

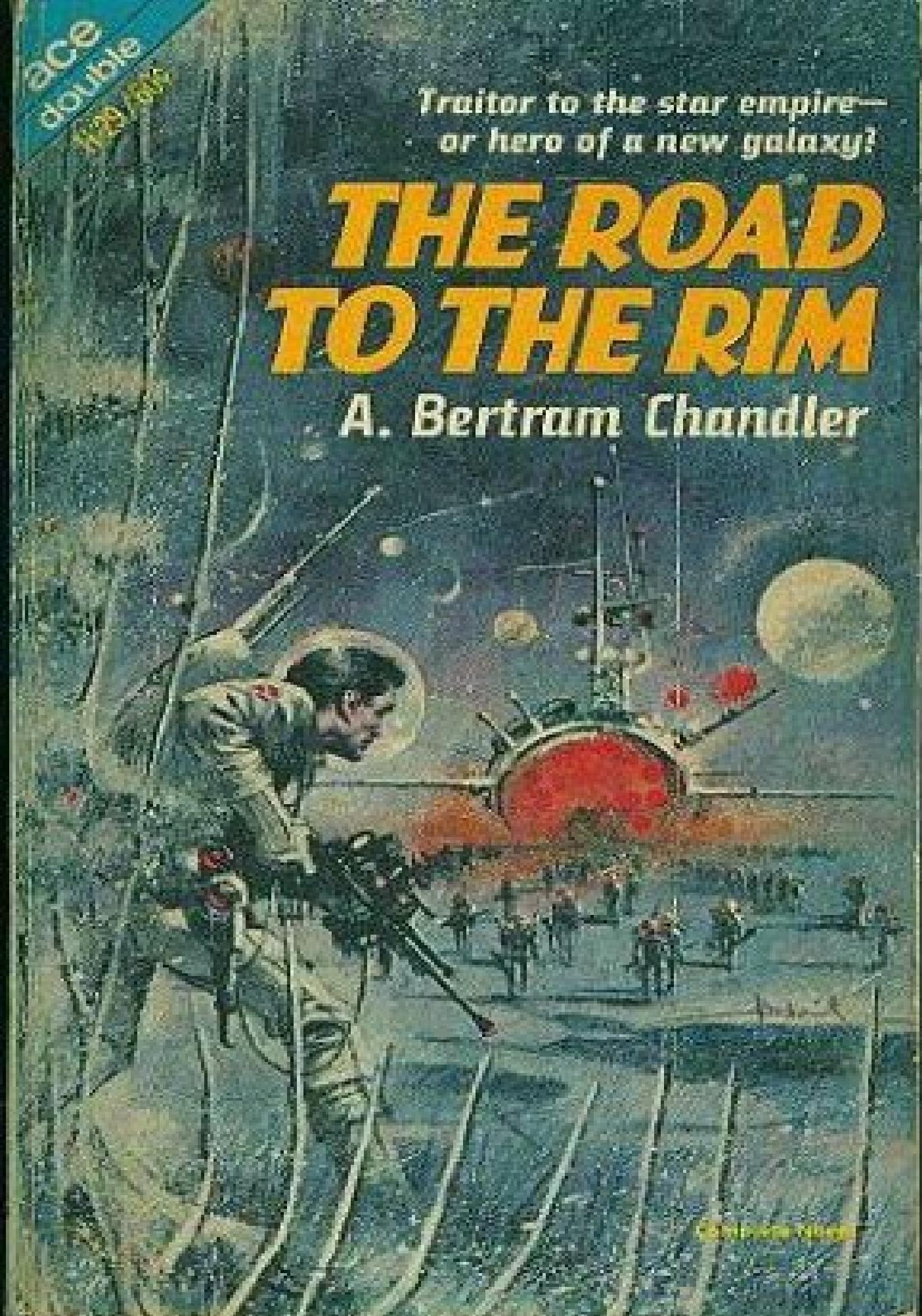
ace  
double

1950-1951

Traitor to the star empire—  
or hero of a new galaxy?

# THE ROAD TO THE RIM

A. Bertram Chandler



Centipede Books

**THE ROAD TO THE RIM**  
**A. Bertram Chandler**

THE ROAD TO THE RIM Copyright © 1967 by A. Bertram Chandler

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review, without permission in writing from the publisher.

All characters in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

**Dedication:**  
**For Admiral Lord Hornblower, R. N.**

*Lieutenant John Grimes of the Federation Survey Service: fresh out of the Academy—and as green as they come!*

"What do you think you're playing at?"

"Captain," said Wolverton, "I can no more than guess at what you intend to do—but I have decided not to help you do it."

"Give me the initiator, Wolverton. That's an order!"

"A *lawful* command, Captain? As lawful as those that armed this ship?"

"Hold him, Grimes!"

. . . They hung there, clinging to each other, but more in hate than in love. Wolverton's back was to the machine; he could not see, as could Grimes, that there was an indraught of air into the shimmering, spinning complexity. Grimes felt the beginnings of panic . . . all that mattered was that there was nothing to prevent him and Wolverton from being drawn into the machine . . . Violently Grimes shoved away. To the action, there was a reaction . . .

When he had finished retching, Grimes forced himself to look again at the slimy, bloody obscenity that was a man turned inside out—heart still beating, intestines still writhing . . .

# I

HIS UNIFORM was new, too new, all knife-edged creases, and the braid and buttons as yet un-dimmed by time. It sat awkwardly upon his chunky body—and even more awkwardly his big ears protruded from under the cap that was set too squarely upon his head. Beneath the shiny visor his eyes were gray (but not yet hard), and his face, for all its promise of strength, was as yet unlined, had yet to lose its immature softness. He stood at the foot of the ramp by which he had disembarked from the transport that had carried him from the Antarctic Base to Port Woomera, looking across the silver towers that were the ships, interplanetary and interstellar, gleaming in the desert. The westerling sun was hot on his back, but he did not notice the discomfort. There were the ships, the *real* ships—not obsolescent puddle-jumpers like the decrepit cruiser in which he, with the other midshipmen of his class, had made the training cruise to the moons of Saturn. There were the ships, the star ships, that span their web of commerce from Earth to the Centaurian planets, to the Cluster Worlds, to the Empire of Waverley, to the Shakespearian Sector and beyond.

*(But they're only merchantmen, he thought, with a young man's snobbery.)*

He wondered in which one of the vessels he would be taking passage. Merchantman or not, that big ship, the one that stood out from her neighbors like a city skyscraper among village church steeples, looked a likely enough craft. He pulled the folder containing his orders from his inside breast pocket, opened it, read (not for the second time, even), the relevant page.

*. . . you are to report on board the Interstellar Transport Commission's Delta Orionis . . .*

He was not a spaceman yet, in spite of his uniform, but he knew the Commission's system of nomenclature. There was the *Alpha* class, and the *Beta* class, and there were the *Gamma* and *Delta* classes. He grinned wryly. His ship was one of the smaller ones. Well, at least he would not be traveling to Lindisfarne Base in an *Epsilon* class tramp.

Ensign John Grimes, Federation Survey Service, shrugged his broad shoulders and stepped into the ground car waiting to carry him and his baggage from the airport to the spaceport.

## II

GRIMES LOOKED at the officer standing just inside *Delta Orionis'* airlock, and she looked at him. He felt the beginnings of a flush spreading over his face, a prickling of the roots of his close-cropped hair, and felt all the more embarrassed by this public display of his embarrassment. But spaceborn female officers, at this time, were almost as scarce as hens' teeth in the Survey Service—and such few as he had met all looked as though they shared a common equine ancestry. It was all wrong, thought Grimes. It was unfair that this girl (this attractive girl) should already be a veteran of interstellar voyages while he, for all his uniform and commission, should be embarking upon his first, his very first trip outside the bounds of the Solar System. He let his glance fall from her face (but not without reluctance), to the braid on her shoulderboards. Gold on a white facing. So it wasn't too bad. She was only some sort of paymaster—or, to use Merchant Service terminology, only some sort of purser.

She said, her clear, high voice almost serious, "Welcome aboard the *Delia O'Ryan*, Admiral."

"Ensign," corrected Grimes stiffly. "Ensign Grimes . . ."

". . . of the Federation Survey Service," she finished for him. "But you are all potential admirals." There was the faintest of smiles flickering upon her full lips, a barely discernible crinkling at the corners of her eyes. *Her brown eyes*, thought Grimes. *Brown eyes, and what I can see of her hair under that cap seems to be auburn . . .*

She glanced at her wristwatch. She told him, her voice now crisp and businesslike, "We lift ship in precisely ten minutes' time, Ensign."

"Then I'd better get my gear along to my cabin, Miss . . . ?"

"I'll look after that, Mr. Grimes. Meanwhile, Captain Craven sends his compliments and invites you to the Control Room."

"Thank you." Grimes looked past and around the girl, trying to discover for himself the door that gave access to the ship's axial shaft. He was determined not to ask.

"It's labeled," she told him with a faint smile. "And the cage is waiting at this level. Just take it up as far as it goes, then walk the rest. Or do you want a pilot?"

"I can manage," he replied more coldly than he had intended, adding, "thank you." He could see the sign over the door now. It was plain enough. AXIAL SHAFT. So was the button that he had to press to open the door—but the girl pressed it for him. He thanked her again—and this time his coldness was fully intentional—and stepped into the cage. The door slid shut behind him. The uppermost of the studs on the elevator's control panel was marked CAPTAIN'S DECK. He pushed it, then stood there and watched the lights flashing on the panel as he was swiftly lifted to the nose of the ship.

When he was carried no further he got out, found himself on a circular walk surrounding the upper extremity of the axial shaft. On the outside of the shaft itself there was a ladder. After a second's hesitation he climbed it, emerged through a hatch into the control room.

It was like the control room of the cruiser in which he had made his training cruise—and yet subtly (or not so subtly), unlike it. Everything—but so had it been aboard the Survey Service vessel—was functional, but there was an absence of high polish, of polishing for polishing's sake. Instruments gleamed—but it was the dull gleam that comes from long and continual use, and matched the dull gleam of the buttons and rank marks on the uniforms of the officers already seated at their stations, the spacemen to whom, after all, a uniform was no more (and no less), than an obligatory working rig.

The big man with the four gold bars on each shoulder half turned his head as Grimes came up through the hatch. "Glad to have you aboard, Ensign," he said perfunctorily. "Grab yourself a seat—there's a spare one alongside the Mate's. Sorry there's no time for introductions right now. We're due to get upstairs."

"Here!" grunted one of the officers.

Grimes made his way to the vacant acceleration chair, dropped into it, strapped himself in. While he was so doing he heard the Captain ask, "All secure, Mr. Kennedy?"

"No, sir."

"Then why the hell not?"

"I'm still waiting for the purser's report, sir."

"Are you?" Then, with a long-suffering sigh, "I suppose she's still tucking some passenger into her—or *his*—bunk . . ."

"She could still be stowing some passenger's gear, sir," contributed Grimes. "Mine," he added.

"Indeed?" The Captain's voice was cold and elaborately uninterested.

Over the intercom came a female voice. "Purser to Control. All secure below."

"And bloody well time," grumbled the shipmaster. Then, to the officer at the transceiver, "Mr. Digby, kindly obtain clearance."

"Obtain clearance, sir," acknowledged that young man brightly. Then, into his microphone, "*Delta Orionis* to Port Control. Request clearance to lift ship. Over."

"Port Control to *Delta Orionis*. You may lift. Bon voyage. Over."

"Thank you, Port Control. Over and out."

Then the ship was throbbing to the rhythmic beat of her Inertial Drive, and Grimes felt that odd sense of buoyancy, of near weightlessness, that persisted until the vessel broke contact with the ground—and then the still gentle acceleration induced the reverse effect. He looked out through the nearest viewport. Already the ocher surface of the desert, streaked by the long, black shadows of ships and spaceport buildings, was far below them, with the vessels and the immobile constructions looking like toys, and one or two surface vehicles like scurrying insects. Far to the north, dull-ruddy against the blue of the sky, there was a sandstorm. *If that sky were darker*, thought Grimes, *this would look like Mars*, and the mental comparison reminded him that he, too, was a spaceman, that he, too, had been around (although only within the bounds of Sol's planetary system). Even so, he was Survey Service, and these others with him in Control were only merchant officers, fetchers and carriers, interstellar coach and truck drivers. (But he envied them their quiet competency.)

Still the ship lifted, and the spaceport below her dwindled, and the land horizon to the north and the now visible sea horizon to the south began to display the beginnings of curvature. Still she lifted, and overhead the sky was dark, and the first bright stars, Sirius and Canopus, Alpha and Beta Centauri, were sparkling there, beckoning, as they had beckoned for ages immemorial before the first clumsy rocket clambered heavenward up the ladder of its own fiery exhaust, before the first airplane spread its flimsy wings, before the first balloon was lifted by the hot, expanding gases from its airborne furnace . . .

"Mr. Grimes," said the Captain suddenly, his voice neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"Sir?"

"We lift on I.D. until we're clear of the Van Allens."

"I know, sir," said Grimes—then wished that he could unsay the words. But it was too late. He was conscious of the shipmaster's hostile silence, of the amused contempt of the merchant officers. He shrank into his chair, tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. The ship's people talked among themselves in low voices, ignoring him. They allowed themselves a period of relaxation, producing and lighting cigarettes. Nobody offered the Ensign one.

Sulkily he fumbled for his pipe, filled it, lighted it. The Chief Officer coughed with quite unnecessary vigor. The Captain growled, "Put that out, please," and muttered something about stinking out the control room. He, himself, was puffing at a villainous black cigar.

The ship lifted, and below her the Earth was now a great sphere, three-quarters in darkness, the line of the terminator drawn across land masses, cloud formations and oceans. City lights twinkled in the gloom like star clusters, like nebulae. In a quiet voice an officer was calling readings from the radar altimeter.

To the throbbing of the Inertial Drive was added the humming, shrilling to a whine, of the directional gyroscopes as the ship turned about her short axis hunting the target star. The pseudo-gravity of centrifugal force was at an odd angle to that of acceleration—and the resultant was at an odder angle still. Grimes began to feel sick—and was actually thankful that the Captain had made him put his pipe out. Alarm bells sounded, and then somebody was saying over the intercom. "Prepare for acceleration. Prepare for acceleration. Listen for the countdown."

The countdown. Part of the long tradition of space travel, a hangover from the days of the first, unreliable rockets. Spaceships still used rockets—but only as auxiliaries, as a means of delivering thrust in a hurry, of building up acceleration in a short time.

At the word *Zero!* the Inertial Drive was cut and, simultaneously, the Reaction Drive flared into violent life. The giant hand of acceleration bore down heavily upon all in the ship—then, suddenly, at a curt order from the Captain, lifted.

Grimes became aware of a thin, high keening, the song of the ever-precussing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive. He knew the theory of it—as what spaceman did not?—although the mathematics of it were beyond the comprehension of all but a handful of men and women. He knew what was happening, knew that the ship, now that speed had been built up, was, as one of his instructors had put it, going ahead in space and astern in time. He felt, as he had been told that he would feel, the uncanny sensation of *déjà vu*, and watched the outlines of the control room and of every person and instrument in the compartment shift and shimmer, the colors sagging down the spectrum.

Ahead, the stars were pulsating spirals of opalescence, astern, Earth and Moon were frighteningly distorted,

uncanny compromises between the sphere and the tesseract. But this was no more than the merest subliminal glimpse; in the twinkling of an eye the Home Planet and her daughter were no more than dust motes whirling down the dark dimensions.

The Captain lit a fresh cigar. "Mr. Kennedy," he said, "you may set normal Deep Space watches." He turned to Grimes. His full beard almost hid his expression, that of one performing a social duty with no enthusiasm. "Will you join me in my day cabin, Ensign?"

"It will be my pleasure, sir," lied Grimes.

