an intelligent guess as to how you got here.”

“All right,” demanded Irene. “How *did* we get here?”

“This was the way of it, Madam. Your ship was being chivvied by three New Italian cruisers—and on our Time Track we don’t run to any Italians, new or old. Against your better judgment you were forced to run into the Horsehead Nebula. Correct?”

“So far. Yes.”

“And you found conditions inside the nebula rather . . . odd. As you should have done.”

“And why should we?” asked Trafford.

“It all ties in with the Continuous Creation of Matter Theory. But the matter isn’t *created*. It comes in from elsewhere. I don’t know whether or not this happened in *your* Universe, but here, some years ago, there was a very rich man called Halvorsen . . .”

“Halvorsen’s bathroom fittings?” asked Irene.

“The same. Well, *our* Mr. Halvorsen, having made his millions, wanted to make his name—but as a scientist,

not as a plumber. He wanted to find out where this influx of hydrogen atoms and whatever came from. He owned a yacht—practically a spaceborne laboratory—and he hired one of my officers—at the time I was Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners—to serve as Master of the brute. He did find out that there's a steady influx of matter into this Galaxy from the Galactic North. But he never did get around to finding out that it's a circuit, possibly a closed circuit. Matter flows in at the North—and out at the South.

"But Nature is seldom tidy—and this North-South business is far too tidy for the old slattern. There are other points of influx and efflux; the Horsehead Nebula is both. You, as far as I can gather from what my Mr. Mayhew learned from your Mr. Metzenthner, tried to stem the tide. You broke through into this Universe, against the current. And somehow, when you did so, you created eddies that freed debris that has been drifting aimlessly in the backwash for decades—that ship's boat from *Star Scout*, for example. Don't ask me how it and other pieces of wreckage got here before you did."

"You certainly stick to your story," said Irene.

Grimes replied with cold deliberation, "Madam, this happens to be our Universe, not yours. You are not even an invited guest. Furthermore, if *your* story is to be believed, you are ready and willing to continue one of your private brawls in our back garden. Frankly, as soon as I can figure out a way to reverse your trajectory without starting a free-for-all, I shall give you every assistance. You have only to proceed to and re-enter the nebula and, this time, sail *with* the current."

"The odds now," pointed out Irene, "are even. Two against two. I'm assuming, of course, that you're on our side and not an ally of the slavers out there."

"The odds are not even. My *Faraway Quest* is not a warship, and I have no desire to put her and my crew in hazard. I'll help you—but only as a means of getting you out of my hair."

"How can you help us, Commodore?" asked Trafford.

"I don't know, Captain. Perhaps if you tell your Chief Officer to pipe down we shall be able to discuss matters properly."

"Personally," Trafford said, "I find this Alternative Universe theory most fantastic. On the other hand, all the evidence indicates that there is, as you say, a Rim Worlds Confederacy. As for the influx and efflux of matter business—well, our own experiences in the nebula show that it could be the answer. So I think we can take it that the majority of the officers of this ship admit that we've been switched on to a divergent Time Track. We don't know enough to be able to say whether or not we like it—but we have to get back to where we came from. We've contracted to carry twenty-four passengers from Karakella to Iralia. And you have no alternative Iralia to which we can deliver them."

"No. *Our* Iralia was colonized after the plague had wiped out all the inhabitants," put in Sonya Verrill. "You're in quite a jam, Captain."

"And you are too, Commander. You, like ourselves, will have to reverse trajectory sooner or later. And by this time our new Italian friends will have decided that we're allies, and you'll be at the receiving end of their broadsides as well as us."

"Too true." She turned to the Commodore. "And what do we do about it, John? You will remember that I said that it was unwise to make physical contact with this ship."

Grimes reddened, said nothing.

Irene remarked sweetly, "Why not let the Intelligence Officers sort it out, Commodore? My husband was one when he was still in the Imperial Navy. . . . Yes, Commodore Grimes, this is clearly a job for Intelligence, not for shaggy old spacehounds like ourselves . . ."

"Neither shaggy nor old in your case, madam," said Grimes gallantly. "But I think that the intelligence of all of us will be required to find the way out of this impasse."

XV

"CONTROL ROOM HERE," Tallentire's voice came from the intercom speaker. "Can I talk to the Captain? Privately."

Trafford unbuckled himself from his chair and pushed himself towards the nearest telephone. As usual, he did not handle himself well in Free Fall. He noticed that Grimes and the woman Sonya exchanged glances, and that the Commodore's heavy eyebrows lifted ever so slightly.

Pulling himself into a more or less secure position by the instrument he lifted the telephone from its clip, pushed the button that would connect him with his watch officer.

"Captain here, Mr. Tallentire."

"Sir, I've a deputation here. From the passengers. They demand to see you."

"Promise them everything and give them nothing."

"That's just what they're complaining about, sir. They're in a rather hostile mood. They won't be satisfied until they see you."

"Oh. Well, keep them talking, and I'll send Susanna up to bring their leader down here. It's Kankoran, I suppose?"

"It is, sir."

"And get the rest of 'em out of the control room as soon as possible."

"Very good, sir."

Trafford replaced the instrument, turned to face the others in the compartment. "Sue, will you escort Kankoran down here? Never mind about serving any more drinks, Irene can handle that. Oh, by the way, Trialanne, what do you people drink?"

She smiled. "Anything that's cold and wet and alcoholic. And I know that Desinka Kankoran his Scotch likes . . ."

"Good."

"Dissatisfied customers, Captain?" asked Grimes, with another lift of his eyebrows.

"Yes, Commodore. No doubt your Mr. Mayhew has passed on to you what he learned from our Mr. Metzenthier. I suppose that as we've finished up one helluva long way from Iralia there's a certain amount of alarm and despondency among the fare-paying passengers."

"Understandable, Captain Trafford. Understandable. I can appreciate that you will wish to deliver your live cargo as soon as possible."

"You can say that again, Commodore Grimes."

Susanna ushered Kankoran into the wardroom. He was, obviously, in a bad temper—a state of flaring indignation so pronounced that it almost, but not quite, counteracted his equally obvious space-sickness. He was a most unhappy man—and determined to make somebody, anybody, pay for his unhappiness.

He snatched the drinking bulb from the compartmented tray that Irene offered him, rudely squirted the contents into his mouth. His aim could have been better. He carelessly let go of the drained and crumpled vessel, letting it drift where it would. He glared at Trafford, then at the three from *Faraway Quest*.

"Captain, who these people are? What their ship? I seen it, lashed alongside this one. Slavers, perhaps. You make rendezvous. You make bargain."

"Desinka Kankoran," said Trafford patiently, "this is Commodore Grimes of the Rim Confederacy's naval forces. He is not a slaver."

"You say. *He* say. Hal"

"Medisinka Trialanne," said Trafford to the Italian telepath. "Will you explain to your leader, please?"

"Her no trust. Live with outworlder. No better than slave herself."

"Desinka Kankoran, you must trust *somebody*."

"*Why*? Outworlders never trust. Outworlders' doxies—pah!"

"Desinka Kankoran, you must calm down before we can hope to discuss matters."

"Calm down? Me calm down? Good money I pay for passage to Iralia. Already we have battle, we have storm—and now we not even have gravity. Where is comfort for which we pay?"

"'And now not even have gravity . . .'" quoted Sonya Verrill. "Tell me, Captain Trafford, would that be constant acceleration? Even with the Mannschenn Drive in operation?"