### III

HANDLING HIS BIG BODY with easy grace in the Free Fall conditions, the Captain led the way from the control room. Grimes followed slowly and clumsily, but with a feeling of great thankfulness that after his training cruise he was no longer subject to spacesickness. There were drugs, of course, and passengers used them, but a spaceman was expected to be independent of pharmaceutical aids. Even so, the absence of any proper "up" or "down" bothered him more than he cared to admit.

The shipmaster slid open the door to his accommodation, motioned to Grimes to enter, murmuring sardonically, "Now you see how the poor live." The so-called poor, thought Grimes, didn't do at all badly. This Deep Space sitting room was considerably larger than the day cabin of the Survey Service cruiser's Captain had been. True, it was also shabbier—but it was far more comfortable. Its decorations would never have been approved aboard a warship, were obviously the private property of the Master. There were a full dozen holograms on the bulkhead, all of them widely differing but all of them covering the same subject matter. Not that the subject matter was covered.

"My harem," grunted the Captain. "That one there, the redhead, I met on Caribbea. Quite a stopover that was. The green-haired wench—and you can see that it's not a dye job, although I've often wondered why women can't be *thorough*—isn't human, of course. But indubitably humanoid, and indubitably mammalian. Belongs to Brrroooooorrrrooo—one of the worlds of the Shaara Empire. The local Queen Mother offered to sell Lalia—that's her name—to me for a case of Scotch. And I was tempted . . ." He sighed. "But you Service Survey types aren't the only ones who have to live by Regulations."

Grimes said nothing, tried to hide his interest in the art gallery.

"But take a pew, Ensign. Spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard—this is Liberty Hall."

Grimes pulled himself to one of the comfortable chairs, strapped himself in. He said lamely, "I don't see any cat, sir."

"A figure of speech," growled the Captain, seating himself next to what looked like a drink cabinet. "Well, Mr. Grimes, your Commandant at the Academy, Commodore Bradshaw, is an old friend and shipmate of mine. He said that you were a very promising young officer"—like a balloon in a comic strip the unspoken words, "God knows why," hung between them—"and asked me to keep an eye on you. But I have already gained the impression that there is very little that a mere merchant skipper such as myself will be able to teach you."

Grimes looked at the bulky figure seated opposite him, at the radiation-darkened skin of the face above the black, silver-streaked beard, at the fiercely jutting nose, at the faded but bright and intelligent blue eyes, the eyes that were regarding him with more than a hint of amused contempt. He blushed miserably as he recalled his brash, "I know, sir," in this man's own control room. He said, with an effort, "This is my first Deep Space voyage, sir."

"I know." Surprisingly the Captain chuckled—and as though to celebrate this minor scoring over his guest opened the liquor cabinet. "Pity to have to suck this excellent Manzanilla out of a bulb—but that's one of the hardships of Free Fall. Here!" He tossed a little pear-shaped container to Grimes, kept one for himself. "Your health, Ensign!"

"And yours, sir."

The wine was too dry for Grimes' taste, but he made a pretense of enjoying it. He was thankful that he was not asked to have a second drink. Meanwhile, his host had pulled a typewritten sheet from a drawer of his desk and was looking at it. "Let me see, now . . . You're in cabin 15, on D Deck. You'll be able to find your own way down, won't you?"

Grimes said that he would and unbuckled his lapstrap. It was obvious that the party was over.

"Good. Now, as an officer of the Survey Service you have the freedom of the control room and the engine rooms . . ."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just don't abuse the privilege, that's all."

*After that*, thought Grimes, *I'm not likely to take advantage of it, let alone abuse it.* He let himself float up from his chair, said, "Thank you, sir." (For the drink, or for the admonition? What did it matter?) "I'll be getting down to my cabin, sir. I've some unpacking to do."

"As you please, Mr. Grimes."

The Captain, his social duty discharged, had obviously lost interest in his guest. Grimes let himself out of the cabin and made his way, not without difficulty, to the door in the axial shaft. He was surprised at the extent to which

one not very large drink had interfered with the control of his body in Free Fall. Emerging from the elevator cage on D Deck he stumbled, literally, into the purser. "Let go of me," she ordered, "or I shall holler rape!"

*That, he thought, is all I need to make this trip a really happy one.*

She disengaged herself, moved back from him, her slim, sandaled feet, magnetically shod, maintaining contact with the steel decking, but gracefully, with a dancing motion. She laughed. "I take it that you've just come from a home truth session with B.B."

"B.B.?"

"The Bearded Bastard. But don't take it too much to heart. He's that way with *all* junior officers. The fact that you're Survey Service is only incidental."

"Thank you for telling me."

"His trouble," she went on. "His *real* trouble is that he's painfully shy."

*He's not the only one*, thought Grimes, looking at the girl. She seemed even more attractive than on the occasion of their first meeting. She had changed into shorts-and-shirt shipboard uniform—and she was one of the rare women who could wear such a rig without looking lumpy and clumpy. There was no cap now to hide her hair—smooth, lustrous, with coppery glints, with a straight white part bisecting the crown of her finely shaped head.

She was well aware of his scrutiny. She said, "You must excuse me, Ensign. I have to look after the other customers. They aren't seasoned spacemen like you."

Suddenly bold, he said, "But before you go, what is your name?"

She smiled dazzlingly. "You'll find a list of all ship's personnel posted in your cabin. I'm included." Then she was gone, gliding rapidly around the curve of the alleyway.

He looked at the numbers over the cabin doors, outboard from the axial shaft, making a full circuit of that hollow pillar before he realized that this was only the inner ring, that he would have to follow one of the radial alleyways to reach his own accommodation. He finally found No. 15 and let himself in.

His first action was to inspect the framed notices on the bulkhead.

*I.S.S. Delta Orionis*, he read.

*Captain J. Craven, O.G.S., S.S.R.*

So the Old Man held a Reserve commission. And the Order of the Golden Star was awarded for something more than good attendance.

*Mr. P. Kennedy, Chief Officer.*

He ignored the other names on the list while he searched for one he wanted. Ah, here it was.

*Miss Jane Pentecost, Purser.*

He repeated the name to himself, thinking that, despite the old play on words, this Jane was not plain. (But Janes rarely are.) *Jane Pentecost . . .* Then, feeling that he should be showing some professional interest, he acquainted himself with the names of the other members of the ship's crew. He was intrigued by the manning scale, amazed that such a large vessel, relatively speaking, could be run by such a small number of people. But this was not a warship; there were no weapons to be manned, there would never be the need to put a landing party ashore on the surface of a hostile planet. The Merchant Service could afford to automate, to employ machinery in lieu of ratings. The Survey Service could not.

Virtuously he studied the notices dealing with emergency procedures, ship's routine, recreational facilities and all the rest of it, examined with care the detailed plan of the ship. Attached to this was a card, signed by the Master, requesting passengers to refrain, as much as possible, from using the elevator in the axial shaft, going on to say that it was essential, for the good of their physical health, that they miss no opportunity for taking exercise. (In a naval vessel, thought Grimes, with a slight sneer, that would not be a request—it would be an order. And, in any case, there would be compulsory calisthenics for all hands.)

He studied the plan again and toyed with the idea of visiting the bar before dinner. He decided against it; he was still feeling the effects of the drink that the Captain had given him. So, to pass the time, he unpacked slowly and carefully, methodically stowing his effects in the drawers under the bunk. Then, but not without reluctance, he changed from his uniform into his one formal civilian suit. One of the officer-instructors at the Academy had advised this. "Always wear civvies when you're traveling as passenger. If you're in uniform, some old duck's sure to take you for one of the ship's officers and ask you all sorts of technical questions to which you don't know the answers."

While he was adjusting his frilled cravat in front of the mirror the sonorous notes of a gong boomed from the intercom.

## IV

THE DINING SALOON was much more ornate than the gunroom of that training cruiser had been, and more ornate than her wardroom. The essentials were the same, of course, as they are in any ship—tables and chairs secured to the deck, each seat fitted with its strap so that the comforting pressure of buttocks on padding could give an illusion of gravity. Each table was covered with a gaily colored cloth—but beneath the fabric there was the inevitable stainless steel to which the stainless steel service would be held by its own magnetic fields. But what impressed Grimes was the care that had been taken, the ingenuity that had been exercised to make this compartment look like anything but part of a ship.

The great circular pillar of the axial shaft was camouflaged by trelliswork, and the trelliswork itself almost hidden by the luxuriance of some broad-level climbing plant that he could not identify. Smaller pillars were similarly covered, and there was a further efflorescence of living decoration all around the circular outer wall—the wall that must be the inner skin of the ship. And there were windows in this wall. No, Grimes decided, not windows, but holograms. The glowing, three dimensional pictures presented and maintained the illusion that this was a hall set in the middle of some great park. But on what world? Grimes could not say. Trees, bushes and flowers were unfamiliar, and the color of the sky subtly strange.

He looked around him at his fellow diners, at the dozen passengers and the ship's officers, most of whom were already seated. The officers were in neat undress uniform. About half the male passengers were, like himself, formally attired; the others were sloppy in shorts and shirts. But this was the first night out and some laxity was allowable. The women, however, all seemed to have decided to outshine the glowing flowers that flamed outside the windows that were not windows.

There was the Captain, unmistakable with his beard and the shimmering rainbow of ribbons on the left breast of his blouse. There were the passengers at his table—the men inclined to portliness and pomposity, their women sleek and slim and expensive looking. Grimes was relieved to see that there was no vacant place—and yet, at the same time, rather hurt. He knew that he was only an Ensign, a one-ringer, and a very new Ensign at that—but, after all, the Survey Service was the Survey Service.

He realized that somebody was addressing him. It was a girl, a small, rather chubby blonde. She was in uniform—a white shirt with black shoulder-boards, each bearing a narrow white stripe, sharply creased slacks, and black, highly polished shoes. Grimes assumed, correctly, that she was a junior member of the purser's staff. "Mr. Grimes," she said, "will you follow me, please? "You're at Miss Pentecost's table."

Willingly he followed the girl. She led him around the axial shaft to a table for four at which the purser with two passengers, a man and a woman, was already seated. Jane Pentecost was attired as was his guide, the severity of her gold-trimmed black and white in pleasing contrast to the pink and blue frills and flounces that clad the other woman, her slenderness in still more pleasing contrast to the other's untidy plumpness.

She smiled and said pleasantly, "Be seated, Admiral."

"Admiral?" asked the man at her left, unpleasantly incredulous. He had, obviously, been drinking. He was a rough looking customer, in spite of the attempt that he had made to dress for dinner. He was twice the Ensign's age, perhaps, although the heavily lined face under the scanty sandy hair made him look older. "Admiral?" He laughed, revealing irregular yellow teeth. "In what? The Space Scouts?"

Jane Pentecost firmly took control. She said, "Allow me to introduce Ensign Grimes, of the Survey Service . . ."

"Survey Service . . . Space Scouts . . . S.S . . . What's the difference?"

"Plenty!" answered Grimes hotly.

The purser ignored the exchange. "Ensign, this is Mrs. Baxter . . ."

"Pleased to meet you, I'm sure," simpered the woman.

"And Mr. Baxter."

Baxter extended his hand reluctantly and Grimes took it reluctantly. The amenities observed, he pulled himself into his seat and adjusted his lapstrap. He was facing Jane Pentecost. The man was on his right, the woman on his left. He glanced first at her, then at her husband, wondering how to start and to maintain a conversation. But this was the purser's table, and this was her responsibility.

She accepted it. "Now you're seeing how the poor live, Admiral," she remarked lightly.

Grimes, taking a tentative sip from his bulb of consommé, did not think that the self-styled poor did at all badly, and said as much. The girl grinned and told him that the first night out was too early to draw conclusions. "We're still on shoreside meat and vegetables," she told him, "and you'll not be getting your first taste of our instant

table wine until tomorrow. Tonight we wallow in the unwonted luxury of a quite presentable Montrachet. When we start living on the produce of our own so-called farm, washing it down with our own reconstituted plonk, you'll see the difference."

The Ensign replied that, in his experience, it didn't matter if food came from tissue-culture vats or the green fields of Earth—what was important was the cook.

"Wide experience, Admiral?" she asked sweetly.

"Not very," he admitted. "But the gunroom cook in my last ship couldn't boil water without burning it."

Baxter, noisily enjoying his dinner, said that this preoccupation with food and drink was symptomatic of the decadence of Earth. As he spoke his knife grated unpleasantly on the steel spines that secured his charcoal broiled steak to the surface of his plate.

Grimes considered inquiring if the man thought that good table manners were also a symptom of decadence, then thought better of it. After all, this was not *his* table. Instead, he asked, "And where are you from, Mr. Baxter?"

"The Rim Worlds, Mr. Grimes. Where we're left to sink or swim—so we've no time for much else than keeping ourselves afloat." He sucked noisily from his bulb of wine. "Things might be a little easier for us if your precious Survey Service did something about keeping the trade routes open."

"That is our job," said Grimes stiffly. "And we do it."

"Like hell! There's not a pirate in the Galaxy but can run rings around you!"

"Practically every pirate has been hunted down and destroyed," Grimes told him coldly.

"Practically every pirate, the man says! A few small-time bunglers, he means!"

"Even the notorious Black Bart," persisted Grimes.

"Black Bart!" Baxter, spluttering through his full mouth, gestured with his laden fork at Grimes. "Black Bart! He wasn't much. Once he and that popsy of his split brass rags he was all washed up. I'm talkin' about the *real* pirates, the ones whose ships wear national colors instead o' the Jolly Roger, the ones that your precious Survey Service daren't say boo to. The ones who do the dirty work for the Federation."

"Such as?" asked Grimes frigidly.

"So now you're playin' the bleedin' innocent. Never heard o' the Duchy o' Waldegren, Mr. Ensign Grimes?"

"Of course. Autonomous, but they and the Federation have signed what's called a Pact of Perpetual Amity."

"Pretty words, ain't they? Suppose we analyze them. Suppose we analyze by analogy. D'yer know much about animals, Mr. Ensign Grimes?"

"Animals?" Grimes was puzzled. "Well, I suppose I do know something. I've taken the usual courses in xenobiology . . . ."

"Never mind that. You're a Terry. Let's confine ourselves to a selection of yer own Terran four-footed friends."

"What the hell are you driving at?" flared Grimes, losing his temper. He threw an apologetic glance in Jane Pentecost's direction, saw that she was more amused than shocked.

"Just think about a Pact of Perpetual Amity between an elephant and a tom cat," said Baxter. "A fat an' lazy elephant. A lean, scrawny, vicious tom cat. If the elephant wanted to he could convert that cat into a fur bedside rug just by steppin' on him. But he doesn't want to. He leaves the cat alone, just because the cat is useful to him. He does more than just leave him alone. He an' this feline pull out their pens from wherever they keep 'em an' sign their famous Pact.

"In case you haven't worked it out for yourself, the elephant's the Federation, and the tom cat's the Duchy of Waldegren."

"But why?" asked Grimes. "Why?"

"Don't they teach you puppies any interstellar politics? Or are those courses reserved for the top brass? Well, Mr. Grimes, I'll tell you. There's one animal that has the elephant *really* worried. Believe it or not, he's scared o' mice. An' there're quite a few mice inside the Federation, mice that make the elephant nervous by their rustlings an' scurryings an' their squeaky demands for full autonomy. That's where the cat comes in. By his free use of his teeth an' claws, by his very presence, he keeps the mice quiet."

"And just who are these famous mice, Mr. Baxter?" asked Grimes.

"Don't they teach you nothin' in your bleedin' Academy? Well, I'll tell you. In *our* neck o' the woods, the mice are the Rim Worlds, an' the tom cat, as I've already made clear, is the Duchy o' Waldegren. The Duchy gets away with murder—murder an' piracy. But accordin' to the Duchy, an accordin' to your big, stupid elephant of a Federation, it's not piracy. It's—now, lemme see, what fancy words have been used o' late? Contraband Control. Suppression of Espionage. Violation of the Three Million Mile Limit. Every time that there's an act of piracy there's some quote legal unquote excuse for it, an' it's upheld by the Federation's tame legal eagles, an' you Survey Service

sissies just sit there on your big, fat backsides an' don't lift a pinkie against your dear, murderous pals, the Waldegrenese. If you did, they send you screaming back to Base, where some dear old daddy of an Admiral'd spank your little plump bottoms for you."

"Please, Mr. Baxter!" admonished Jane Pentecost.

"Sorry, Miss. I got sort of carried away. But my young brother was Third Reaction Drive Engineer of the old *Bunyip* when she went missing. Nothin' was ever proved—but the Waldegrenese Navy was holdin' fleet maneuvers in the sector she was passin' through when last heard from. Oh, they're cunnin' bastards. They'll never go for one o' these ships, or one of the Trans-Galactic Clippers; it'll always be some poor little tramp that nobody'll ever miss but the friends an' relatives o' the crew. And, I suppose, the underwriters—but Lloyds makes such a packet out o' the ships that don't get lost that they can well afford to shell out now an' again. Come to that, it must suit 'em. As long as there're a few 'overdues' an' 'missings' they can keep the premiums up."

"But I still can't see how piracy can possibly pay," protested Grimes.

"O' course it pays. Your friend Black Bart made it pay. An' if you're goin' to all the expense of building and maintaining a war fleet, it might just as well earn its keep. Even your famous Survey Service might show a profit if you were allowed to pounce on every fat merchantman who came within range o' your guns."

"But for the Federation to condone piracy, as you're trying to make out . . . That's utterly fantastic."

"If you lived on the Rim, you might think different," snarled Baxter.

And Jane Pentecost contributed, "Not piracy. Confrontation."

## V

AS SOON AS the meal was finished the Baxters left rather hastily to make their way to the bar, leaving Grimes and Jane Pentecost to the leisurely enjoyment of their coffee. When the couple was out of earshot Grimes remarked, "So those are Rim Worlders. They're the first I've met."

"They're not, you know," the girl told him.

"But they are. Oh, there are one or two in the Survey Service, but I've never run across them. Now I don't particularly want to."

"But you did meet one Rim Worlder before you met the Baxters."

"The Captain?"

She laughed. "Don't let him hear you say that—not unless you want to take a space walk without a suit!"

"Then who?"

"Who could it be, Admiral? Whom have you actually met, to talk to, so far in this ship? Use your crust."

He stared at her incredulously. "Not you?"

"Who else?" She laughed again, but with a touch of bitterness. "We aren't all like our late manger companions, you know. Or should know. Even so, you'd count yourself lucky to have Jim Baxter by your side in any real jam. It boils down to this. Some of us have acquired veneer. Some of us haven't. Period."

"But how did you . . . ?" He groped for words that would not be offensive to conclude the sentence.

"How did I get into this galley? Easily enough. I started my spacefaring career as a not very competent Catering Officer in *Jumbuk*, one of the Sundowner Line's more ancient and decrepit tramps. I got sick in Elsinore. Could have been my own cooking that put me in the hospital. Anyhow, I was just about recovered when the Commission's *Epsilon Serpentis* blew in—and she landed her purser with a slightly broken leg. She'd learned the hard way that the Golden Rule—*stop whatever you're doing and secure everything when the acceleration warning sounds*—is meant to be observed. The Doctor was luckier. She broke his fall . . ." Grimes was about to ask what the Doctor and the purser had been doing, then was thankful that he had not done so. He was acutely conscious of the crimson blush that burned the skin of his face.

"You must realize," said the girl dryly, "that merchant vessels with mixed crews are not monastic institutions. But where was I? Oh, yes. On Elsinore. Persuading the Master of the *Snaky Eppy* that I was a fit and proper person to take over his pursering. I managed to convince him that I was at least proper—I still can't see what my predecessor saw in that lecherous old goat of a quack, although the Second Mate had something . . ." Grimes felt a sudden twinge of jealousy. Anyhow, he signed me on, as soon as I agreed to waive repatriation.

"It was a long voyage; as you know, the *Epsilon* class ships are little better than tramps themselves. It was a long voyage, but I enjoyed it— seeing all the worlds that I'd read about and heard about and always wanted to visit. The Sundowner Line doesn't venture far afield—just the four Rim Worlds, and now and again the Shakespearian Sector, and once in a blue moon one of the drearier planets of the Empire of Waverley. The Commission's tramps, of course, run *everywhere*.

"Anyhow, we finally berthed at Woomera. The Old Man must have put in a good report about me, because I was called before the Local Superintending Purser and offered a berth, as a junior, in one of the *Alpha* class liners. *Alpha Centauri*, if you must know. She was on the Sol-Sirius service. Nothing very glamorous in the way of ports of call, but she was a fine ship, beautifully kept, efficiently run. A couple of years there knocked most of the sharp corners off me. After that—a spell as Assistant Purser of *Beta Geminorum*. Atlanta, Caribbea Carinthia and the Cluster Worlds. And then my first ship as Chief Purser. This one."

One of Jane's girls brought them fresh bulbs of coffee and ampoules of a sweet, potent liqueur. When she was gone Grimes asked, "Tell me, what are the Rim Worlds like?"

She waited until he had applied the flame of his lighter to the tip of her long, thin cigar, then answered, "Cold. Dark. Lonely. But . . . they have something. The feeling of being on a frontier. *The* frontier. The last frontier."

"The frontier of the dark . . ." murmured Grimes.

"Yes. The frontier of the dark. And the names of our planets. They have something too. A . . . poetry? Yes, that's the word. Lorn, Ultimo, Faraway and Thule . . . And there's that night sky of ours, especially at some times of the year. There's the Galaxy—a great, dim-glowing lenticulate nebula, and the rest is darkness. At other times of the year there's only the darkness, the blackness that's made even more intense by the sparse, faint stars that are the other Rim Suns, by the few, faint luminosities that are the distant island universes that we shall never reach . . ."

She shivered almost imperceptibly. "And always there's that sense of being on the very edge of things, of

hanging on by our fingernails with the abyss of the eternal night gaping beneath us. The Rim Worlders aren't a spacefaring people; only a very few of us ever get the urge. It's analogous, perhaps, to your Maoris—I spent a leave once in New Zealand and got interested in the history of the country. The Maoris come of seafaring stock. Their ancestors made an epic voyage from their homeland paradise to those rather grim and dreary little islands hanging there, all by themselves, in the cold and stormy Southern Ocean, lashed by frigid gales sweeping up from the Antarctic. And something—the isolation? the climate?—killed the wanderlust that was an essential part of the makeup of their race. You'll find very few Maoris at sea—or in space—although there's no dearth of Polynesians from the home archipelagoes aboard the surface ships serving the ports of the Pacific. And there are quite a few, too, in the Commission's ships . . ."

"We have our share in Survey Service," said Grimes. "But tell me, how do you man your vessels? This Sundowner Line of yours . . ."

"There are always the drifters, the no-hopers, the castoffs from the Interstellar Transport Commission, and Trans-Galactic Clippers, and Waverley Royal Mail and all the rest of them."

"And from the Survey Service?" The question lifted her out of her somber mood. "No," she replied with a smile. "Not yet."

"Not ever," said Grimes.

## VI

ONCE HIS INITIAL SHYNESS HAD WORN OFF—and with it much of his Academy-induced snobbery—Grimes began to enjoy the voyage. After all, Survey Service or no Survey Service, this was a ship and he was a spaceman. He managed to accept the fact that most of the ship's officers, even the most junior of them, were far more experienced spacemen than he was. Than he was *now*, he often reminded himself. At the back of his mind lurked the smug knowledge that, for all of them, a captaincy was the very limit of promotion, whereas he, one day, would be addressed in all seriousness as Jane Pentecost now addressed him in jest.

He was a frequent visitor to the control room but, remembering the Master's admonition, was careful not to get in the way. The watch officers accepted him almost as one of themselves and were willing to initiate him into the tricky procedure of obtaining a fix with the interstellar drive in operation—an art, he was told, rather than a science.

Having obtained the permission of the Chief Engineers he prowled through the vessel's machinery spaces, trying to supplement his theoretical knowledge of reaction, inertial and interstellar drives with something more practical. The first two, of course, were idle, and would be until the ship emerged from her warped Space-Time back into the normal continuum—but there was the Pile, the radio-active heart of the ship, and there was the auxiliary machinery that, in this tiny, man-made planet, did the work that on a natural world is performed by winds, rivers, sunlight and gravity.

There was the Mannschenn Drive Room—and, inside this holy of holies, no man need fear to admit that he was scared by the uncanny complexity of ever-precussing gyroscopes. He stared at the tumbling rotors, the gleaming wheels that seemed always on the verge of vanishing into nothingness, that rolled down the dark dimensions, dragging the ship and all aboard her with them. He stared, hypnotized, lost in a vague, disturbing dream in which Past and Present and Future were inextricably mingled—and the Chief Interstellar Drive Engineer took him firmly by the arm and led him from the compartment. "Look at the time-twister too long," he growled, "and you'll be meeting yourself coming back!"

There was the "farm"—the deck of yeast- and tissue-culture vats which was no more (and no less), than a highly efficient protein factory, and the deck where stood the great, transparent globes in which algae converted the ship's organic waste and sewage back into usable form (processed as nutriment for the yeasts and the tissue-cultures and as fertilizer for the hydroponic tanks, the biochemist was careful to explain), and the deck where luxuriant vegetation spilled over from the trays and almost barricaded the inspection walks, the source of vitamins and of flowers for the saloon tables and, at the same time, the ship's main air-conditioning unit. Grimes said to Jane Pentecost, who had accompanied him on this tour of inspection, "You know, I envy your Captain."

"From you, Admiral," she scoffed, "that *is* something. But why?"

"How can I put it? You people do the natural way what we do with chemicals and machinery. The Captain of a warship is Captain of a warship. Period. But your Captain Craven is absolute monarch of a little world."

"A warship," she told him, "is supposed to be able to go on functioning as such even with every compartment holed. A warship cannot afford to depend for the survival of her crew upon the survival of hosts of other air-breathing organisms."

"Straight from the book," he said. Then, puzzled, "But for a . . ." He hesitated.

"But for a woman, or for a purser, or for a mere merchant officer I know too much," she finished for him. "But I can read, you know. And when I was in the Sundowner Line, I, as well as all the other officers, was supposed to keep up with all the latest Survey Service publications."

"But why?" he asked.

"But why not? We'll have a Navy of our own, one day. Just stick around, Admiral."

"Secession?" he inquired, making it sound like a dirty word.

"Once again—why not?"

"It'd never work," he told her.

"The history of Earth is full of secessions that did work. So is the history of Interstellar Man. The Empire of Waverley, for example. The Duchy of Waldegren, for another—although that's one that should have come to grief. We should all of us be a great deal happier if it had."

"Federation policy . . ." he began.

"Policy, shmolicy! Don't let's be unkind to the Waldegrenese, because as long as they're in being they exercise a restraining influence upon the Empire of Waverley and the Rim Worlds . . ." Her pace slackened. Grimes noticed that they were passing through the alleyway in which she and her staff were accommodated. She went on, "But all

this talking politics is thirsty work. Come in for a couple of drinks before lunch."

"Thank you. But, Jane"—she didn't seem to have noticed the use of her given name—"I don't think that either of us is qualified to criticize the handling of foreign and colonial affairs."

"Spoken like a nice, young, well-drug-up future admiral. Oh, I know, I know. You people are trained to be the musclemen of the Federation. Yours not to reason why, yours but to do and die, and all the rest of it. But I'm a Rim Worlder—and out on the Rim you learn to think for yourself." She slid her door open. "Come on in. This is Liberty Hall—you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

Her accommodation was a suite rather than a mere cabin. It was neither as large nor as well fitted as the Captain's, but it was better than the Chief Officer's quarters, in which Grimes had already been a guest. He looked with interest at the holograms on the bulkhead of the sitting room. They were—but in an altogether different way—as eye-catching as Captain Craven's had been. There was one that was almost physically chilling, that induced the feeling of utter cold and darkness and loneliness. It was the night sky of some planet—a range of dimly seen yet sharply serrated peaks bisecting a great, pallidly glowing, lenticulate nebula. "Home, sweet home," murmured the girl, seeing what he was looking at. "The Desolation Mountains on Faraway, with the Galactic Lens in the background."

"And you feel homesick for *that*?"

"Darn right I do. Oh, not all the time. I like warmth and comfort as well as the next woman. But . . ." She laughed. "Don't stand around gawking—you make the place look untidy. Pull yourself into a chair and belay the buttocks."

He did so, watching her as she busied herself at the liquor cabinet. Suddenly, in these conditions of privacy, he was acutely conscious of the womanliness of her. The rather tight and rather short shorts, as she bent away from him, left very little to the imagination. And her legs, although slender, were full where they should be full, with the muscles working smoothly under the golden skin. He felt the urge, which he sternly suppressed, to plant a kiss in the delectable hollow behind each knee. She turned suddenly. "Here! Catch!" He managed to grab the bulb that was hurtling toward his face, but a little of the wine spurted from the nipple and struck him in the right eye. When his vision cleared he saw that she was seated opposite him, was laughing (at or with him?). At, he suspected. A real demonstration of sympathy would have consisted of tears, not laughter. Her face grew momentarily severe. "Not the mess," she said reprovingly. "But the waste."

Grimes examined the bulb. "I didn't waste much. Only an eyeful."

She raised her drink in ritual greeting. "Here's mud in your eye," adding, "for a change."

"And in yours."

In the sudden silence that followed they sat looking at each other. There was a tension, some odd resultant of centrifugal and centripetal forces. They were on the brink of something, and both of them knew it, and there was the compulsion to go forward countered by the urge to go back.

She asked tartly, "Haven't you ever seen a woman's legs before?"

He shifted his regard to her face, to the eyes that, somehow, were brown no longer but held the depth and the darkness of the night through which the ship was plunging.

She said, "I think you'd better finish your drink and go."

He said, "Perhaps you're right."

"You better believe I'm right." She managed a smile. "I'm not an idler, like some people. I've work to do."

"See you at lunch, then. And thank you."

"Don't thank me. It was on the house, as the little dog said. Off with you, Admiral."

He unbuckled his lapstrap, got out of the chair and made his way to the door. When he was out of her room he did not go to his own cabin but to the bar, where he joined the Baxters. They, rather to his surprise, greeted him in a friendly manner. Rim Worlders, Grimes decided, had their good points.

IT WAS AFTER LUNCH when one of the purserettes told him that the Captain wished to see him. *What have I done now?* wondered Grimes—and answered his own question with the words, *Nothing. Unfortunately.*

Craven's manner, when he admitted Grimes into his dayroom, was severe. "Come in, Ensign. Be seated."

"Thank you, sir."

"You may smoke if you wish."

"Thank you, sir."

Grimes filled and lighted his pipe; the Captain ignited one of his pungent cigars, studied the eddying coils of smoke as though they were writing a vitally important message in some strange language.

"Er, Mr. Grimes, I believe that you have been seeing a great deal of my purser, Miss Pentecost."

"Not a great deal, sir. I'm at her table, of course."

"I am told that she has entertained you in her quarters."

"Just one bulb of sherry, sir. I had no idea that we were breaking ship's regulations."

"You were not. All the same, Mr. Grimes, I have to warn you."

"I assure you, sir, that nothing occurred between us."

Craven permitted himself a brief, cold smile. "A ship is not a Sunday school outing—especially a ship under my command. Some Masters, I know, do expect their officers to comport themselves like Sunday school pupils, with the Captain as the principal—but *I* expect *my* senior officers to behave like intelligent and responsible adults. Miss Pentecost is quite capable of looking after herself. It is you that I'm worried about."