Trafford started to answer, then was silenced by a glare from Irene. But Kankoran raved on. "I not know. No—Gallilla be praised!—spaceman. But this I do know. Machine go *vroom, vroom, vroom*, and gravity we have, and *up* and *down*, and can eat and drink proper, and not be sick."

"*Vroom, vroom, vroom . . .*" murmured Sonya. Then, to Grimes, "Doesn't that sound like an Inertial Drive generator, John?"

So, thought Trafford, *there goes my ace in the hole*. It had seemed a good idea to interview the irate Italian in the wardroom, so that this Commodore and his officers could attain some measure of appreciation of his, Trafford's, problems. It had seemed a good idea. It didn't any longer.

"You are an Italian, Desinka Kankoran?" asked Sonya in a very womanly voice.

Kankoran seemed to see her properly for the first time. He looked at her, and rapidly regained his composure. The Italian males had a reputation—that of latter day Don Juans. This Kankoran was no exception to the rule. Here was a woman, an attractive woman, a strange woman. Suddenly he was on his best behavior.

"Yes, Medisinka . . ."

"Sonya."

"Yes, Medisinka Sonya. I Italian am."

Sonya's voice oozed regret. "We do not have your people in our Universe. It is a pity, a great pity."

"In *your* Universe, Medisinka? Surely there is only one Universe."

"There are many Universes, Desinka—an infinitude, perhaps. The Worlds of If. We, in this Universe, are just embarked upon a program of research into the matter. You must take my word for it that you are no longer in the Galaxy that you know."

"*Your* world," replied Kankoran, gazing into her eyes, "I feel that I can take. But you were saying. . . . My people Not here?"

"No. There was a plague that spread from world to world . . ."

"The plague. Yes. We too had it, but kept control . . ." His manner brightened. "Then perhaps it is not necessary that we return. Perhaps we our planet can repopulate."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Desinka. Your world was colonized by another race, people with whom we have always been on friendly terms. So we must help you to get back—and you, and the other passengers, must help the Captain and his officers . . ."

"They not trustworthy are."

"But they are trustworthy. They are doing their best. If they were not highly competent you and your people would long since have fallen into the hands of the slavers. You must realize that."

"I . . . I do," admitted Kankoran reluctantly.

"Good. Then run along, will you, and tell your friends that matters are being brought under control and that you'll all soon be on your way to Iralia again."

"You the truth speak, Medisinka Sonya?"

"I the truth speak, Desinka Kankoran."

"Then, for myself and for my people, I you thank." He made an odd, formal gesture, not quite a bow and not quite a salaam, then allowed Susanna to escort him from the compartment.

There was a brief silence after he had gone. Trafford saw that Irene was glaring coldly at the other woman, was about to say something. He spoke hastily before she

could do so. He said, "You handled that well, Commander Verrill."

"I tried to, Captain Trafford."

"Sonya," said the Commodore, "is trained in such techniques."

"Olga Popovsky the Beautiful Spy, no doubt," sneered Irene.

"I have been called that, Mrs. Trafford," admitted Sonya lightly.

"No doubt, *Mrs. Grimes*. Yours must have been—or *is*—a fascinating profession. Just a little too dirty for low, common spacefaring types like ourselves."

"That will do!" The Commodore's voice crackled with authority. "That will do!"

But Irene, in her time, had had Admirals' guts for a necktie, was not overawed by a mere Commodore—and a Commodore in a service whose existence she did not recognize at that. She snarled. "This is *my* ship, and it's run the way that *I* want it to be run."

"Indeed? And this sector of Space, madam, is under *my* jurisdiction."

"And have you the guns to enforce it? We could blow you into one of your fancy alternative universes at the blink of an eye."

"No doubt you could—and then you'd have the entire Rim Worlds Navy on your tail. And you'll never get back to your own Time Track without our help."

"I'm not so sure that we want to get back. If the rest of your navy is like your precious *Faraway Quest* we should have no trouble in setting up our own little kingdom here."

"And what about honoring your obligations?" asked Grimes coldly. "What about carrying out the terms of your contract? What do *you* say, Captain Trafford? You're the *Master* of this vessel."

"Yes," said Trafford. "I am. And *I* shall be grateful for your help."

"We shall expect to be paid for it."

"How can we pay, Commodore? The Imperial currency in our strongroom is legal tender anywhere in our Universe, but hardly in yours."

"Barter," said Grimes.

"Barter?"

"Yes. Know-how for know-how . . ." He smiled grimly. "Even before that disgruntled customer of yours spilled the beans we'd realized that your ships maintain constant acceleration while running under Interstellar Drive. Oddly enough that was one point that the telepaths—yours and ours—missed. I don't know how you find your Mr. Metzenth—Mr. Mayhew is an absolute moron insofar as anything mechanical is concerned." A fresh smile robbed the words of offense. "Anyhow," he went on, "we realized that you and your people just aren't used to living and working in Free Fall. You probably realized that we are used to Free Fall."

"Yes," admitted Trafford. "And I guessed why."

"Good. And am I correct in assuming that your Inertial Drive is on the blink? After all, Kankoran told us all as much."

"It is, Commodore."

"How many engineers do you carry?"

Irene was saying nothing, but her expression was almost shouting: *Don't answer. Don't answer.* But this was a discussion, a friendly talk between commanding officers. Trafford felt mutinous—but why should *he* feel mutinous? He, as Grimes had pointed out, was the Master.

"Only the one," he said.

"And without skilled assistance he will find it hard to rewind the armatures. I, Captain, have a large engineering staff aboard my ship, and shall be pleased to place them at your disposal."

"Every one of them with a camera!" flared Irene. "Every one of them, by the time they've finished, able to build a Mikimotu Governor from scratch!"

"Is that what it's called?" Grimes laughed. "But what does it matter if we do learn your secret?"

NEBULA ALERT

"Plenty. There are such things as royalties, you know . . ."

"And do *you* get a percentage of them, madam?"

"If you must know, yes. And it's no use your offering to pay—your Confederate dollars will be as little use to us as our Imperial crowns to you."

"But we intend to pay, madam. Know-how for know-how. You have to reverse your trajectory sooner or later—and the sooner the better—but you can't do it without breaking through into normal Space-Time. And once you do, you'll be under fire. I think that I have the answer to that problem."

"You'd better," grumbled Irene. "You'd just better. That's all."

XVI

STILL THE four ships—*Wanderer*, *Faraway Quest* and the two New Italian cruisers—were falling outwards into the unfathomable depths of intergalactic space. The New Italians were stubborn, obviously determined to be advantageously situated when *Wanderer* broke back into the normal Continuum prior to alteration of trajectory. And how much did their captains know? That was a question for the answer to which Trafford would have been prepared to pay generously. Metzenthner, Mayhew and Trialanne assured him that the three of them were maintaining psionic interference so heavy that no telepaths, no matter how skilled, no matter how artificially stimulated, could hope to eavesdrop. Unluckily the opposition was using similar techniques.

Meanwhile, there were comings and goings between *Wanderer* and *Faraway Quest*. It seemed to Trafford that whenever he looked through the control room viewports he would see at least one spacesuited figure working its way along the lifelines that had been rigged between the two airlocks. Grimes' engineers, working with rather than under Bronheim, soon had the yacht's Inertial Drive generator repaired—but still, apart from a brief trial run, there was no return to conditions of constant acceleration. Trafford, who did not like Free Fall, called Bronheim to his quarters.

"Damn it all!" he exploded, "how much longer must we go on sucking our liquor out of feeding bottles like a bunch of bloody babies?"

"The Commodore's people are installing certain . . . modifications, Captain."

"By whose authority?"

Bronheim appeared embarrassed. "I thought that you'd agreed, sir, to accept the Commodore's help. These modifications are part of it."

"You're not paid to think!"

"Insofar as my engines are concerned, that's just what I *am* paid for, Captain."

"Sorry, Mr. Bronheim. But what *are* these famous modifications?"

Bronheim told him.

"*What?*" Trafford was incredulous, as intelligent men often are when confronted with the obvious. "It will never work."

"Any why not, Captain?" Bronheim grinned. "Of course, it will mean a certain amount of inconvenience. It shouldn't be hard to make the necessary changes in the control room, but it'll not be so easy in the accommodations."

"Before you start pulling the ship apart and putting her together again," said Trafford, "I'm going to see the Commodore." He added, "And don't touch anything until I get back."

He went back to Control where Irene had the watch. He told her what he had learned from Bronheim. She, like himself, was at first incredulous, so much so that Trafford said wickedly, "At least that's one thing you never did in the Dog Star Line."

"I suppose," she admitted grudgingly, "that there has to be a first time for everything. But I still don't like it. You'd better see friend Grimes before Bronheim and his cobbles get too enthusiastic."

"That was already my intention. I leave you in charge, Mrs. Trafford."

"I accept the charge, Captain," she replied formally.

Trafford went back to his quarters, got into his space-suit, then carried on to the airlock. He was annoyed to find that one of Grimes' junior officers was on duty there. But it must have been with Irene's sanction, and, after all, the Commodore had men to spare, whereas the fully automated *Wanderer* did not. He acknowledged the young man's salute, admitted his competence insofar as locking

out procedure was concerned, then pulled himself, along the lifeline, across the short distance separating the two ships.

It was the first time that he had been aboard *Faraway Quest*. He was surprised, and not unfavorably. He had been expecting a merchant vessel's informality—after all, the survey ship, although officially an auxiliary cruiser of the Rim Confederacy's navy, was manned mainly by reservists. The officer who locked him in was smartly uniformed and Trafford, glancing at the young man's uniform trimmings, decided that he must be some sort of Rim Worlds equivalent to an Imperial Marine. There were no white-gloved side boys, and no Bo's'n's pipes—but this was not the Imperial Navy. *But I'm not in the Imperial Navy any longer*, thought Trafford, *and, in any case, there's no Imperial Navy on this Time Track!*

"This way, sir," said the lieutenant, taking the lead. Trafford envied him the ease with which he handled himself in Free Fall, shuffled after him cautiously, fearful of breaking the hold of his magnetized boot soles on the deck. Nonetheless, he was able to look about him on his way to the Commodore's accommodation, to register details.

This was a working ship: every piece of equipment showed signs of constant use. She was a working ship, but well maintained. There was an absence of spit-and-polish, the quite unnecessary burnishing of metal for its own sake. *But*, thought Trafford with wry amusement, *she's a far, far cry from the Dog Star tramps that Irene gets so nostalgic about.*

Then he was ushered into the Commodore's day cabin. As does any shipmaster when visiting another vessel he made comparisons. *What has he got that I haven't? What have I got that he hasn't?* Once again, he was impressed. This cabin was less luxurious than his own aboard *Wanderer*—but an Imperial yacht of necessity runs to luxury. It was less luxurious, but more comfortable—especially since it had been designed and fitted for almost perpetual Free Fall conditions. And the Commodore and Sonya Verrill—or Sonya Grimes—could have been, in spite of their uni-

forms, any reasonably well-to-do couple taking their ease in a well-furnished sitting room ashore.

Grimes unbuckled himself from his easy chair, got to his feet. "Glad to have you aboard, Captain. Be seated, will you? I know that in Free Fall it's no more than a formality, but it gives an illusion of gravity." Then, as Trafford was maneuvering himself into the indicated seat, he went on: "You know, I envy you people your constant acceleration." He grinned. "Not that we shall have to envy you much longer. Now, Captain, what can I do for you?"

"This same question of acceleration, Commodore. Just what are you people doing to *my* ship?"

"Helping you, of course, Captain." He gestured to a big desk that was backed by a full bulkhead of bookshelves. Trafford saw, standing on the polished surface, what at first glance seemed to be a model of an Inertial Drive generator, complete with Mikimotu Governor. But there was something odd about that governing device. The standard version boasted only one temporal precession regulator, an affair of interlaced Mobius strips not unlike a Carlotti Beacon antenna. This generator had one at each pole.

"Yes, yes," said Trafford. "But will it work?"

"Why shouldn't it, Captain? One of man's troubles is that he *must* orient himself. Seamen, airmen and spacemen have always been especially prone to that psychological weakness. Going astern has always been something exceptional, carried out only for maneuvering purposes. Oh yes, yes. I know that with the Mannschenn Drive—but that's not quite the same. But, by and large, the majority of vessels have always been designed to be navigated bow first."

"The majority of vessels? Surely *all* vessels, Commodore."

"Cut it short, John," said his wife. "I should warn you, Captain Trafford, that my husband's about to mount his hobby horse."

"And a useful hobby it's been at times. I should tell you, Captain, that I'm something of an expert on marine transport—marine transport, that is, in pre-hovercraft days. One of the most fascinating facets of the subject is specialized

ships. As a matter of fact I was amusing myself writing an article about them when we blundered on you—or you blundered on us.”

“Specialized ships?” echoed Trafford.

“Yes. Double-ended ferry steamers, to be specific. A single engine, and a single shaft running the length of the vessel, and a screw at each end, one pusher and one puller. No difference between stem and stern, and a bridge and wheelhouse at each end. The big advantage, of course, was that no time was lost maneuvering to berth or un-berth at either end of the run.

“Unluckily your *Wanderer* hasn’t a control room at each end, but apart from that she can navigate as well stern first as bows first. After all, you haven’t got to consider hydrodynamic qualities. And your vision screens can easily be adjusted.”

“And my accommodation?” asked Trafford. “To say nothing of the galleys. And the plumbing . . .”

“That’s your problem, Captain. I’ve offered you a way of getting clear of your trigger happy friends without a shot being fired. All you have to do is to restart your Inertial Drive—in reverse. Run it in reverse until you feel that you can afford the time to end for end your ship. I see no reason why you shouldn’t run in reverse all the way back through the nebula.”

“And if we do . . . shall we get back on to *our* Time Track?”

Grimes shrugged. “Our own experience has been that any displaced object or person has a built-in tendency to return to the Time Track of origin. Furthermore, we *think* that only two Time Tracks are accessible through the Horse-head—yours if you proceed inwards (as you will be), and somebody else’s if you proceed outwards.

“But, once again, that’s up to you, Captain.”

“Give the man a drink,” said Sonya, “and then, perhaps, he’ll look a little happier.”

“I’m just worried about the plumbing,” said Trafford, not altogether untruthfully.”

XVII

TRAFFORD'S WORRIES were justified. He remembered how once, years ago, he had made a voyage as passenger and during the trip had become friendly with the liner's Chief Officer. Over a friendly drink the merchant spaceman had told him that the two main requirements for his job were low cunning and a smattering of plumbing. And now Trafford was Master of a passenger ship of sorts—and discovered that there is nothing more annoying than to have the intercom lines to the control room choked with irate calls about taps that will not run, and waste pipes that do run, but the wrong way.