"There's no need to be worried, sir."

The Captain laughed. "I'm not worried about your morals, Mr. Grimes. In fact, I have formed the opinion that a roll in the hay would do you far more good than harm. But Miss Pentecost is a dangerous woman. Before lifting ship, very shortly before lifting ship, I received a confidential report concerning her activities. She's an efficient purser, a highly efficient purser, in fact, but she's even more than that. Much more." Again he studied the smoke from his cigar. "Unfortunately there's no *real* proof, otherwise she'd not be sailing with us. Had I insisted upon her discharge I'd have been up against the Interstellar Clerical and Supply Officers' Guild."

"Surely not," murmured Grimes. Craven snorted. "You people are lucky. *You* haven't a mess of Guilds to deal with, each and every one of which is all too ready to rush to the defense of a Guild member, no matter what he or she is supposed to have done. As a Survey Service Captain you'll never have to face a suit for wrongful dismissal. You'll never be accused of victimization."

"But what has Miss Pentecost done, sir?" asked Grimes.

"Nothing—or too damn much. You know where she comes from, don't you? The Rim Worlds. The planets of the misfits, the rebels, the nonconformists. There's been talk of secession of late—but even those irresponsible anarchists know full well that secession will never succeed unless they build up their own space power. There's the Duchy of Waldegren, which would pounce as soon as the Federation withdrew its protection. And even the Empire of Waverley might be tempted to extend its boundaries. So . . ."

"They have a merchant fleet of sorts, these Rim Worlders. The Sundowner Line. I've heard rumors that it's about to be nationalized. But they have no fighting navy."

"But what's all this to do with Miss Pentecost, sir?"

"If what's more than just hinted at in that confidential report is true—plenty. She's a recruiting sergeant, no less. Any officer with whom she's shipmates who's disgruntled, on the verge of throwing his hand in—or on the verge of being emptied out—she'll turn on the womanly sympathy for, and tell him that there'll always be a job waiting out on the Rim, that the Sundowner Line is shortly going to expand, so there'll be quick promotion and all the rest of it."

"And what's that to do with *me*, Captain? "

"Are all Survey Service ensigns as innocent as you, Mr. Grimes? Merchant officers the Rim Worlds want, and badly. Naval officers they'll want more badly still once the balloon goes up." Grimes permitted himself a superior smile. "It's extremely unlikely, sir, that I shall ever want to leave the Survey Service."

"Unlikely perhaps—but not impossible. So bear in mind what I've told you. I think that you'll be able to look after yourself now that you know the score."

"I think so too," Grimes told him firmly. He thought, *The old bastard's been reading too many spy stories.*

## VII

THEY WERE DANCING.

Tables and chairs had been cleared from the ship's saloon, and from the big, ornate playmaster throbbed the music of an orchestra so famous that even Grimes had heard of it—The Singing Drums.

They were dancing.

Some couples shuffled a sedate measure, never losing the contact between their magnetically shod feet and the polished deck. Others—daring or foolhardy—cavorted in Nul-G, gamboled fantastically but rarely gracefully in Free Fall.

They were dancing.

Ensign Grimes was trying to dance.

It was not the fault of his partner that he was making such a sorry mess of it. She, Jane Pentecost, proved the truth of the oft-made statement that spacemen and spacemen are expert at this form of exercise. He, John Grimes, was the exception that proves the rule. He was sweating, and his feet felt at least six times their normal size. Only the fact that he was holding Jane, and closely, saved him from absolute misery.

There was a pause in the music. As it resumed Jane said, "Let's sit this one out, Admiral."

"If you wish to," he replied, trying not to sound too grateful.

"That's right. I wish to. I don't mind losing a little toenail varnish, but I think we'll call it a day while I still have a full set of toenails."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"So am I." But the flicker of a smile robbed the words of their sting.

She led the way to the bar. It was deserted save for the bored and sulky girl behind the gleaming counter. "All right, Sue," Jane told her. "You can join the revels. The Admiral and I will mind the shop."

"Thank you, Miss Pentecost." Sue let herself out from her little cage, vanished gracefully and rapidly in the direction of the saloon. Jane took her place.

"I *like* being a barmaid," she told the ensign, taking two frosted bulbs out of the cooler.

"I'll sign for these," offered Grimes.

"You will not. This comes under the heading of entertaining influential customers."

"But I'm not. Influential, I mean."

"But you will be." She went on dreamily. "I can see it. I can just see it. The poor old *Delia O'Ryan*, even more decrepit that she is now, and her poor old purser, about to undergo a fate worse than death at the hands of bloody pirates from the next Galaxy but three . . . . But all is not lost. There, light years distant, is big, fat, Grand Admiral Grimes aboard his flagship, busting a gut, to say nothing of his Mannschenn Drive unit, to rush to the rescue of his erstwhile girlfriend. 'Dammitall,' I can hear him muttering into his beard. 'Dammitall. That girl used to give me free drinks when I was a snotty nosed ensign. I will repay. Full speed ahead, Gridley, and damn the torpedoes!' "

Grimes laughed—then asked sharply, "Admiral in which service?"

"What do you mean, John?" She eyed him warily.

"You know what I mean."

"So . . ." she murmured. "So . . . I know that you had another home truth session with the Bearded Bastard. I can guess what it was about."

"And is it true?" demanded Grimes.

"Am I Olga Popovsky, the Beautiful Spy? Is that what you mean?"

"More or less."

"Come off it, John. How the hell can I be a secret agent for a non-existent government?"

"You can be a secret agent for a subversive organization."

"What is this? Is it a hangover from some half-baked and half-understood course in counterespionage?"

"There was a course of sorts," he admitted. "I didn't take much interest in it. At the time."

"And now you wish that you had. Poor John."

"But it wasn't espionage that the Old Man had against you. He had some sort of story about your acting as a sort of recruiting sergeant, luring officers away from the Commission's ships to that crumbly little rabble of star tramps calling itself the Sundowner Line . . . ."

She didn't seem to be listening to him, but was giving her attention instead to the music that drifted from the

saloon. It was one of the old, Twentieth Century melodies that were enjoying a revival. She began to sing in time to it.

*"Goodbye, I'll run  
To seek another sun  
Where I May find  
There are hearts more kind  
Than the ones left behind . . ."*

She smiled somberly and asked, "Does that answer your question?"

"Don't talk in riddles," he said roughly.

"Riddles? Perhaps—but not very hard ones. That, John, is a sort of song of farewell from a very old comic opera. As I recall it, the guy singing it was going to shoot through and join the French Foreign Legion. (But there's no French Foreign Legion anymore . . .) We, out on the Rim, have tacked our own words on to it. It's become almost a national anthem to the Rim Runners, as the people who man our ships—such as they are—are already calling themselves.

"There's no French Foreign Legion anymore—but the misfits and the failures have to have somewhere to go. I haven't *lured* anybody away from this service—but now and again I've shipped with officers who've been on the point of getting out, or being emptied out, and when they've cried into my beer I've given them advice. Of course, I've a certain natural bias in favor of my own home world. If I were Sirian born I'd be singing the praises of the Dog Star Line."

"Even so," he persisted, "your conduct seems to have been somewhat suspect."

"Has it? And how? To begin with, *you* are not an officer in this employ. And if you were, I should challenge you to find anything in the Commission's regulations forbidding me to act as I have been doing."

"Captain Craven warned me," said Grimes.

"Did he, now? That's his privilege. I suppose that he thinks that it's also his duty. I suppose he has the idea that I offered you admiral's rank in the Rim Worlds Navy as soon as we secede. *If* we had our own Navy—which we don't—we might just take you in as Ensign, Acting, Probationary."

"Thank you."

She put her elbows on the bar counter, propping her face between her hands, somehow conveying the illusion of gravitational pull, looking up at him. "I'll be frank with you, John. I admit that we do take the no-hopers, the drunks and the drifters into our merchant fleet. I know far better than you what a helluva difference there is between those rustbuckets and the well-found, well-run ships of the Commission and, come to that, Trans-Galactic Clippers and Waverley Royal Mail. But when we do start some kind of a Navy we shall want better material. Much better. We shall want highly competent officers who yet, somehow, will have the Rim World outlook. The first batch, of course, will have to be outsiders, to tide us over until our own training program is well under way."

"And I don't qualify?" he asked stiffly.

"Frankly, no. I've been watching you. You're too much of a stickler for rules and regulations, especially the more stupid ones. Look at the way you're dressed now, for example. Evening wear, civilian, junior officers, for the use of. No individuality. *You* might as well be in uniform. Better, in fact. There'd be some touch of brightness."

"Go on."

"And the way you comport yourself with women. Stiff. Starchy. Correct. And you're all too conscious of the fact that I, even though I'm a mere merchant officer, and a clerical branch at that, put up more gold braid than you do. I noticed that especially when we were dancing. I was having to lead all the time."

He said defensively, "I'm not a very good dancer."

"You can say that again." She smiled briefly. "So there you have it, John. You can tell the Bearded Bastard, when you see him again, that you're quite safe from my wiles. I've no doubt that you'll go far in your own Service—but you just aren't Rim Worlds material."

"I shouldn't have felt all that flattered if you'd said that I was," he told her bluntly—but he knew that he was lying.

## VIII

"YES?" JANE WAS SAYING. "Yes, Mr. Letourneau?"

Grimes realized that she was not looking at him, that she was looking past him and addressing a newcomer. He turned around to see who it was. He found—somehow the name hadn't registered—that it was the Psionic Radio Officer, a tall, pale, untidily put together young man in a slovenly uniform. He looked scared—but that was his habitual expression, Grimes remembered. They were an odd breed, these trained telepaths with their Rhine Institute diplomas, and they were not popular, but they were the only means whereby ships and shore stations could communicate instantaneously over the long light years. In the Survey Service they were referred to, slightly, as Commissioned Teacup Readers. In the Survey Service and in the Merchant Service they were referred to as Snoopers. But they were a very necessary evil.

"Yes, Mr. Letourneau?"

"Where's the Old Man? He's not in his quarters."

"The Master"—Jane emphasized the title—"is in the saloon." Then, a little maliciously, "Couldn't you have used your crystal ball?"

Letourneau flushed. "You know very well, Miss Pentecost, that we have to take an oath that we will always respect the mental privacy of our shipmates . . . But I must find him. Quickly."

"Help yourself. He's treading the light fantastic in there." When he was gone she said, "Typical. Just typical. If it were a real emergency he could get B.B. on the intercom. But no. Not him. He has to parade his distrust of anything electronic and, at the same time, make it quite clear that he's not breaking his precious oath . . . Tell me, how do you people handle your spaceborne espers?"

He grinned. "We've still one big stick that you people haven't. A court martial followed by a firing party. Not that I've ever seen it used."

"Hardly, considering that you've only been in Space a dog watch." Her face froze suddenly. "Yes, Sue?"

It was the girl whom Jane had relieved in the bar. "Miss Pentecost, will you report to the Captain in Control, please. At once."

"What have I done now?"

"It's some sort of emergency, Miss Pentecost. The Chief Officer's up there with him, and he's sent for the Doctor and the two Chief Engineers."

"Then I must away, John. Look after the bar again, Sue. Don't let the Admiral have too many free drinks."

She moved fast and gracefully, was gone before Grimes could think of any suitable repartee. He said to the girl, "What is happening, Sue?"

"I don't know, Ad—" She flushed. "Sorry, Ensign. And, in any case, I'm not supposed to talk to the passengers about it."

"But I'm not a real passenger," he said—and asked himself, *Am I a real anything?*

"No, I suppose you're not, Mr. Grimes. But you're not on duty."

"An officer of the Survey Service is *always* on duty," he told her, with some degree of truth. "Whatever happens on the spacelanes is our concern." It sounded good.

"Yes," she agreed hesitantly. "That's what my fiancé—he's a Lieutenant J.G.—is always telling me."

"So what's all the flap about?"

"Promise not to tell anybody?"

"Of course."

"Mr. Letourneau came wandering into the Saloon. He just stood there staring about, the way he does, then he spotted the Captain. He was actually dancing with me at the time . . ." She smiled reminiscently, and added, "He's a very good dancer."

"He would be. But go on."

"He came charging across the dance floor—Mr. Letourneau, I mean. He didn't care whose toes he trod on or who he tripped over. I couldn't help overhearing when he started babbling away to Captain Craven. It's a distress call. From one of our ships—*Epsilon Sextans*." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And it's piracy."

"Piracy? Impossible."

"But, Mr. Grimes, it's what he said."

"Psionic Radio Officers have been known to go around the bend before now," Grimes told her, "and to send false alarm calls. And to receive non-existent ones."

"But the *Sexy Eppy*—sorry, *Epsilon Sextans*—has a cargo that'd be worth pirating. Or so I heard. The first big shipment of Antigieratridine to Waverly . . ."

Antigieratridine, the so-called Immortality Serum. Manufactured in limited, but increasing quantities only on Marina (often called by its colonists Submarina), a cold, unpleasantly watery world in orbit about Alpha Crucis. The fishlike creatures from which the drug was obtained bred and flourished only in the seas of their own world.

But piracy . . .

But the old legends were full of stories of men who had sold their souls for eternal youth.

The telephone behind the bar buzzed sharply. Sue answered it. She said, "It's for you, Mr. Grimes."

Grimes took the instrument. "That you, Ensign?" It was Captain Craven's voice. "Thought I'd find you there. Come up to Control, will you?" It was an order rather than a request.

ALL THE SHIP'S EXECUTIVE OFFICERS were in the Control Room, and the Doctor, the purser and the two Chief Engineers. As Grimes emerged from the hatch he heard Kennedy, the Mate, say, "Here's the Ensign now."

"Good. Then dog down, Mr. Kennedy, so we get some privacy." Craven turned to Grimes. "'You're on the Active List of the Survey Service, Mister, so I suppose you're entitled to know what's going on. The situation is this. *Epsilon Sextans*, Marina to Waverley with a shipment of Antigieratridine, has been pirated." Grimes managed, with an effort, to refrain from saying "I know." Craven went on. "Her esper is among the survivors. He says that the pirates were two frigates of the Waldegren Navy. Anyhow, the Interstellar Drive Engineers aboard *Epsilon Sextans* managed to put their box of tricks on random precession, and they got away. But not in one piece . . ."

"Not in one piece?" echoed Grimes stupidly.

"What the hell do you expect when an unarmed merchantman is fired upon, without warning, by two warships? The esper says that their Control has had it, and all the accommodation spaces. By some miracle the Psionic Radio Officer's shack wasn't holed, and neither was the Mannschenn Drive Room."

"But even one missile . . ." muttered Grimes.

"If you want to capture a ship and her cargo more or less intact," snapped Craven, "you don't use missiles. You use laser. It's an ideal weapon if you aren't fussy about how many people you kill."

"Knowing the Waldegrenese as we do," said Jane Pentecost bitterly, "there wouldn't have been any survivors anyhow."

"Be quiet!" roared Craven. Grimes was puzzled by his outburst. It was out of character. True, he could hardly expect a shipmaster to react to the news of a vicious piracy with equanimity—but this shipmaster was an officer of the Reserve, had seen service in warships and had been highly decorated for outstanding bravery in battle.

Craven had control of himself again. "The situation is this. There are people still living aboard *Epsilon Sextans*. Even though all her navigators have been killed I think that I shall be able to find her in time. Furthermore, she has a very valuable cargo and, in any case, cannot be written off as a total loss. There is little damage that cannot be repaired by welded patches. I have already sent a message to Head Office requesting a free hand. I have salvage in mind. I see no reason why the ship and her cargo should not be taken on to Waverley."

"A prize crew, sir?"