Wanderer's supply and elimination systems had been designed to function efficiently at a constant acceleration of one gravity *forward*, and more or less efficiently in Free Fall. Irene and Bronheim had done their best to sort out the tangle of piping and to modify it before the Inertial Drive was restarted but, inevitably, the job was not a perfect one. Far from it. The only consolation was that *Faraway Quest*, still fast alongside *Wanderer* and being towed by her, stern first, would also be having her troubles.

Grimes had refused to let go as soon as the work on *Wanderer's* propulsive machinery had been completed. "What guarantee do I have," he asked reasonably enough, "that your two friends will resume their pursuit of you, as soon as they get themselves turned around, and not stick with me? I don't want to have to continue on this outward bound course for the next thousand years."

The reversal of trajectory had been carried out smoothly enough—it was the psychological readjustment that was hard. In Space there is neither *up* nor *down*—but as long

as man has a ship around him, especially a ship capable of constant acceleration, he will revert to his old, planet-bound way of looking at things. Not only will he have his *up* and *down*, he will have his *forward* and *aft*, his *port* and *starboard*. Free Fall is bad enough, but at least decks do not become deckheads (or floors become ceilings) and vice versa. Too, the transparent controlroom dome that had been the stem of the ship was now *down*—and in spite of the ladders and catwalks that had been improvised there was always the fear of falling into and through that fragile glass to plunge unchecked into the ultimate night.

At first Trafford was inclined to welcome the spate of calls about the malfunctioning of the plumbing, they helped to keep his officers' minds off that age-old fear of falling. Then the complaints became a nuisance, and Irene, grumbling, was sent down—*up*, rather—with Susanna to make reassuring noises to the passengers and—that long ago Chief Officer had also passed this on to Trafford—to promise everything and do nothing.

Meanwhile, the New Italian cruisers had obviously been taken aback. For long minutes they continued to plunge ahead, diminishing blips in the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator. It would take them time, precious time, to shut down their Interstellar Drives, to swing on their gyroscopes and to restart. And it would take time for Commodore Grimes to perform the same maneuver in his own ship.

It was surprising, therefore, when Grimes called on the Carlotti Communicator. "You're on your own now, Captain. Good luck."

"But the two cruisers . . ."

"They have to make an alteration of one hundred and eighty degrees. Our own alteration will be only one hundred and twenty. We shall be around and clear before they've dedigitated."

"If you say so, Commodore."

"I say so, Captain. Casting off."

"Acknowledged. Thank you, Commodore, for your help."

"And thank you, Captain, for yours. And you can tell your lady wife that if she wants her share of the Mikimoto Governor royalties she'll have to come back here to collect them."

"Or you can pay when you visit us."

"In Confederate money?"

The electro magnets detached themselves from *Wanderer's* shell plating, were swiftly winched in. The outline of *Faraway Quest* shimmered, wavered and then was gone. She, too, was now only a blip in the screen—a huge one at first, and then dwindling rapidly. Grimes would be safe enough. To chase him the cruisers would have to make yet another alteration of trajectory—and, if necessary, Grimes could have units of the Confederate Navy on hand when he made his break out into normal Space-Time.

Yes, Grimes could look after himself—but could Trafford?

The screen showed that the two Italians had trajectory. The chase had been resumed, with *Wanderer* still as the objective. And they were gaining.

Trafford got on the intercom to Bronheim. "No, Captain, I can *not* give you any more revolutions. *Faraway Quest's* people made a good job—but not all that good. You can't modify a machine, without proper tests, and still expect it to run at maximum capacity."

So the New Italians were overhauling *Wanderer*. So what? What could they do when they had resumed their stations on their quarry? Unless they could synchronize temporal precession rates, they would be unable to bring their weapons to bear. There was still the correction of trajectory to be carried out once the nebula had been traversed—but that was a bridge that Trafford would cross when he came to it.

He was safe for the time being—but he was far from happy. He did not like this stern first navigation. As the days went by—and as the grim outline of the nebula loomed ever larger in the vision screens—all the minor

troubles were ironed out. The last of the cabin furniture was changed around to suit the upside down conditions, and even the plumbing now functioned properly. There was no more than normal grumbling from the passengers. Intellectually the Captain and his officers could accept their mood of progression, emotionally they could not. Irene said that it reminded her of that mythical bird that flies backwards because it has no interest in where it is going but likes to see where it has been. And the real danger in that lack of emotional acceptance would come when they had re-entered the nebula, when they were once again subjected to psychological strain and warping.

Metzenthner and Trialanne were called to the Captain's quarters for consultation. Said Trafford: "You know what happened last time we made the passage of that . . . that cosmic sewer. It'll be worse this time. What can we do to guard against it? More specifically, what can *you* do?"

"We can maintain an overall damping . . ." ventured Metzenthner. "We can, with your permission, monitor the thoughts of all on board."

"Permission granted. I don't like the idea of snooping—and being snooped—as well you know. But, for the safety of the ship, it has to be done."

"We discreet will be," said Trialanne.

"Thank you. Of course, I'm more concerned about ourselves than the customers."

"I can appreciate that, Captain. We know what a strain this going backwards is on the staff."

"You *know*, Mr. Metzenthner?"

"Captain, there has been no . . . snooping, I assure you. One does not have to be a telepath to realize how you all feel."

"H'm. I suppose not."

"But this . . . strain is all so unnecessary."

"It's easy for you to say that."

"But it *is* unnecessary. Look at it this way: A spaceship always comes in to a landing stern first—and a descent

through a planetary atmosphere is always far more dangerous than a progression, or even retrogression, through the hard vacuum of Space, or the not quite so hard vacuum of a nebula."

"You have something there."

"Of course," agreed the telepath smugly.

"Do you think you can peddle the idea? Subtly, of course. Even now I can accept it on the intellectual level only. It all boils down to this, I suppose. A landing is carried out only at widely spaced intervals. It's a special occasion, with all hands at their stations and all more or less keyed up. And it's always rather a strain; I know that I always consider myself entitled to a stiff drink once my vanes are set solidly on the apron."

"A natural reaction, Captain, and a common one. But all of you are capable of bringing a ship in to that standard stern first landing. So all of you are equally capable of standing a Deep Space watch with the vessel going astern through light years of sweet damn all."

"Sue's not qualified—but she's turned out to be a good spacewoman nonetheless. Better than quite a few with commissions or certificates. All right, then. You've almost convinced me. Just keep pushing out the soothing thoughts, the pair of you, and we'll get by. I hope."

"We'll get by," Metzenthier assured him.

Yes, they were getting by.

The strain eased, almost imperceptibly, until their stern first progression seemed normal. Even the other non-normal factors—the two hostile cruisers determinedly keeping station, the black, looming nightmare in the rear vision screens—became more acceptable. (In Tallentire's case, of course, the presence of enemy ships was very much as it should be.)

Watch followed watch, subjective day followed subjective day, and the horse's head reared higher and ever higher against the shimmering drift. The first glimmering,

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almost microscopic specks of light began to appear in the screen of the Mass Proximity Indicator.

And with them, in spite of the efforts of the two telepaths, came the fear of the Unknown.