"If you care to put it that way. This will mean cutting down the number of officers aboard my own vessel—but I am sure, Mr. Grimes, that you will be willing to gain some practical watch-keeping experience. All that's required is your autograph on the ship's Articles of Agreement."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me. I may be thanking you before the job's over and done." He turned to his Chief Officer. "Mr. Kennedy, keep in touch with Mr. Letourneau and let me know if anything further comes through either from *Epsilon Sextans* or from Head Office. The rest of you—keep this to yourselves. No sense in alarming the passengers. I'm sure that the Doctor and Miss Pentecost between them can concoct some soothing story to account for this officers' conference."

"Captain Craven," said Jane Pentecost.

"Well?"

"The other man at my table, Mr. Baxter. I knew him out on the Rim. He holds Chief Reaction Drive Engineer's papers."

"Don't tell him anything yet. But I'll keep him in mind. Now, Mr. Grimes, will you join me in my day cabin?"

## IX

THE HOLOGRAMS were all gone from the bulkheads of Captain Craven's cabin. To replace them there was just one picture—of a woman, not young, but with the facial bone structure that defies age and time. She was in uniform, and on her shoulderboards were the two and a half stripes of a Senior Purser. The shipmaster noticed Grimes' interest and said briefly and bitterly. "She was too senior for an *Epsilon* class ship—but she cut her leave short, just to oblige, when the regular purser went sick. She should have been back on Earth at the same time as me, though. Then we were going to get married . . ."

Grimes said nothing. He thought, *Too senior for an Epsilon class ship? Epsilon Sextans, for example? What could he say?*

"And that," said Craven savagely, "was that."

"I'm sorry, sir," blurted Grimes, conscious of the inadequacy of his words. Then, foolishly, "But there are survivors, sir."

"Don't you think that I haven't got Letourneau and his opposite number checking? And have *you* ever seen the aftermath of a Deep Space battle, Mister? Have you ever boarded a ship that's been slashed and stabbed to death with laser beams?" He seemed to require no answer; he pulled himself into the chair by his desk, strapped himself in and motioned to Grimes to be seated. Then he pulled out from a drawer a large sheet of paper, which he unfolded. It was a cargo plan. "Current voyage," he grunted. "And we're carrying more to Lindisfarne than one brand-new ensign."

"Such as, sir?" ventured Grimes.

"Naval stores. I don't mind admitting that I'm more than a little rusty insofar as Survey Service procedure is concerned, even though I still hold my Reserve Commission. You're more familiar with fancy abbreviations than I am. Twenty cases RERAT, for example . . ."

"Reserve rations, sir. Canned and dehydrated."

"Good. And ATREG?"

"Atmospheric regeneration units, complete."

"So if *Epsilon Sextans*' 'farm' has been killed we shall be able to manage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think you'd be able to install an ATREG unit?"

"Of course, sir. They're very simple, as you know. Just synthetic chlorophyll and a UV source . . . In any case, there are full instructions inside every container."

"And this? A double M, Mark XV?"

"Anti-Missile Missile."

"And ALGE?"

"Anti-Laser Gas Emitter."

"The things they do think of. I feel more at home with these AVMs—although I see that they've got as far as Mark XVII now."

"Anti-Vessel Missiles," said Grimes. A slight enthusiasm crept into his voice. "The XVII's a real honey."

"What does it do?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Even though you are a Reserve Officer, I can't tell you."

"But they're effective?"

"Yes. Very."

"And I think you're Gunnery Branch, Mr. Grimes, aren't you?"

"I am sir." He added hastily, "But I'm still quite capable of carrying out a watch officer's duties aboard this vessel should the need arise."

"The main thing is, you're familiar with naval stores and equipment. When we find and board *Epsilon Sextans* I shall be transshipping certain items of cargo . . ."

"RERAT and ATREG, sir?"

"Yes. And the others."

"But, sir, I can't allow it. Not unless I have authority from the Flag Officer commanding Lindisfarne Base. As soon as your Mr. Letourneau can be spared I'll get him to try and raise the station there."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Mr. Grimes. In view of the rather peculiar political situation, I think that

the answer would be No. Even if it were 'Yes', you know as well as I how sluggishly the tide flows through official channels. Furthermore, just in case it has escaped your notice, *I am the Master.*"

"And I, sir, represent the Survey Service. As the only commissioned officer aboard this vessel *I am* responsible for Survey Service cargo."

"As a Reserve Officer, Mr. Grimes, I rank you."

"Only when you have been recalled to Active Service. Sir."

Craven said, "I was rather afraid that you'd take this attitude. That's why I decided to get this interview over and done with, just so we all know where we stand." He put away the cargo plan, swiveled his chair so that he could reach out to his liquor cabinet. He pulled out two bulbs, tossed one to Grimes. "No toasts. If we drank to Law and Order we should mean different things. So just drink. And listen."

"To begin with, *Epsilon Sextans* doesn't know where she is. But Letourneau is one of the rare telepaths with the direction finding talent, and as soon as he's able to get lined up we shall alter course to home on the wreck. That's what he's trying to do now."

"When we find her, we shall synchronize and board, of course. The first thing will be medical aid to the survivors. Then we patch the ship up. And then we arm her. And then, with a prize crew under myself, we put ourselves on the trajectory for Waverley—hoping that those Waldegrenese frigates come back for another nibble."

"They'd never dare, sir."

"Wouldn't they? The original piracy they'll try to laugh off by saying that it was by *real* pirates—no, that's not quite right, but you know what I mean—wearing Waldegren colors. The second piracy—they'll make sure that there are no survivors."

"But I still can't see how they can hope to get away with it. It's always been an accepted fact that the main weapon against piracy has been psionic radio."

"And so it was—until some genius developed a jamming technique. *Epsilon Sextans* wasn't able to get any messages out until her crazy random precession pulled her well clear."

"And you hope, sir, that they *do* attack you?"

"I do, Mr. Grimes. I had hoped, that I should have a good gunnery officer under me, but"—he shrugged his massive shoulders—"I think that I shall be able to manage."

"And you hope that you'll have your weapons," persisted Grimes.

"I see no reason why I should not, Ensign."

"There is one very good reason, sir. That is that I, a commissioned officer of the Survey Service, am aboard your vessel. I insist that you leave the tracking down and destruction of the pirates to the proper authorities. I insist, too, that no Survey Service stores be discharged from this ship without my written authority."

For the first time the hint of a smile relieved the somberness of Craven's face. "And to think that I believed that Jane Pentecost could recruit *you*," he murmured. Then, in a louder voice, "And what if I just go ahead without your written authority, Ensign?"

Grimes had the answer ready. "Then, sir, I shall be obliged to order your officers not to obey your unlawful commands. If necessary, I shall call upon the male passengers to assist me in any action that is necessary."

Craven's bushy eyebrows went up and stayed up. "Mr. Grimes," he said in a gritty voice, "it is indeed lucky for you that I have firsthand experience of the typical Survey Service mentality. Some Masters I know would, in these circumstances, send you out on a spacewalk without a suit. But, before I take drastic action, I'll give you one more chance to cooperate." His tone softened. "You noticed the portrait I've put up instead of all the temporary popsies. Every man, no matter how much he plays around, has one woman who is *the* woman. Gillian was *the* woman as far as I was concerned—as far as I *am* concerned. I've a chance to bring her murderers under my guns—and, by God, I'm taking that chance, no matter what it means either to my career or to the somewhat odd foreign policy of the Federation. I used to be annoyed by Jane Pentecost's outbursts on that subject—but now I see that she's right. And she's right, too, when it comes to the Survey Service's reluctance to take action against Waldegren."

"So I, Mr. Grimes, am taking action."

"Sir, I forbid you . . ."

"*You forbid me?* Ensign, you forget yourself. Perhaps this will help you remember."

*This* was a Minetti automatic that had appeared suddenly in the Captain's hand. In his hairy fist the little, glittering weapon looked no more than a toy—but Grimes knew his firearms, knew that at the slightest pressure of Craven's finger the needle-like projectiles would stitch him from crown to crotch.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Grimes." As he spoke, Craven pressed a button set in his desk with his free hand. "I'm sorry about this. But I realize that I was expecting rather too much of you. After all, you have your career to consider . . . Time was," he went on, "when a naval officer could put his telescope to his blind eye as an excuse for

ignoring orders—and get away with it. But the politicians had less power in those days. We've come a long way—and a wrong way—since Nelson."

Grimes heard the door behind him slide open. He didn't bother to look around, not even when hard hands were laid on his shoulders.

"Mr. Kennedy," said Craven, "things turned out as I feared that they would. Will you and Mr. Ludovic take the Ensign along to the Detention Cell?"

"I'll see you on trial for piracy, Captain!" flared Grimes.

"An interesting legal point, Ensign—especially since you are being entered in my Official Log as a mutineer."

## X

THE DETENTION CELL was not uncomfortable, but it was depressing. It was a padded cell—passengers in spacecraft have been known to exhibit the more violent symptoms of mania—which detracted from its already inconsiderable cheerfulness if not from its comfort. However, Grimes was not mad—not in the medical sense, that is—and so was considered able to attend to his own bodily needs. The little toilet was open to him, and at regular intervals a bell would sound and a container of food would appear in a hatch recessed into the bulkhead of the living cabin. There was reading matter too—such as it was. The Ensign suspected that Jane Pentecost was the donor. It consisted of pamphlets published by some organization calling itself The Rim Worlds Secessionist Party. The almost hysterical calls to arms were bad enough—but the ones consisting mainly of columns of statistics were worse. Economics had never been Grimes' strong point.

He slept, he fed at the appointed times, he made a lengthy ritual of keeping himself clean, he tried to read—and, all the time, with only sounds and sensations as clues, he endeavored to maintain a running plot of the ship's maneuvers.

Quite early there had been the shutting down of the Mannschenn Drive, and the consequent fleeting sensation of temporal disorientation. This had been followed by the acceleration warning—the cell had an intercom speaker recessed in the padding—and Grimes, although it seemed rather pointless in his sponge rubber environment, had strapped himself into his couch. He heard the directional gyroscopes start up, felt the effects of centrifugal force as the ship came around to her new heading. Then there was the pseudo-gravity of acceleration, accompanied by the muffled thunder of the reaction drive. It was obvious, thought the Ensign, that Captain Craven was expending his reaction mass in a manner that, in other circumstances, would have been considered reckless.

Suddenly—silence and Free Fall, and almost immediately the off-key keening of the Mannschenn Drive. Its note was higher, much higher, than Grimes remembered it, and the queasy feeling of temporal disorientation lasted much longer than it had on previous occasions. And that, for a long time, was all. Meals came, and were eaten. Every morning—according to his watch—the prisoner showered and applied depilatory cream to his face. He tried to exercise—but to exercise in a padded cell, with no apparatus, in Free Fall, is hard. He tried to read—but the literature available was hardly more interesting to him than a telephone directory would have been. And, even though he never had been gregarious, the lack of anybody to talk to was wearing him down.

It was a welcome break from the monotony when he realized that, once again, the ship was maneuvering. This time there was no use of the directional gyroscopes; there were no rocket blasts, but there was a variation of the whine of the Drive as it hunted, hunted, as the temporal precession rate was adjusted by tens of seconds, by seconds, by microseconds.

And then it locked.

The ship shuddered slightly—once, twice.

Grimes envisaged the firing of the two mooring rockets, one from the bow and one from the stern, each with the powerful electromagnet in its nose, each trailing its fathoms of fine but enormously strong cable. Merchant vessels, he knew, carried this equipment, but unlike naval ships rarely used it. But Craven, as a Reservist, would have seen and taken part in enough drills.

The ship shuddered again—heavily.

So the rendezvous had been made. So *Delta Orionis* and *Epsilon Sextans*, their Drives synchronized, bound together by the rescue ship's cables, were now falling as one unit through the dark immensities.

So the rendezvous had been made—and already the survivors of the wreck were being brought aboard the *Delia O'Ryan*, were being helped out of their stinking spacesuits, were blurting out their story to Craven and his officers. Grimes could visualize it all, almost as clearly as though he were actually watching it. He could visualize, too, the engineers swarming over the wreck, the flare of their burning and welding torches, the cannibalizing of nonessential plating from the ship's structure for hull patches. It was all laid down in the Survey Service's Damage Control Manual—and Captain Craven, at least, would know that book as thoroughly as did Grimes.

And what of the cargo, the Survey Service stores, *Grimes'* stores? A trembling in the ship's structure, a barely felt vibration, told him that gantries and conveyor belts were being brought into operation. There would be no great handling problems. Lindisfarne was *Delta Orionis'* first port of call, and the Survey Service consignment would be top stowage. But there was nothing that Grimes could do about it—not a thing. In fact, he was beginning to doubt the legality of the stand he had made against the Master. And he was the small frog in this small puddle, while Captain Craven had made it quite clear that he was the big frog. Grimes wished that he was better versed in astronomical law—although a professional lawyer's knowledge would be of no use to him in his present situation.

So, with some hazy idea that he might need all his strength, both mental and physical, for what was to befall him (but *what?*), in the near future, he strapped himself into his bunk and did his best to forget his worries in sleep. He was well enough acquainted with the psychiatrists' jargon to know that this was no more than a return to the womb but, before dropping off into a shallow slumber, shrugged, *So what?*

HE JERKED into sudden wakefulness.

Jane Pentecost was there by his bunk, looking down at him.

"Come in," he said. "Don't bother to knock. Now you see how the poor live. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

She said, "That's not very funny."

"I know it's not. Even the first time that I heard it aboard this blasted ship I was able to refrain from rolling in the aisles."

She said, "There's no need to be so bitchy, John."

"Isn't there? Wouldn't you be bitchy if you'd been thrown into this padded cell?"

"I suppose I would be. But you asked for it, didn't you?"

"If doing my duty—or trying to do my duty—is asking for it, I suppose that I did. Well—and has our pirate Captain cast off yet, armed to the teeth with the weapons he's stolen?"

"No. The weapons are still being mounted. But let's not argue legalities, John. There's not enough time. I . . . I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" he echoed.

"Yes. Somebody has to do the cooking aboard *Epsilon Sextans*—and I volunteered."

"You?"

"And why the hell not?" she flared. "Captain Craven has been pushed over to *our* side of the fence, and it'd be a pretty poor show if we Rim Worlders weren't prepared to stand by him. Baxter's gone across to take over as Reaction Drive Engineer; the only survivor in that department was the Fourth, and he's only a dog watch in Space."

"And who else?"

"Nobody. The *Sexy Eppy's* Chief, Second and Third Interstellar Drive Engineers survived, and they're willing—*anxious*, in fact, now that their ship's being armed—to stay on. And the Psionic Radio Officer came through, and is staying on. All of our executive officers volunteered, of course, but the Old Man turned them down. He said that, after all, he could not hazard the safety of this ship by stripping her of her trained personnel. Especially since we carry passengers."

"That's his worry," said Grimes without much sympathy. "But how does he hope to fight his ship if those frigates pounce again?"

"He thinks, he'll be able to manage—with remote controls for every weapon brought to his main control panel."

"Possible," admitted Grimes, his professional interest stirred. "But not very efficient. In a naval action the Captain has his hands full just handling the ship alone, without trying to control her weaponry."

"And you'd know, of course."

"Yes."

"Yes, you've read the books. And Captain Craven commanded a light cruiser during that trouble with the Dring, so he knows nothing."

"He still hasn't got four hands and two heads."

"Oh, let's stop talking rubbish," she cried. "I probably shan't see you again, John and . . . and . . . oh, hell, I want to say goodbye properly, and I don't want you to think too badly about either the Old Man or . . . or myself."

"So what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Damn you, Grimes, you snotty-nosed, stuck-up spacepuppy! Look after yourself!"

Suddenly she bent down to kiss him. It was intended to be no more than a light brushing of lips, but Grimes was suddenly aware, with his entire body, of the closeness of her, of the warmth and the scent of her, and almost without volition his arms went about her, drawing her closer still to him. She tried to break away, but it was only a halfhearted effort. He heard her murmur, in an odd, sardonic whisper, "wotthehell, wotthehell," and then, "toujours gai." It made no sense at the time but, years later, when he made the acquaintance of the Twentieth Century poets, he was to remember and to understand. What was important now was that her own arms were about him.

Somehow the buttons of her uniform shirt had come undone, and her nipples were taut against Grimes' bare chest. Somehow her shorts had been peeled away from her hips—unzippered by whom? and how?—and somehow Grimes' own garments were no longer the last barrier between them.

He was familiar enough with female nudity; he was one of the great majority who frequented the naked beaches in preference to those upon which bathing costumes were compulsory. He knew what a naked woman looked like—but this was different. It was not the first time that he had kissed a woman—but it was the first time that he had kissed, and been kissed by, an unclothed one. It was the first time that he had been alone with one.

What was happening he had read about often enough—and, like most young men, he had seen his share of pornographic films. But this was different. This was happening to *him*.

And for the first time.

When it was over, when, still clasped in each others' arms they drifted in the center of the little cabin, impelled there by some odd resultant of forces, their discarded clothing drifting with them, veiling their perspiration-moist bodies, Grimes was reluctant to let her go.

Gently, Jane tried to disengage herself.

She whispered, "That was a warmer goodbye than I intended. But I'm not sorry. No. I'm not sorry . . ."

Then, barely audibly, "It was the first time for you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm all the more glad it happened. But this *is* goodbye."

"No."

"Don't be a fool, John. You can't keep me here."

"But I can come with you."

She pushed him from her. Somehow he landed back on the bed. Before he could bounce he automatically snapped one of the confining straps about his middle. Somehow—she was still wearing her sandals but nothing else—she finished up standing on the deck, held there by the contact between the magnetic soles and the ferrous fibers in the padding. She put out a long, graceful arm and caught her shirt. She said harshly, "*I'm* getting dressed and out of here. *You* stay put. Damn you, Grimes, for thinking that I was trying to lure you aboard the *Sexy Eppy* with the body beautiful. I told you before that I am not, repeat not, Olga Popovsky, the Beautiful Spy. And I'm not a prostitute. There's one thing I wouldn't *sell* if I were offered the services of the finest Gunnery Officer (which you aren't), in the whole bloody Galaxy in payment!"

"You're beautiful when you flare up like that," said Grimes sincerely. "But you're *always* beautiful." Then, in a louder voice, "Jane, I love you."

"Puppy love," she sneered. "And I'm old enough to be your . . ." A faint smile softened her mouth. "Your maiden aunt."

"Let me finish. All right, it's only puppy love—you say. But it's still love. But"—he was extemporizing—convincingly, he hoped—"but my real reason for wanting to come with you is this. I can appreciate now what Captain Craven lost when *Epsilon Sextans* was pirated. I can see—I can *feel*—why he's willing to risk his life and his career to get his revenge. And I think that it's worth it. And I want to help him."

She stood there, her shirt half on, eyeing him suspiciously. "You mean that? You really mean that?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a liar, Grimes."

"No," he said slowly. "No. Not altogether. I want to help the Old Man—and I want to help *you*. This piracy has convinced me that you Rim Worlders *are* getting the dirty end of the stick. I may not be the finest Gunnery Officer in the whole Galaxy—but I'm better acquainted with the new stuff than Captain Craven is."

Her grin was openly derisive. "First it's fellow-feeling for another spaceman, then it's international politics. What next?"

"Where we started. I *do* love you, Jane. And if there's going to be any shooting, I want to be on hand to do the shooting back on your behalf. I'll admit that . . . that what's happened has influenced my decision. But you didn't buy me, or bribe me. Don't think that. Don't ever think that." There was a note of pleading in his voice. "Be realistic, Jane. With another officer along, especially an officer with recent gunnery training, you stand a damn sight better chance than you would otherwise."

"I . . . I suppose so. But I still don't like it."

"You don't have to. But why look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"All right. You win. Get your clothes on and come and see the Old Man."

## XI

JANE PENTECOST led Grimes to the airlock. The ship seemed oddly deserted, and he remarked on this. The girl explained that the passengers had been requested to remain in their accommodations, and that most of *Delta Orionis*' personnel were employed in work aboard *Epsilon Sextans*.

"So I haven't been the only one to be kept under lock and key," commented Grimes sardonically.

"You're the only one," retorted the girl, "who's been compensated for his imprisonment."

There was no answer to that, so the Ensign remained silent. Saying nothing, he inspected with interest the temporary tunnel that had been rigged between the airlocks of the two ships. So *Epsilon Sextans*' pressure hull had been made good, her atmosphere restored. That meant that the work of installing the armament had been completed. He hoped that he would not have to insist upon modifications.

The wreck—although she was a wreck no longer—bore her scars. The worst damage had been repaired, but holes and slashes that did not impair her structural strength were untouched, and spatters of once molten metal still made crazy patterns on beams and frames, stanchions and bulkheads. And there were the scars made by Craven's engineers—the raw, bright cicatrices of new welding.

Forward they made their way, deck after deck. The elevator in the axial shaft was not yet working, so Grimes had time and opportunity to appreciate the extent of the damage. They passed through the wreckage of the "farm"—the burst algae tanks, the ruptured vats in which yeast and tissue cultures were black and dead, frostbitten and dehydrated. They brushed through alleyways choked with the brittle fronds of creeping plants killed by the ultimate winter.

And then they were passing through the accommodation levels. Bulkheads had been slashed through, destroying the privacy of the cabins that they had once enclosed. Destroying the privacy—and the occupants. There were no longer any bodies; for this Grimes was deeply thankful. (He learned later that Craven's first action had been to order and conduct a funeral service.) There were no bodies—but there were still stains. Men and women die quickly in hard vacuum—quickly and messily.

Captain Craven was alone in the Control Room. He was working, rather slowly and clumsily, wiring up an obviously makeshift panel that was additional to the original one installed before the Master's acceleration chair. It was obvious what it was—the remote controls for the newly fitted weaponry. Grimes said quickly, "There's no need for that, sir."

Craven started, let go of his screwdriver, made a fumbling grab for it as it drifted away from him. He stared at Grimes, then growled, "So it's *you*, is it?" Then, to Jane, "What the hell do you mean by letting this puppy out of his kennel?"

"Captain Craven," she told him quietly, "Mr. Grimes wants to come with us."

"*What?* I warn you, Miss Pentecost, I'm in no mood for silly jokes."

"This is not a silly joke, Captain," said Grimes. "I've had time to think things over. I feel, I really feel that you have a far better chance if there's a qualified officer along to handle the gunnery."

Craven looked at them, from the girl to Grimes, then back again. He said, "Ensign, didn't I warn you?"

"It's not that way at all, sir," Grimes told him, flushing. "In fact, Miss Pentecost has been trying hard to dissuade me."

"*Oh?*"

"It's true," said Jane. "But he told me that we couldn't afford to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"I don't know what's been happening," rasped Craven. "I don't want to know what's been happening between the pair of you. This change of mind, this change of heart is rather . . . sudden. No matter. One volunteer, they say, is worth ten pressed men." He glared coldly at the Ensign. "And you volunteer?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I believe you. I have no choice in the matter. But you realize the consequences?"

"I do."

"Well, I *may* be able to do something to clear your yardarm. I've still to make my last entries in the Official Log of *Delta Orionis*, before I hand over to Captain Kennedy. And when it comes to such documentation, nobody cares to accuse a shipmaster of being a liar. Not out loud." He paused, thinking. "How does this sound, Miss Pentecost? Date, Time, Position, etc., etc. Mr. John Grimes, passenger, holding the rank of Ensign in the Federation Survey Service, removed by force from this vessel to *Epsilon Sextans*, there to supervise the installation and mounting of the armament, Survey Service property, discharged on my orders from No. 1 hold, also to advise upon the use of

same in the subsequent event of an action's being fought. Signed, etc., etc. And witnessed."

"Rather long-winded, sir. But it seems to cover the ground."

"I intend to do more than advise!" flared Grimes.

"Pipe down. Or, if you must say it, make sure that there aren't any witnesses around when you say it. Now, when it comes to the original supervision, you see what I'm trying to do. Will it work?"

"After a fashion, sir. But it will work much better if the fire control panel is entirely separate from maneuvering control."

"You don't think that I could handle both at once?"

"You *could*. But not with optimum efficiency. No humanoid could. This setup of yours might just work if we were Shaara, or any of the other multi-limbed arthropods. But even the Shaara, in their warships, don't expect the Queen-Captain to handle her ship *and* her guns simultaneously."

"You're the expert. I just want to be sure that you're prepared to, quote, advise, unquote, with your little pink paws on the actual keyboard of your battle organ."

"That's just the way that I propose to advise."

"Good. Fix it up to suit yourself, then. I should be able to let you have a mechanic shortly to give you a hand."

"Before we go any further, sir, I'd like to make an inspection of the weapons themselves. Just in case . . ."

"Just in case I've made some fantastic bollix, eh?" Craven was almost cheerful. "Very good. But try to make it snappy. It's time we were on our way."

"Yes," said Jane, and it seemed that the Captain's discarded somberness was hanging about her like a cloud. "It's time."

## XII

AT ONE TIME, before differentiation between the mercantile and the fighting vessel became pronounced, merchant vessels were built to carry a quite considerable armament. Today, the mounting of weapons on a merchantman presents its problems. After his tour of inspection Grimes was obliged to admit that Captain Craven had made cunning use of whatever spaces were available— but Craven, of course, was a very experienced officer, with long years of service in all classes of spacecraft. Too—and, perhaps, luckily—there had been no cannon among the Survey Service ordnance that had been requisitioned, so recoil had not been among the problems.

When he was finished, Grimes returned to the Control Room. Craven was still there, and with him was Jane Pentecost. They had, obviously, been discussing something. They could, perhaps, have been quarreling; the girl's face was flushed and her expression sullen.

"Yes?" snapped the Captain.

"You've done a good job, sir. She's no cruiser, but she should be able to defend herself."

"Thank you. Then we'll be on our way."

"Not so fast, sir. I'd like to wire up my control panel properly before we shove off."

Craven laughed. "You'll have time, Mr. Grimes. I still have a few last duties to discharge aboard *Delta Orionis*. But be as quick as you can."

He left the compartment, followed by Jane Pentecost. She said, over her shoulder, "I'll send Mr. Baxter to help you, John."

The Rim Worlder must have been somewhere handy; in a matter of seconds he was by Grimes' side, an already open tool satchel at his belt. As he worked, assisting deftly and then taking over as soon as he was sure of what was required, he talked. He said, "Mum wanted to come along, but I soon put the damper on that. But I was bloody amazed to find *you* here."

"Were you?" asked Grimes coldly.

"You bet I was. Never thought you were cut out to be a bloody pirate." He cursed briefly as a spatter of hot metal from his sizzling soldering iron stung his hand. "A cold weld'd be better, but it'd take too much time. But where was I? Oh, yes. The shock to me system when I saw you comin' aboard this wagon."

"I have my quite valid reasons," Grimes told him stiffly.

"You're tellin' me. Just as my missus had quite valid reasons for wantin' to come with me. But she ain't a gunnery expert." He added piously, "Thank Gawd."

"And I am one," said the Ensign, trying to change the drift of the conversation before he lost his temper. "Yes, that's right. Just stick to the color code. The blue wiring's the ALGE . . ."

"I know," Baxter told him. "Tell me, is it any good?"

"Yes. Of course, if an enemy held us in her beams for any prolonged period we should all be cooked, but as far as it goes it's effective enough."

"Hope you're right." He made the last connections, then replaced the panel on the open shallow box. "Here's yer magic cabinet, Professor. All we have ter see now is what rabbits yer can pull outer the hat."

"Plenty, I hope," said Captain Craven, who had returned to Control. "And are you ready now, Mr. Grimes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Then we'll make it stations. If you will take the copilot's chair, while Mr. Baxter goes along to look after his rockets."

"Will do, Skipper," said the engineer, packing away his tools as he pulled himself toward the exit hatch.

The ship's intercom came to life, in Jane Pentecost's voice. "Connection between vessels severed. Airlock door closed."

"We're still connected," grumbled Craven. "*Delia O'Ryan* still has her magnetic grapnels out." He spoke into the transceiver microphone: "*Epsilon Sextans* to *Delta Orionis*. Cast off, please. Over."

"*Delta Orionis* to *Epsilon Sextans*. Casting off." Through a viewport Grimes could see one of the bright mooring wires snaking back into its recess. "All clear, Captain."

"Thank you, *Captain Kennedy*." And in a softer voice, "And I hope you keep that handle to your name, Bill."

"Thank you, sir. And all the best, Captain, from all of us, to all of you. And good hunting."

"Thanks. And look after the old *Delia*, Captain. And yourself. Over—and out."

"*Delta Orionis* to *Epsilon Sextans*. Over and out."

(There was something very final, thought Grimes, about those outs.)

He was aware that the ships were drifting slowly apart. Now he could see all of *Delta Orionis* from his viewport. He could not help recalling the day on which he had first seen her, at the Woomera spaceport. So much had happened since that day. (And so much was still to happen—he hoped.) He heard Craven say into the intercom, "Stand by for temporal precession. We're desynchronizing." Then, there was the giddiness, and the off-beat whine of the Mannschenn Drive that pierced his eardrums painfully, and beyond the viewports the great, shining shape of the other ship shimmered eerily and was suddenly warped into the likeness of a monstrous Klein flash—then vanished. Where she had been (where she still was, in space but not in time) shone the distant stars, the stars that in this distorted continuum were pulsing spirals of iridescence.

"Mannschenn Drive. *Cut!*"

The thin, high keening died abruptly. Outside, the stars were glittering points of light, piercingly bright against the blackness.

"Mr. Grimes!" Craven's voice was sharp. "I hope that you take more interest in gunnery than you do in ship handling. In case it has escaped your notice, I would remind you that you are second in command of this vessel, and in full charge in the event of my demise."

"Sorry, sir," stammered Grimes. Then, suddenly bold, "But I'm not your second in command, sir. I've signed no Articles."

Surprisingly, Craven laughed. "A spacelawyer, yet! Well, Mr. Grimes, as soon as we get this vessel on course we'll attend to the legal formalities. Meanwhile, may I request your close attention to what I am doing?"

"You may, sir."

Thereafter he watched and listened carefully. He admired the skill with which Craven turned the ship on her directional gyroscopes until the red-glowing target star was centered exactly in the cartwheel sight. He noted that the Captain used his reaction drive at a longer period and at a higher rate of acceleration than usual, and said as much. He was told, the words falling slowly and heavily in the pseudo-gravity, "They . . . will . . . expect . . . us . . . to . . . be . . . in . . . a . . . hurry. We must . . . not . . . disappoint . . . them."

Speed built up, fast—but it was a velocity that, in the context of the interstellar distances to be traversed, was no more than a snail's crawl. Then—and the sudden silence was like a physical blow—the thunder of the rockets ceased. The screaming roar had died, but the ship was not quiet. The whine of the Mannschenn Drive pervaded her every compartment, vibrated through every member of her structure. She was falling, falling through space and time, plunging through the warped continuum to her rendezvous with Death . . .

*And whose death?* wondered Grimes.

He said, "I should have asked before, sir. But how are . . . how are *they* going to find us?"

"I don't know," said Craven. "I don't know. But they've found other ships when they've wanted to. They've never used the old pirate's technique of lying in wait at breaking-out points. A Mass Proximity Indicator? Could be. It's theoretically possible. It could be for a ship under Mannschenn Drive what radar is for a ship in normal space-time. Or some means of homing on a temporal precession field? That's more like it, I think, as this vessel was able to escape when she went random.