XVIII

Wanderer was back in the heart of the nebula, plunging stern first into and through the pearly luminescence. (The great horse's head was black only when viewed against the more intense light of the background stars.) This time the engines were not laboring. She was running with the tide, with the current that would carry her *where?*

Or *when?*

Still the New Italian cruisers were there, blobs of light in the screen. Trafford hoped that the doom, whatever it was, that had overtaken the destroyed ship during the first passage would also overtake them, but he knew that he could not expect blind luck to solve his problems. Like himself, the enemy captains had been through once already, and had survived. They knew what dangers to guard against; probably they knew, while Trafford could only guess, just what had happened aboard their lost consort. Their staffs of telepaths would be at least as efficient as Metzenth and Trialanne and would be working, as Metzenth and Trialanne were working, to exert a damping influence, to smother the first sparks of mutiny.

As before, the radar became operational again, although it should not have. As before, it was unreliable, although no more so than the Mass Proximity Indicator. Ranges and bearings varied with every passing minute, and more than once Trafford was called to the control room when the officer of the watch feared that collision with one or the other of the cruisers, was imminent. In normal conditions, of course, two ships running under Interstellar Drive could not collide—unless their temporal precession rates were synchronized. But these were not normal conditions.

So it was that when the buzzer over Trafford's bed sounded

for, he estimated, the fifteenth time, he woke with a bad temper.

"Yes?" he snapped into the microphone. "What is it now?"

Irene—it was her watch—answered. "Get out of your scratcher and come up here. Fast."

"Down here," he corrected.

"This is an emergency, damn you. I'm sounding the General Alarm."

Hard on her words came the metallic shrilling of the bells.

Trafford cursed his wife—in her capacities as spouse, First Mate and Owner—as he fell rather than jumped out of his couch, flung an approximation to correct uniform about himself. He tried to hurry to the control room—but in these upside down conditions, and with himself not yet fully awake, his haste retarded rather than accelerated his progress.

When he got there he found Irene doing her best to watch both screens—radar and Mass Proximity Indicator—at once. Without turning her head she muttered, "So it's you. You took your time getting here. Well, *Captain*, she's all yours."

"And what the hell is happening?" demanded Trafford, reasonably enough.

"Can't you see?" Then, her manner softening ever so slightly: "Look. It's the first time that the two screens have tallied. Both show that our friend on the starboard beam has closed, and is closing still."

"Yes . . ." admitted Trafford. "Yes. . . . But if she is . . ."

"Furthermore," she went on, "Bronheim reports a determined attempt to synchronize by *somebody*. It should be obvious, even to you, who that somebody is."

"Tell him Random Precession . . ."

"And what do you think I've been doing up here? Polishing my toenails? He reports that he can't vary the precession by as much as a microsecond. The nebula has its own field

—and that's enormously more powerful than any that can be generated by a ship."

Trafford stared at the two screens, and was frightened by what he saw. In each of them a looming, distorted luminosity was expanding to fill the full hemisphere.

Wasting no time he issued his orders: "Close airtight doors. All personnel suit up." He paused, realizing that another of his hunches was becoming dictatorial. "Officers to wear side-arms."

"And the main armament?" demanded Tallentire, who was now in the control room. "State of readiness?"

"Of course."

"Open fire *now*?"

Trafford remembered the behavior of the enemy missiles, of his own anti-missile laser. "Better not. Not unless you've taken a course in boomerang throwing."

He looked from the frightening screens to the starboard viewports. Still nothing; still only the formless, dimly luminous mist. He was aware that Irene, Tallentire and Susanna had already shrugged into their suits, although they had not yet closed their faceplates. Irene was thrusting his own space armor at him; grudgingly he coöperated as she acted as his dresser. It was not necessary for her to help him, but she realized that the handling of the situation demanded his full attention.

Not that there was anything that he could do about it. Yet.

On the screens there was only a barely visible hairline separating the gleaming spindle representing *Wanderer* from the expanding blob that was the enemy. And then, through the ports, Trafford saw her—a mass of swirling light and color nothing at all like a ship, nothing at all like anything made by Man. It could have been a rocket burst, perhaps, or an enormous Catherine wheel. It hung there, relatively motionless, spinning slowly, seemingly ephemeral.

Suddenly it solidified to hard, gleaming metal.

It solidified and then there was the deafening crash and all the minor crashes, the crackling arcs from deranged

electrical equipment, the growling and screaming complaints from strained and overstrained structural members.

But there were no red lights yet on the internal pressure panel. So far the pressure hull had not been holed; in no compartment was there a loss of atmosphere. If only Bronheim could de-synchronize. . . . But the engineer's skill, even combined with the enormous horsepower at his command, was no match, could never be a match for the forces running wild in this abnormal region of Space-Time.

Tallentire, sitting at his console, looked helplessly at Trafford. A warship's weaponry is designed for use at long range. The Gunnery Officer could, the Captain knew, fire a salvo of guided missiles from the port, the unengaged side and bring them round to plunge upon the New Italian ship. At best the enemy would have ample warning, would be able to use his anti-missile laser. At worst, the missiles, even if their warheads were de-activated, could well touch off a cataclysmic explosion that would utterly destroy both ships.

There was only one solution to the problem, and Tallentire knew it. This was a return to the good old days—or the bad old days—of sea warfare. He was not, like that most peculiar Commodore Grimes, an expert on sea history, but he had read the occasional book, watched the occasional historic film. What was the order usually given on these occasions? "Out cutlasses! Boarders away!" He envied Grimes his relatively large crew, his detachment of Marines.

He said, "Susanna, you've worked with Kankoran. Get him on the intercom and ask him if his people can use weapons."

"Are you going to arm the *passengers*?" demanded Irene.

"Forget your Merchant Service legalities, can't you?" he snarled. "In any case, there's never a law of God or Man that applies in this blasted nebula."

Susanna, who had been talking rapidly on the intercom telephone, reported. "Trialanne's already put them all in the picture. And Kankoran says that all the men are well versed in the use of small arms."

"Good. Mr. Tallentire, run down to the armory and get out a supply of laser pistols. Make sure that they're set for reduced range; we don't want our pressure hull converted into a strainer."

"But we're boarding *them*, aren't we? At least, I assumed that was your intention," said Irene.

"We're boarding them, as you say, *if* we can board them before they board us." He looked around. Tallentire was already gone on his errand. "You'll do, Susanna. Get hold of Kankoran, then take him and his people to the armory. They'll not find their way by themselves."

"What's wrong with using Metzenthier or Trialanne?" asked Irene.

"They're of more use where they are. They may be able to warn us of the enemy's intentions."

Then Trafford and Irene were alone in Control. There was nothing more, yet, that either of them could do. From the viewports they could see the vaned stern of the other ship, the venturi of the emergency reaction drive. It would have been nice to have known what was going on inside that hull, but no reports came from the telepaths.

Trafford called Metzenthier on the intercom, was told that the New Irilians were putting up a strong barrage of psionic interference—so strong, he thought and hoped, that their own telepathic receivers would be helpless.

"But," Metzenthier said comfortingly, "if they board we may be able to deceive them."

"If they board!" exploded Irene, who had overheard. "That's defeatist talk!"

"It's common sense," Trafford told her firmly. "*They* have a full crew of fighting men. They don't have to organize, improvise even. They don't have to issue weapons to civilian passengers." He added, "I've always thought that you carried your passion for automation too far in this ship."