"But if they want us—and they will—they'll find us. And then"—he looked at Grimes, his blue gaze intense—"and then it's up to you, Ensign."

"To all of us," said Grimes.

## XIII

SHE WAS UNDERMANNED, this *Epsilon Sextans*, but she functioned quite efficiently. Craven kept a Control Room watch himself, and the other two watchkeepers were Grimes and Jane Pentecost. Four on and eight off were their hours of duty— but there was plenty of work to be done in the off duty periods. The Captain, of course, was in over-all charge, and was trying to bring his command to the pitch of efficiency necessary for a fighting ship. Jane Pentecost was responsible for meals—although these, involving little more than the opening of cans, did not take up too much of her time. She had also taken over biochemist's duties, but called now and again upon Grimes to help her with the ATREG unit. Its operation was simple enough, but it was inclined to be temperamental and, now and again, allowed the carbon dioxide concentration to reach a dangerous level. Grimes' main concern was his armament. He could not indulge in a practice shot—the expulsion of mass by a ship running under interstellar drive is suicidal; even the employment of laser weapons is dangerous. But there were tests that he could make; there was, in the ship's stores, a spare chart tank that he was able to convert to a battle simulator.

Craven helped him, and set up targets in the tank, glowing points of light that were destroyed by the other sparks that represented Grimes' missiles. After one such drill he said, "You seem to know your stuff, Ensign. Now, what's your grasp of the tactical side of it?"

Grimes considered his words before speaking. "Well, sir, we *could* use laser with the Drive in operation—but we haven't got laser. The pirates have. They can synchronize and just carve us up at leisure. This time, I think they'll go for the interstellar drive engine room first, so that we can't get away by the use of random precession."

"Yes. That's what they'll do. That's why I have that compartment literally sealed in a cocoon of insulation. Oh, I know it's not effective, but it will give us a second or so of grace. No more."

"We can't use our reflective vapor," went on Grimes. "That'd be almost as bad, from our viewpoint, as loosing off a salvo of missiles. But, sir, when this ship was first attacked there must have been a considerable loss of mass when the atmosphere was expelled through the rents in the shell plating . . . the Drive was running. How was it that the ship wasn't flung into some other space-time?"

"Come, come, Mr. Grimes. You should know the answer to that one. She was held by the powerful temporal precession fields of the drive units of the two pirates. And then, of course, when the engineers managed to set up their random precession there was no mass left to be expelled."

"H'm. I see. Or I think I see. Then, in that case, why shouldn't I use my ALGE as soon as we're attacked?"

"No. Better not. Something might just go wrong—and I don't want to become one of my own ancestors."

"Then . . . ?"

"You tell me, Mr. Grimes."

"Cut our Drive . . . ? Break out into the normal continuum? Yes . . . it could work." He was becoming enthusiastic. "And then we shall be waiting for-them, with our missile batteries, when *they* break out."

"We'll make an admiral of you yet, young Grimes."

WITH WATCHKEEPING and with off-watch duties time was fully occupied. And yet there was something missing. There was, Grimes said to himself, one hell of a lot missing. Jane Pentecost had her own watch to keep, and her own jobs to do when she was not in the control room—but she and Grimes had some free time to share. But they did not share it.

He broached the subject when he was running a test on the artificial chlorophyll in the ATREG. "Jane, I was hoping I'd see more of you."

"You're seeing plenty of me."

"But not enough."

"Don't be tiresome," she snapped. Then, in a slightly softer voice, "Don't . . ."

". . . spoil everything?" he finished for her sardonically.

"You know what I mean," she told him coldly.

"Do I?" He groped for words. "Jane . . . Damn it all, I hoped . . . After what happened aboard the *Delia O'Ryan* . . ."

"That," she said, "was different." Her face flushed. "I tell you this, Grimes, if I'd known that you were coming along with us it never would have happened."

"No?"

"NO!"

"Even so . . . I don't see any reason why we shouldn't . . ."

"Why we shouldn't what? Oh, all right, all right. I know what you mean. But it's out of the question. I'll tell you why, in words of one syllable. In a ship such as *Delta Orionis* discreet fun and games were permissible, even desirable. No shortage of women—both crew and passengers. Here, I'm the only female. Your friend Mr. Baxter has been sniffing after me. And Mr. Wolverton, the Interstellar Chief. *And* his Second. And even, bereaved though he is, the Bearded Bastard. *He* might get away with it—the privileges of rank and all that. But nobody else would—most certainly not yourself. How long would it remain a secret if we went to bed together?"

"I suppose you're right, but . . ."

"But what? Oh John, John, you *are* a stubborn cow."

"Cow?"

"Sorry. Just Rimworldsese. Applicable to both sexes."

"Talking of sex . . ."

"Oh, shut *up!*"

"I'll not." She looked desirable standing there. A small smudge of grease on her flushed cheek was like a beauty spot. "I'll not," he said again. She was close to him, and he was acutely conscious that beneath the thin uniform shirt and the short shorts there was only Jane. He had only to reach out. He did so. At first she did not resist—and then exploded into a frenzy of activity. Before he could let go of her a hard, rough hand closed on his shirt collar and yanked him backwards.

"Keep yer dirty paws off her!" snarled a voice. It was Baxter's. "Keep yer dirty paws off her! If we didn't want yer ter let off the fireworks I'd do yer, here an' now."

"And keep *your* dirty paws off me!" yelled Grimes. It was meant to be an authentic quarterdeck bark, but it didn't come out that way.

"Let him go, Mr. Baxter," said Jane, adding, "please."

"Oh, orl right. If yer says so. But I still think we should run him up ter the Old Man."

"No. Better not." She addressed Grimes, "Thank you for your help on the ATREG, Mr. Grimes. And thank *you*, Mr. Baxter, for your help. It's time that I started looking after the next meal."

She left, not hastily, but not taking her time about it either. When she was gone Baxter released Grimes. Clumsily the Ensign turned himself around, with a wild flailing motion. Unarmed combat had never been his specialty, especially unarmed combat in Free Fall conditions. But he knew that he had to fight, and the rage and the humiliation boiling up in him made it certain that he would do some damage.

But Baxter was laughing, showing all his ugly, yellow teeth. "Come orf it, Admiral! An' if we must have a set-to—not in here. Just smash the UV projector—an' bang goes our air conditioning! Simmer down, mate. Simmer down!"

Grimes simmered down, slowly. "But I thought you were out for my blood, Mr. Baxter."

"Have ter put on a show for the Sheilas now an' again. Shouldn't mind puttin' on another kind o' show *with* her. But not in public—like you was goin' to. It just won't do—not until the shootin' is over, anyhow. An' even then . . . So, Admiral, it's paws off as far as you're concerned. An' as far as I'm concerned—an' the Chief Time Twister an' his sidekick. But, if yer can spare the time, I propose we continue the conversation in my palatial dogbox."

Grimes should have felt uneasy as he followed the engineer to his accommodation but, oddly enough, he did not. The rough friendliness just could not be the prelude to a beating up. And it wasn't.

"Come in," said Baxter, pulling his sliding door to one side. "Now yer see how the poor live. This is . . ."

"No," protested Grimes. "No."

"Why? I was only goin' to say that this is me 'umble 'umpy. An' I'd like yer to meet a coupla friends o' mine—and there's more where they came from."

The "friends" were two drinking bulbs. Each bore proudly no less than four stars on its label. The brandy was smooth, smooth and potent. Grimes sipped appreciatively. "I didn't know that we had any of *this* aboard *Delia O'Ryan*."

"An' nor did we. You'll not find this tippie in the bar stores of any merchantman, nor aboard any of yer precious Survey Service wagons. Space stock for the Emperor's yacht, this is. So here's ter the Waverley taxpayers!"

"But where did you get this from, Mr. Baxter?"

"Where d'yer think? I've had a good fossick around the holds o' this old bitch, an' there's quite a few things too good to let fall inter the hands o' those bloody Waldegrenese."

"But that's pillage."

"It's common sense. Mind yer, I doubt if Captain Craven would approve, so yer'd better chew some dry tea—that's in the cargo too—before yer see the Old Man again. All the bleedin' same—it's no worse than him borrowing your Survey Service stores an' weapons from *his* cargo."

"I suppose it's not," admitted Grimes. All the same, he still felt guilty when he was offered a second bulb of the luxurious spirit. But he did not refuse it.

## XIV

HE WAS A GOOD FOSSICKER, was Baxter.

Two days later, as measured by the ship's chronometer, he was waiting for Grimes as he came off watch. "Ensign," he announced without preamble, "I've found somethin' in the cargo."

"Something new, you mean?" asked Grimes coldly. He still did not approve of pillage, although he had shared the spoils.

"Somethin' that shouldn't be there. Somethin' that's up *your* alley, I think."

"There's no reason why equipment for the Waverley Navy shouldn't be among the cargo."

"True enough. But it wouldn't be in a case with *Beluga Caviar* stenciled all over it. I thought I'd found somethin' to go with the vodka I half pinched, but it won't."

"Then what is it?"

"Come and see."

"All right." Briefly Grimes wondered if he should tell Craven, who had relieved the watch, then decided against it. The Old Man would probably insist on making an investigation in person, in which case Grimes would have to pass another boring hour or so in the Control Room.

The two men made their way aft until they came to the forward bulkhead of the cargo spaces. Normally these would have been pressurized, but, when *Epsilon Sextans'* atmosphere had been replenished from *Delta Orionis'* emergency cylinders, it had seemed pointless to waste precious oxygen. So access was through an airlock that had a locker outside, in which suits, ready for immediate use, were stowed.

Grimes and Baxter suited up, helping each other as required. Then the engineer put out his gloved hand to the airlock controls. Grimes stopped him, bent forward to touch helmets. He said, "Hang on. If we open the door it'll register on the panel in Control."

"Like hell it will!" came the reply. "Most of the wiring was slashed through during the piracy. I fixed the hold lights—but damn all else." Grimes, through the transparency of the visors, saw the other's grin. "For obvious reasons."

Grimes shrugged, released Baxter. Everything was so irregular that one more, relatively minor irregularity hardly mattered. He squeezed with the engineer into the small airlock, waited until the atmosphere it held had been pumped back into the body of the ship, then himself pushed the button that actuated the mechanism of the inner valve.

This was not the first time that he had been in the cargo spaces. Some of the weapons "borrowed" from *Delta Orionis'* cargo had been mounted in the holds. When he had made his inspections it had never occurred to him that the opening and closing of the airlock door had not registered in Control.

He stood back and let Baxter lead the way. The engineer pulled himself to one of the bins in which he had been foraging. The door to it was still open, and crates and cartons disturbed by the pillager floated untidily around the opening.

"You'll have to get all this restowed," said Grimes sharply. "If we have to accelerate there'll be damage." But he might as well have been speaking to himself. The suit radios had not been switched on and, in any case, there was no air to carry sound waves, however faintly.

Baxter had scrambled into the open bin. Grimes followed him, saw him standing by the case, its top prized open, that carried the lettering, BELUGA CAVIAR. PRODUCE OF THE RUSSIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC. Baxter beckoned. Grimes edged his way past the drifting packages to join him.

There was something in the case—but it was not jars or cans of salted sturgeon's eggs. It looked at first like a glittering, complex piece of mobile statuary, although it was motionless. It was a metal mismating of gyroscope and Moebius Strip. It did not look wrong—nothing functional ever does—but it did look *odd*.

Grimes was standing hard against Baxter now. Their helmets were touching. He asked, "What . . . what is it?"

"I was hopin' you'd be able ter tell me, Admiral." Then, as Grimes extended a cautious hand into the case, "Careful! Don't touch nothin'!"

"Why not?"

"'Cause this bloody lot was booby-trapped, that's why. See that busted spring? An' see that cylinder in the corner? That's a thermite bomb, or somethin' worse. Shoulda gone orf when I pried the lid up—but luckily I bugged the firin' mechanism with me bar when I stuck it inter just the right crack. But I think the bastard's deloused now."

"It looks as though it—whatever it is—is hooked up to one of the electrical circuits."

"Yair. An' it's not the lightin' circuit. Must be the airlock indicators."

"Must be." As a weapons expert, Grimes could see the thermite bomb—if that was what it was—had been rendered ineffective. It hadn't been an elaborate trap, merely a device that would destroy the—the *thing* if the case housing it were tampered with. Baxter had been lucky—and, presumably, those who had planted the—what the hell was it?—unlucky.

With a cautious finger he nudged the rotor.

It turned—and he was reminded of those other rotors, the ever-precising gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive.

He remembered, then. He remembered a series of lectures at the Academy on future weapons and navigational devices. Having decided upon his specialty he had been really interested only in the weapons. But there had been talk of a man called Carlotti, who was trying to develop a device that would induce temporal precession in radio signals, so that instantaneous communications would be possible throughout the Galaxy without ships and shore stations having to rely upon the temperamental and unreliable telepaths. And beacons, employing the same principle, could be used for navigation by ships under interstellar drive . . .

So this could be one of Signor Carlotti's gadgets. Perhaps the Empire of Waverley had offered him a higher price than had the Federation. But why the BELUGA CAVIAR? To deter and confuse industrial spies? But *Epsilon Sextans* possessed excellent strong rooms for the carriage of special cargo.

And why was the thing wired up?

Suddenly it was obvious. Somehow, the Duchy of Waldegren possessed Carlotti equipment. This . . . this beacon had been transmitting, unknown to anybody aboard the ship, during the voyage. The frigates had homed upon her. When, inadvertently, its power supply had been shut off the victim, using random precession, had been able to make her escape.

So, if the pirates were to make a second attack it would have to be reactivated.

"We'd better throw this lot on to the Old Man's plate," said Grimes.

CAPTAIN CRAVEN listened intently as Grimes and Baxter told their story. They feared that he was going to lose his temper when told of the engineer's cargo pillaging, but he only remarked, in a dry voice, "I guess that the consignees can afford to compensate us for our time and trouble. Even so, Mr. Baxter, I insist that this practice must cease forthwith." And then, when Grimes described the device, he said, "Yes, I have heard of Carlotti's work. But I didn't think that he'd got as far as a working model. But the thing could have been developed by Waldegrene scientists from the data in his published papers."

"So you agree, sir, that it is some kind of beacon upon which the pirates can home?"

"What else can it be? Now, gentlemen, we find ourselves upon the horns of a dilemma. If we don't reactivate the bloody thing, the chances are that we shall deliver the ship and cargo intact, at no great risk to ourselves, and to the joy of the underwriters. If we *do* reactivate it—then the chances are that we shall have to fight our way through. And there's no guarantee that we shall be on the winning side."

"I was shanghaied away here as a gunnery officer," said Grimes.

"Shanghaied—or press-ganged?" queried Craven.

"The technique was more that of the shanghai," Grimes told him.

"Indeed?" Craven's voice was cold. "But no matter. You're here, and you're one of my senior officers. What course of action do *you* recommend?"

Grimes replied slowly and carefully. "Legally speaking, what we're involved in isn't a war. But it *is* a war, of sorts. And a just war. And, in any case, the Master of a merchant vessel has the legal right to resist illegal seizure or destruction by force of arms. Of course, we have to consider the illegal circumstances attending the arming of this ship . . ."

"Let's not get bogged down in legalities and illegalities," said Craven, with a touch of impatience. "The lawyers can sort it all out eventually. Do we reactivate?"

"Yes," said Grimes.

"And you, Mr. Baxter. What do you say?"

"We Rim Worlders just don't like Waldegren. I'll not pass up a chance ter kick the bastards in the teeth. Reactivate, Skipper."

"Good. And how long will it take you to make good the circuit the beacon's spliced in to?"

"Twenty minutes. No more. But d'yer think we oughter put the whole thing to the vote first?"

"No. Everybody here was under the impression that we should be fighting. With one possible exception, they're all volunteers."

"But I did volunteer, sir," objected Grimes.