"And if we're cluttered up with hordes of useless ratings, who's going to pay their wages? This isn't the Imperial Navy, you know."

"Well I know it." Then he said, "Irene, stop this bicker-

ing. That's an order—to both of us! You know, I know the psychological effects of this blasted nebula. We're not behaving normally."

"Speak for yourself," she replied—but managed a smile—only a tentative one, but it robbed the words of their sting.

Carefully, Trafford lowered himself down into the nose of his ship—the domed transparency that was still *down*. He might, he hoped, to be able to contort himself somehow to look aft through a viewport, to see what, if anything, the New Italians were doing.

He need not have troubled.

Irene called him back to the temporary platform that had been rigged as a navigating deck. She pointed to the indicator panel. The single (so far) red light showed that Compartment F was holed.

XIX

Compartment F was holed!

Trafford slammed shut his faceplate, saw that Irene had done the same. Her voice, through the helmet speaker, was matter of fact. "Well," she said, "they're in."

It might not be them, thought Trafford. It might be no more than a plate weakened by the collision suddenly blowing out. But he knew that this was not the case. He tried to put himself in the place of the officer in charge of the boarding party. The course of action was obvious—to make for and to take control, to burn through the intervening bulkheads, one by one, with laser weapons. There would be no opposition; the armory—where, presumably Tallentire was still issuing weapons to the passengers—was abaft the point of ingress.

"Mr. Tallentire," said Trafford into his helmet microphone. There would be time for the Gunnery Officer and as many of the passengers who were armed to hurry forward to intercept the raiders. "Mr. Tallentire!" Then he realized that a steadily mounting, infuriating squealing made communication impossible. His first few words to Irene had told the enemy what frequency was being used—and they had at once taken the necessary action. They were in a compact body; their officer could give orders of a sort by hand signals. *Wanderer's* people were scattered throughout the ship.

He touched his helmet to Irene's, said, "Looks like this is it."

"Looks like it," she agreed. He saw that she had already pulled her handgun out of its holster. "Well, Benjamin, it's been fun . . ."

Trafford pulled his own weapon, made sure that his gloved thumb was centered on the firing stud. There was nothing to do now but wait, to watch the deckhead—normally the deck—for the first flickers of light that would betray the progress of the raiders. But the indicator panel would give better warning. After F—E. After E—D . . .

But it wasn't working out that way. The red lights showed that G was losing atmosphere, and then that H was holed. What were the New Irilians playing at? To send one party to Control and one to the engineroom made sense, but not to concentrate forces in a drive aft . . .

Irene was laughing.

Again Trafford touched helmets. "Share the joke," he said.

"I hope it *is* a joke," she replied. "From *our* viewpoint, I mean . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"That our little friends have blundered on to the armory deck, to find our Mr. Tallentire, with possibly as many as eleven armed men, waiting for them. Tallentire's no fool; he'll have realized by now that the boarders are in the ship, and he'll be doubly alert as soon as he sees that somebody is burning through the bulkhead from 'G'. The jamming of the suit radio will have warned him too."

"I hope you're right. Do you think that we should go along to 'H' to lend a hand?"

"I do not. Mind you, I'd like to—but somebody has to look after the shop."

"I suppose so." Impatiently, irked by his inactivity, Trafford watched the panel. Compartment "I" was holed now, but this could be accidental. A man can miss with a laser weapon as easily as with a projectile pistol and the results are apt to be far more destructive. "I" was holed, but "J" was still intact, still airtight.

But, thought Trafford, suppose that Tallentire and his crowd are winning—what then? How many men does that bloody New Italian captain have aboard his ship? Perhaps he can afford to send reinforcements, and more reinforcements—and all with freshly charged power packs for their lasers,

while Tallentire's are of no more use than cigarette lighters!

To break away from the other ship—that was the answer. And how to break away? To de-synchronize. And how to de-synchronize? As long as both Mannschenn Drives were running, the immeasurably more powerful field of the nebula would maintain them in synchronization. But suppose that the Drive of one of the ships were stopped? There was, it was true, physical contact between the two hulls, but, owing to the curvature of their shells, it was a very limited contact.

And what, in this dreadfully warped region of Space-Time, would happen to the vessel whose Drive was stopped?

Too risky, thought Trafford. *Too risky, insofar as Wanderer was concerned.*

But the New Irilians? Why not? But how?

He saw that Irene had plugged into the intercom, that her lips were moving. She beckoned him to her. She touched helmets and said, "That was Metzenthier. He's keeping track on what's happening. He says that Tallentire disposed of the first boarding party, with only two casualties on our side. But there are reinforcements."

"What I was afraid of. So I'm afraid I have to leave you in charge of the ship. I'm going outside."

"But. . . But you can't!"

"I must. The only way to de-synchronize is for the Drive of one of the two ships to be stopped. I don't want to stop ours. What would happen if I did, I can't guess. And I don't want to find out."

"I guess not. Why not try it with a guided missile? That ship is no more than a modified *Woomera* class cruiser, so we know just where the Mannschenn Drive room is situated."

"Should I be able to guide the missile? And if I could, would our friend let it home aboard his ship? No, it has to be done the hard way. The sure way."

"You hope," she said. "We hope."

Briefly she held him closely, and then flipped up her

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faceplate. He followed suit. They kissed briefly, after a fashion, hampered by their helmets. He said, "I'll be careful," and clicked his faceplate shut again.

XX

HE HAD SAID that he would be careful, and he was careful, as careful as only an experienced spaceman can be when going Outside. First trip cadets are apt to cavort joyfully in the empty immensities beyond the frail hulls—but a few bad scares soon cure them of their playful carelessness. It was a long time since Trafford had been a first trip cadet.

He made his way to the airlock on the deck abaft the control room. Before locking out, he checked his equipment: lifeline, torch, laser pistol. He made sure that this latter was set to maximum output. He didn't mind making hash of somebody else's pressure hull—in fact he was looking forward to it.

There was nobody to operate the lock for him, but all such chambers are so designed that one man, working alone, is able to let himself out from—and to let himself back into—his ship. It takes longer, as even the simplest controls are awkward to spacegloved hands, but it can be done in safety.

Trafford, deliberately not wasting time by haste, let himself out. At last, with both valves securely shut once more and with the minimum of atmosphere lost, he stood on the shell plating held there by the magnetic soles of his boots. He was careful not to look "up", not to direct his gaze outwards. That was bad enough in normal Space, and worse still from a ship running under Interstellar Drive. In these utterly abnormal conditions panic could afflict him very easily. For long, long seconds he fixed his attention upon his metal-encased toes and then at last, very cautiously, slowly raised his head so that he could glance aft.

It was lucky, he thought, that the ships were alongside each other sardine fashion—very lucky. Had they been stem to stem he would surely have been observed. But had they been stem to stem there would already have been an exchange of small arms fire from control room to control room, probably fatal to both sides. He wondered why the boarders had not attacked at this vulnerable point and then, as his gaze moved sternwards (insofar as *Wanderer* was concerned), became more steady he realized the reason.

The two hulls were in contact in way of Compartment 'G'. The New Irilians, probably, were as timorous about going Outside as he was himself—possibly more so. They must have breached their own pressure hull at the point of contact so that all they had to do was step from one vessel into the other. A lazy man's way of boarding, but it had its obvious advantages.

And it had its disadvantages insofar as Trafford was concerned. It was possible that there had been welding as well as cutting and burning. There was only one way to find out—to go and look.

Cautiously he stooped, clipped the end of his line to the recessed ringbolt at the rim of the airlock door. Cautiously he shuffled aft, the reel at his belt automatically playing out. There was enough of the fine, fantastically strong cord to allow him to walk, or to fall, but he put that thought from his head, twice the length of the ship. Then another thought took over—a feeling rather than a thought. It was the *knowledge* that he was walking the wrong way, the compulsion that he turn around to retrace the footsteps that he had already taken.

But, staring ahead to reassure himself, he tried to continue. And then words formed themselves in his mind—words that, somehow, were spoken in Metzenthers's voice: "Ignore it, Captain. It doesn't apply to you. You're headed right."

Yes, he was headed right. He was *climbing* towards the stern, towards the enemy's bows, as he should have been. Although outside the hull the effect of the Inertial Drive

was much reduced it was still appreciable. He was trudging uphill towards the stern, *his* stern. He reached the circumscribed area of contact. It showed, he discovered as he cautiously circled it, as an unbroken ring of light. He was very careful not to make a complete circuit, retrace his steps.

Now, all he had to do was to find the other ship's Mannschenn Drive room. From what he could remember of the *Woomera* class cruisers it would be more towards the stern, towards *Wanderer's* bows. He shuffled back the way he had come, making sure that the reel of his lifeline was functioning properly. He was still very careful not to look out and away—but now, in any case, all his attention was focused on the plating that formed a curved ceiling above his head, on the circle of bright light thrown by his torch. Luck was still with him; the New Irilians had not followed the practice of some spacefaring races and nations. The hull was unpainted.

At last, when he had almost given up hope, he found what he was looking for. It was, it seemed, too far aft, too close to the big stern vanes. (But it was many years since he had served in a *Woomera* ship.) It was a subtle glow, the merest hint of rainbow colors. Metal in close proximity to the Drive, exposed to the maximum effects of the temporal precession fields, had its reflective qualities altered, warped.

But this was too far away—or too far away for a relatively feeble hand weapon such as the one that Trafford carried. It would take seconds, long seconds, for him to burn through the metal-shell plating, bulkheads, stanchions, possibly tool lockers—shielding the Mannschenn Drive unit, and then the chances were that his destructive beam would be misdirected. If he got closer, he could use the pistol like a sword—he could *slash*, he could do his damage before anybody could do anything about *him*.

He hated to leave the relative security of his own hull, but he knew that he had no choice. He flexed his knees and then jumped, breaking the contact of his soles with

Wanderer's shell plating. He twisted in mid-flight, landed heavily on hands and knees. The *thump*, which was transmitted to his ears by his space armor, was loud, too loud. Surely somebody would have heard it, surely at any second now an airlock door would open and armed men would come pouring out to dispose of the intruder. He would have to be quick.

He used his torch again, saw that he was still in the locality of the diffraction rings. With his free hand he pulled his pistol from the holster, made the first blinding slash—and checked himself violently. It was as well that he had remembered to polarize the transparency of his faceplate, otherwise he would have been literally blinded, would not have seen, just in time, that he was on the point of severing his own lifeline, which had become entangled about his left foot during his clumsy leap. Was it charred? Too late to worry about that now. He cleared it, felt relief as the reel took up the slack.

Firing stud depressed he slashed and slashed, and went on slashing. Metal glowed and flared, fell away. There was an incongruous glimpse of what looked like a cascade of bottles and another, not so incongruous, of a spacesuited man who was trying to bring a hand weapon to bear. He was sliced in two before he could do so. Trafford was profoundly thankful when the corpse sagged out of view.

And then, without warning, there was the well known but always dreaded sensation of temporal disorientation. Desperately, knowing that he should have done it before, Trafford snapped shut the lock on his lifeline reel. It should work. (It might work.) He was maintaining physical contact with *Wanderer* through his lifeline. He was held to the New Italian cruiser only by the magnetic fields in his boot soles.

It should work.

But would it?

Wanderer was gone now, dissolved in the swirling mists, the glowing fog that now seemed to be in violent, stream-

ing motion. *Wanderer* was gone, as though she never had been—yet still that lifeline stretched out, taut.

The circular hole in the enemy's side was in plain view now, from which glared a harsh blue light, from which spewed at least a dozen spacesuited figures, struggling, striving desperately to swim in the nothingness, dwindling, vanishing into the scud.

And still Trafford's line stretched out from him, into the nothingness.

The fog ahead was clearing.

It was thinning, patchy, wispy—and beyond it was some great luminary. There was glare, there was, even, heat. There was glare and heat; there was the open mouth of the dreadful atomic furnace, the blue giant into which the cruiser was plunging unchecked.

Unchecked?

The cessation of vibration beneath Trafford's feet told him that the Inertial Drive had been stopped. He realized that the ship was turning, was swinging on her gyroscopes, turning away from her doom. Trafford knew what would happen next—the Inertial Drive restarted, worked up to the highest possible rate of revolution in as short a time as possible, the Emergency Reaction Drive brought into play. Would it be enough? Could it counteract the enormously powerful gravitational field of this huge sun?

Trafford didn't wait to find out.

He did what he should have done long before—flexed his knees and then jumped.

XXI

TRAFFORD JUMPED—and immediately was falling out and away from the doomed ship. Automatically he pressed the stud that reactivated the winding mechanism of the reel at his belt, saw the lifeline tauten almost at once. (Somehow, during the cruiser's desperate turn away from the blue giant, it had slackened.) And then. . . . And then he was lost, alone and adrift in a region where there was neither Time nor Space but there there was still consciousness—but consciousness with nothing to be conscious of. There was neither sight, sound nor sensation. Trafford clenched his right hand and, normally, the joints of his gloves would have pinched the flesh of his fingers painfully. He listened for the familiar background noise of the air conditioning unit of his suit, for his breathing and his heartbeats. He shouted. He felt nothing, heard nothing.

So this, he thought, was death. A disembodied spirit (and where was his body? following the New Italians into the enormous sun?) would lack sensory equipment. But surely he would be able to *see*—if only the formless mists of the nebula.

And of all the places in the Universe to cash in his chips! And he could not boast even the dubious distinction of being the first man to die in the Horsehead Nebula.

A sentence formed itself in his mind. He did not know if he was remembering it or making it up—but it had the authentic sound of a genuine proverb:

He who rides the nightmare needs a long rein.

And was his long rein still there? He knew that it would not be, that it could not be, but, nevertheless, he stretched out his right hand. In spite of his glove he could feel the

line, could feel the vibration of it. He shouted in incredulous joy—and he heard his shout. All at once sensation returned—all the minor and not so minor discomforts that afflict a man who has worn a spacesuit too long. He had, before now, cursed them—now he welcomed them.

He was alive, but how long would he stay that way?

Still, the reel was working and the line was taut, and it would not be if it were not made fast at both ends. Was *Wanderer* being reeled in towards her Captain, or was Trafford being reeled in towards his ship?

A nice little exercise in Relativity, he thought. Not that it much mattered, as long as one of the two were being reeled in towards the other.

There was light again now, but still nothing to see by it. Nothing, that is but Trafford's own outstretched arm, his clenched hand and the thin white lifeline, stretching, it seemed, to Infinity. But it was only a little over a ship's length. But what was a ship's length in this cock-eyed Continuum?

And then she was there, ahead of Trafford, a dim, gray shape, distant, as though viewed through the wrong end of a telescope. But she was there, and the image of her was expanding—but slowly, slowly. Extending his left hand, open, to the full length of his arm (somehow he felt that it was important that he kept hold of the line, letting it run through his loosely clenched fist) Trafford found that one finger just covered *Wanderer*. Then it was one and a half fingers—and then, after what seemed at least half an eternity, a full two fingers. It was a crude rangefinder, but a practical one.

The line parted, just short of the reel, snapping where Trafford had inadvertently charred it with his laser. He felt the shock as it went, frantically tightened his fist. Something seemed to be pulling or pushing him back—a resultant of Newton's Third Law or forces peculiar to the nebula? Trafford neither knew nor cared as he felt the lifeline slipping through his hand. He lunged forward somehow, and with an agility of which he had never dreamed

himself capable somehow got a turn around his left wrist.

He was safe now, more or less.

He was safe, although still in a precarious position. And what was Irene doing about it? Surely she could see from the control room ports what had happened. He activated his suit radio, called, trying to make and to keep his voice matter of fact. "Captain to *Wanderer*. Captain to *Wanderer*. Do you read me? Over."

There was no reply, although there was no longer any interference on the suit frequency. He felt a sudden chill of fear. No reply. . . . It could mean that the emergency was over, that his officers had discarded their suits. But they must know that Trafford was still Outside. It could mean that the emergency was over—from the viewpoint of the enemy boarding party.

Hand over hand Trafford pulled himself forward. He had nowhere else to go, he thought. He expected to see an airlock door open at any moment, to see spacesuited figures emerge to pick him off with laser rifles. Or, come to that, they could use the ship's main armament, even against a target so insignificant as himself. If it worked. . . . He felt happier when he remembered the behavior of Tallentire's anti-missile laser during the first passage of the nebula.

But there was no hostile activity, no effort made to repel this last, solitary boarder. Trafford could see into the control room now. Everything seemed to be in order. There were no signs of a struggle. Such instruments as were within the scope of his vision seemed to be working normally.

Strange—and heartening. If the boarding party had overwhelmed Tallentire and his armed passengers they would have had to fight their way into Control. Irene, he knew, would never have submitted tamely.

The anesthetic gas? Useless, with all hands in spacesuits.

So, thought Trafford bitterly, *they've given me up for lost. They'll all be in the wardroom holding an Irish Wake,*

telling each other what a helluva fine fellow I was. I'll soon put a stop to that.

He tugged himself to the airlock door, threw a hitch of the line around his waist while he wrestled with the controls. He got the outer valve open at last, discarded the lifeline and clambered into the little chamber. He discarded his gloves. He could work quicker without them. Then, when he was into the entranceway he shucked off his stinking suit. In normal circumstances a hot shower followed by a change into clean uniform would have been the first items on his agenda—but it would be more effective if he confronted his wife and his officers still reeking of his harrowing experience. Almost as an afterthought, he unbuckled the belt with its holstered pistol from his spacesuit, rebuckled it about his waist.

Slowly, turning over in his mind the scathing remarks that he would make, he climbed aft towards the wardroom. He reached the deck on which it was situated, heard the sound of voices. He could not distinguish the words, but heard, among the others, the sing-song tones of an Italian male—Kankoran probably.

The wardroom door was open. He approached the doorway cautiously, as silently as possible, on stockinged feet, savoring in advance the effect that this unkempt apparition of himself would have upon his officers. He could see Metzenthier now. The telepath was standing against the bulkhead in a peculiarly strained attitude. He could see Metzenthier—and Metzenthier could see him, *had* seen him (of that Trafford was certain) but gave no sign of recognition. But something—was it a hunch, or did it come from outside his own mind?—impelled Trafford to draw his weapon.

Hunch?

Hunch be damned. There was something very wrong here.

Trafford could see Metzenthier, and Trialanne, and Susanna, and Bronheim . . . and, with a great, painful gush of relief, Irene.

Irene smiled.

Kankoran, facing the prisoners, a half dozen men in strange, scarlet uniforms with him, snarled. "The silly smirk off your face we will soon take. *You* nothing to be proud of have. Foolishly you followed me when I you told that Tallentire you wished to see the wounded." He laughed unpleasantly. "Only your Mr. Metzenthier intelligence showed. To confuse the boarders, to make them to climb towards the stern when they should have descended to the bows . . ."

"Just giving a nudge to force of habit," said Metzenthier.

"You did well, even so. But was it *you*—or this traitress was it?"

"Traitor?" Trialanne's voice was scornful, bitter. "I loyal am. You the traitor are."

"No matter. So it is that I only, with this handful of non-telepaths, survived the fighting. Us you cannot control, any more than you can control Denelleen. She much has learned. We may be able Mr. Bronheim soon to dispense with. . . ."

And Bronheim's world, thought Trafford, watching the engineer's face, *has collapsed about his ears*. He shook his head, hoping that the negative gesture would stop the man from doing something desperate—something that would earn him a laser beam through the guts before he could do more than stir a muscle.

"It unlucky is," went on Kankoran, addressing Irene, "that we yet cannot dispense with you. No doubt you manuals have, but to learn to navigate time takes."

"You're right on both counts, Kankoran. And it's no use thinking that you can call on the last of your ships for help—*she* vanished from our screens just before you came into my control room with your lying story."

"I so saw. I not altogether a fool am aboard ship. I want you, Medisinka Irene. I pay. After all—you mercenaries are."

"But loyal to our paymasters. Sorry, Kankoran, but we aren't playing."

"Medisinka Susanna?"

"The answer is no, repeat no."

"Desinka Tallentire?"

"Do you think I'm a rat, like you?"

"I could you lock with the Italian prisoners. They unhappy are. You they blame for their unhappiness." He paused. "But no. Permanent damage there could be to all of you. But to persuade. . . . That the problem is.

"To persuade . . ."

Slowly, with infinite caution, Trafford altered the range setting of his pistol. He wanted to be able to fire and to kill the New Italians in his foreground without inflicting more than painful burns, at the most, upon his own people. But the moment was not yet. The New Italians must be distracted by something happening in front of them. He guessed what it would be—and hated himself for having the sort of mind that could make such a guess.

"The . . . the least important. To *me* the least important. The one among you who is least qualified this ship to handle, but who important is to at least one of you. No, Medisinka Trialanne. You not selected are. Yet. Desinka Tallentire—you I ask again. Will you me serve?"

"No."

"Very well. What say you when Medisinka Susanna stripped is, thrust the airlock out? But before this—some little carving off of surplus tissue with our laser pistols. Will you still *no* say?"

"I will still say no."

Kankoran snapped an order in his own language. Two of his men converged rapidly upon Susanna—but Tallentire was before them, flinging his own body in front of his wife. The New Italians could not fire for fear of hitting their own men.

Trafford was not so hampered—and neither was he hampered by a distaste for shooting dangerous enemies in the back. Perhaps he should not have enjoyed doing it—but he did.

Kankoran and four of the New Italians were down, dead or dying. The other two were being hammered into insensibility by Tallentire, Bronheim and Metzenthier. Tria-

lanne had run from the room, after snatching up a laser pistol, presumably to deal with Denelleen.

Irene surveyed the scene calmly, but with more than a hint of distaste. She looked at Trafford, and there was no distaste in her expression, although there was much else, and all of it good.

But all she said was, "Now we know what that bastard Smith was paying us for."

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