"Make your mind up, Ensign. You were telling me just now that you'd been shanghaied. All right. Everybody is a volunteer. So we just rebait the trap without any more yapping about it. Let me know as soon as you're ready, Mr. Baxter. Will you require assistance?"

"I'll manage, Skipper."

When he was gone Craven turned to Grimes. "You realize, Ensign, that this puts me in rather a jam. Let me put it this way. Am I justified in risking the lives of all my officers to carry out a private act of vengeance?"

"I think that you can take Mr. Baxter and myself as being representative, sir. As for the others—Miss Pentecost's a Rim Worlder, and her views will coincide with Baxter's. And the original crew members—they're just as entitled to vengeance as you are. I know that if I'd been an officer of this ship at the time of the original piracy I'd welcome the chance of hitting back."

"You would. Yes. Even if, as now, an alternative suddenly presented itself. But . . ."

"I honestly don't see what you're worrying about, sir."

"You wouldn't. It's a matter of training. But, for all my Reserve commission, I'm a merchant officer. Oh, I know that any military commander is as responsible for the lives of his men as I am—but he also knows that those lives, like his own, are expendable."

"It's a pity that Baxter found the beacon," said Grimes.

"It is—and it isn't. If he hadn't found it, I shouldn't be soliloquizing like a spacefaring Hamlet. And we should have brought the ship in intact and, like as not, all been awarded Lloyd's Medals. On the other hand—if he hadn't found it we—or I?—should have lost our chance of getting back at the pirates."

"You aren't Hamlet, sir." Grimes spoke with the assurance of the very young, but in later years he was to remember his words, and to feel neither shame nor embarrassment, but only a twinge of envy and regret. "You aren't Hamlet. You're Captain Craven, Master under God. Please, sir, for once in your life do something you want to do, and argue it out later with the Almighty if you must."

"And with my owners?" Grimes couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw something like a smile beneath Craven's full beard. "And with my owners?"

"Master Astronauts' certificates aren't all that common, sir. If worst comes to worst, there's always the Rim Worlds. The Sundowner Line, isn't it?"

"I'd already thought of that." There was no doubt about it. Craven was smiling. "After all that you've been saying to me, I'm surprised *that you* don't join forces with our Miss Pentecost."

"Go out to the Rim, sir? Hardly."

"Don't be so sure, young Grimes. Anyhow, you'd better get Miss Pentecost up here now so that we can see how friend Baxter is getting on. There's always the risk that he'll find a few more things among the cargo that aren't nailed down."

## XV

GRIMES CALLED Jane Pentecost on the intercom; after a minute or so she made her appearance in Control. Craven told her what Baxter had discovered and what he, Craven, intended doing about it. She nodded in emphatic agreement. "Yes," she said. "The thing's here to be used—and to be used the way that we want to use it. But I don't think that we should make it public."

"Why not, Miss Pentecost?"

"I could be wrong, Captain, but in my opinion there are quite a few people in this ship who'd welcome the chance of wriggling out of being the cheese in the mousetrap. When there's no alternative they're brave enough. When there's a face-saving alternative . . ."

Baxter's voice came from the intercom speaker. "Chief Reaction Drive Engineer to Control. Repairs completed. Please check your panel."

Yes, the circuit had been restored. The buzzer sounded, and on the board a glowing red light showed that the outer door to the cargo hold airlock was open. How much of the failure of the indicators was due to battle damage and how much to Baxter's sabotage would never be known. Craven's heavy eyebrows lifted ironically as he looked at Grimes, and Grimes shrugged in reply.

Then, the watch handed over to the girl, the two men made their way aft from the Control Room. Outside the airlock they found Baxter, already suited up save for his helmet. There had been only two suits in the locker, and the engineer had brought another one along for the Captain from somewhere.

The little compartment would take only two men at a time. Craven and Grimes went through first, then were joined by Baxter. There was no longer any need for secrecy, so the suit radios were switched on. The only person likely to be listening in was Jane Pentecost in Control.

Grimes heard Craven muttering angrily as they passed packages that obviously had been opened and pillaged, but the Captain did no more than mutter. He possessed the sense of proportion so essential to his rank—and a few bulbs of looted liquor were, after all, relatively unimportant.

They came to the bin in which the case allegedly containing caviar had been stowed, in which some secret agent of Waldegren had tapped the circuit supplying power to the beacon. Inside the box the gleaming machine was still motionless. Craven said, "I thought you told me the current was on."

"It is, Skipper." Baxter's voice was pained. "But I switched it off before I fixed the wiring." He extended a gloved finger, pressed a little toggle switch.

And nothing happened.

"Just a nudge." whispered the engineer.

The oddly convoluted rotor turned easily enough, and as it rotated it seemed almost to vanish in a mist of its own generating—a mist that was no more than an optical illusion.

It rotated, slowed—and stopped.

Baxter cast aspersions upon the legitimacy of its parenthood. Then, still grumbling, he produced a volt-meter. Any doubt that power was being delivered to the machine was soon dispelled. Power was being delivered—but it was not being used.

"Well, Mr. Baxter?" demanded Craven.

"I'm a fair mechanic, Skipper—but I'm no physicist."

"Mr. Grimes?"

"I specialized in gunnery, sir."

Craven snorted, the sound unpleasantly loud in the helmet phones. He said sarcastically, "I'm only the Captain, but I have some smatterings of Mannschenn Drive maintenance and operation. This thing isn't a Mannschenn Drive unit—but it's first cousin to one. As I recall it, some of the earlier models couldn't be started without the employment of a small, temporal precession field initiator. Furthermore, these initiators, although there is no longer any need for them, are still carried as engine room spares in the Commission's ships."

"And that gadget'll start *this* little time-twister, Skipper?" asked the engineer.

"It might, Mr. Baxter. It might. So, Mr. Grimes, will you go along to the Mannschenn Drive room and ask Mr. Wolverton for his initiator? No need to tell him what it's for."

WOLVERTON was in the Mannschenn Drive room, staring moodily at the gleaming complexity of precessing rotors. Grimes hastily averted his eyes from the machine. It frightened him, and he didn't mind admitting it. And

there was something about the engineer that frightened him, too. The tall, cadaverous man, with the thin strands of black hair drawn over his gleaming skull, looked more like a seer than a ship's officer, looked like a fortune-teller peering into the depths of an uncannily mobile crystal ball. He was mumbling, his voice a low, guttural muttering against the thin, high keening of his tumbling gyroscopes. The Ensign at last was able to make out the words.

"Divergent tracks . . . . To be, or not to be, that is the question—"

Grimes thought, *This ship should be renamed the State of Denmark. There's something rotten here . . . .* He said sharply, "Mr. Wolverton!"

Slowly the Chief Interstellar Drive Engineer turned his head, stared at Grimes unseeingly at first. His eyes came into focus. He whispered, "It's you."

"Who else, Chief? Captain's compliments, and he'd like to borrow your temporal precession field initiator."

"He would, would he? And why?"

"An—an experiment." said Grimes, with partial truth. The fewer people who knew the whole truth the better.

"An experiment?"

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind letting me have it now, Chief . . . ."

"But it's engine room stores. It's the Commission's stores. It's a very delicate instrument. It is against the Commission's regulations to issue it to unqualified personnel."

"But Mr. Baxter is helping with the . . . experiment."

"Mr. Baxter! That letter-off of cheap fireworks. That . . . *Rim Runner!* No. No. Mr. Baxter is not qualified personnel."

"Then perhaps you could lend us one of your juniors."

"No. No, I would not trust them. Why do you think that I am here, Mr. Grimes? Why do you think that I have been tied to my gyroscopes? Literally tied, almost. If I had not been here, keeping my own watch, when the pirates struck, this ship would have been utterly destroyed. *I know the Drive, Mr. Grimes.*" He seized the Ensign's arm, turned him so that he was facing the gleaming, spinning rotors, endlessly precessing, endlessly tumbling down the dark dimensions, shimmering on the very verge of invisibility. Grimes wanted to close his eyes, but could not. "*I know the Drive, Mr. Grimes. It talks to me. It shows me things. It warned me, that time, that Death was waiting for this ship and all in her. And now it warns me again. But there is a . . . a divergence . . . .*"

"Mr. Wolverton, please! There is not much time."

"But what is Time, Mr. Grimes? What is Time? What do you know of the forking World Lines, the Worlds of If? I've lived with this machine, Mr. Grimes. It's part of me—or am I part of *it*? Let me show you . . . ." His grip on the Ensign's arm was painful. "Let me show you. Look. Look into the machine. What do you see?"

Grimes saw only shadowy, shimmering wheels and a formless darkness.

"I see you, Mr. Grimes," almost sang the engineer. "I see you—but not as you *will* be. But as you *might* be. I see you on the bridge of your flagship, your uniform gold-encrusted and medal-bedecked, with commodores and captains saluting you and calling you 'sir' . . . but I see you, too, in the control room of a shabby little ship, a single ship, in shabby clothes, and the badge on your cap is one that I have never seen, is one that does not yet exist . . . ."

"Mr. Wolverton! That initiator. *Please!*"

"But there is no hurry, Mr. Grimes. There is no hurry. There is time enough for everything—for everything that is, that has been, that will be and that might be. There is time to decide, Mr. Grimes. There is time to decide whether or not we make our second rendezvous with Death. The initiator is part of it all, Mr. Grimes, is it not? The initiator is the signpost that stands at the forking of the track. You weren't here, Mr. Grimes, when the pirates struck. You did not hear the screams, you did not smell the stench of burning flesh. You're young and foolhardy; all that you want is the chance to play with your toys. And all that I want, now that I know that alternatives exist, is the chance to bring this ship to her destination with no further loss of life."

"Mr. Wolverton . . . ."

"Mr. Grimes!" It was Captain Craven's voice, and he was in a vile temper. "What the hell do you think you're playing at?"

"Captain," said Wolverton. "I can no more than guess at what you intend to do—but I have decided not to help you to do it."

"Then give us the initiator. We'll work it ourselves."

"No, Captain."

"Give me the initiator, Mr. Wolverton. That's an order."

"A *lawful* command, Captain? As lawful as those commands of yours that armed this ship?"

"Hold him, Grimes!" (*And who's supposed to be holding whom?* wondered the Ensign. Wolverton's grip was

still tight and painful on his arm.) "Hold him, while I look in the storeroom!"

"Captain! Get away from the door! You've no right . . ."

Wolverton relinquished his hold on Grimes who, twisting with an agility that surprised himself, contrived to get both arms about the engineer's waist. In the scuffle the contact between their magnetic shoe soles and the deck was broken. They hung there, helpless, with no solidity within reach of their flailing limbs to give them purchase. They hung there, clinging to each other, but more in hate than in love. Wolverton's back was to the machine; he could not see, as could Grimes, that there was an indraught of air into the spinning, shimmering complexity. Grimes felt the beginnings of panic, more than the mere beginnings. There were no guardrails; he had read somewhere why this was so, but the abstruse physics involved did not matter—all that mattered was that there was nothing to prevent him and Wolverton from being drawn into the dimension-twisting field of the thing.

He freed, somehow, his right hand, and with an effort that sprained his shoulder brought it around in a sweeping, clumsy and brutal blow to the engineer's face. Wolverton screamed and his grip relaxed. Violently, Grimes shoved away. To the action there was reaction.

Craven emerged from the storeroom, carrying something that looked like a child's toy gyroscope in a transparent box. He looked around for Grimes and Wolverton at deck level and then, his face puzzled, looked up. He did not, as Grimes had been doing for some seconds, vomit—but his face, behind the beard went chalk-white. He put out his free hand and, not ungently, pulled Grimes to the deck.

He said, his voice little more than a whisper, "There's nothing we can do. Nothing—except to get a pistol and finish him off . . ."

Grimes forced himself to look again at the slimy, bloody obscenity that was a man turned, literally, inside-out—heart (if it was the heart) still beating, intestines still writhing.

## XVI

IT WAS GRIMES who went for a pistol, fetching a Minetti from the weapons rack that he, himself, had fitted up in the Control Room. He told Jane Pentecost what he wanted it for. He made no secret of either his horror or his self blame.

She said, "But this is a war, even if it's an undeclared one. And in a war you must expect casualties."

"Yes, yes. I know. But *I* pushed him into the field."

"It was an accident. It could easily have been you instead of him. And I'm glad that it wasn't."

"But you haven't seen . . ."

"And I don't want to." Her voice hardened. "Meanwhile, get the hell out of here and back to the Mannschenn Drive room. If you're so sorry for the poor bastard, do something about putting him out of his misery."

"But . . ."

"Don't be such a bloody coward, Grimes."

The words hurt—mainly because there was so much truth in them. Grimes was dreading having to see again the twisted obscenity that had once been a man, was dreading having to breathe again the atmosphere of that compartment, heavy with the reek of hot oil, blood and fecal matter. But, with the exception of Craven, he was the only person in the ship trained in the arts of war. He recalled the words of a surgeon-commander who had lectured the midshipmen of his course on the handling of battle casualties—and recalled, too, how afterward the young gentlemen had sneered at the bloodthirstiness of one who was supposed to be a professional healer. "*When one of your shipmates has really had it, even if he's your best friend, don't hesitate a moment about finishing him off. You'll be doing him a kindness. Finish him off—and get him out of sight. Shockingly wounded men are bad for morale.*"

"What are you waiting for?" demanded Jane Pentecost. "Do you want *me* to do it?"

Grimes said nothing, just hurried out of the Control Room.

Craven was still in the Mannschenn Drive room when Grimes got back there. With him were two of the interstellar drive engineers—the Second and the Third. Their faces were deathly white, and the Second's prominent Adam's apple was working spasmodically, but about them there was an air of grim resolution. The Third—how could he bear to touch that slimy, reeking mess?—had hold of its shoulders (white, fantastically contorted bone gleaming pallidly among red convolutions of flesh), while the Second, a heavy spanner in his hand, was trying to decide where to strike.

The Captain saw Grimes. "Give me that!" he snapped, and snatched the pistol from the Ensign's hand. Then, to the engineers, "Stand back!"

The little weapon rattled sharply and viciously. To the other smells was added the acidity of burned propellant. What had been Wolverton was driven to the deck by the impact of the tiny projectiles, and adhered there. There was surprisingly little blood, but the body had stopped twitching.

Craven handed the empty pistol back to the Ensign. He ordered, "You stay here, Mr. Grimes, and organize the disposal of the body." He went to the locker where he had put the initiator, took out the little instrument and, carrying it carefully, left the Mannschenn Drive room. Neither of the engineers, still staring with horrified fascination at their dead Chief, noticed.

"How . . . how did it happen?" asked the Second, after a long silence. "He fell into the field," said Grimes.

"But how? How? He was always getting on us about being careless, and telling us what was liable to happen to us, and now it's happened to him—"

"That's the way of it," contributed the Third, with a certain glum satisfaction. "Don't do as I do, do as I say."

"Have you a box?" asked Grimes.

"A box?" echoed the Second.

"Yes. A box." Now that he was doing something, doing something useful, Grimes was beginning to feel a little better. "We can't have a funeral while we're running under interstellar drive. We have to . . . to put him somewhere." *Out of sight*, he mentally added.

"That chest of spares?" muttered the Second.

"Just the right size," agreed the Third.

"Then get it," ordered Grimes.

The chest, once the spares and their packing had been removed and stowed elsewhere, was just the right size. Its dimensions were almost those of a coffin. It was made of steel, its bottom magnetized, and remained where placed on the deck while the three men, fighting down their recurring nausea, handled the body into it. All of them

sighed audibly in relief when, at last, the close-fitting lid covered the remains. Finally, the Third ran a welding torch around the joint. As he was doing so the lights flickered.

Was it because of the torch? wondered Grimes. Or was it because the beacon in the hold had been reactivated? Somehow he could not feel any real interest.

CLEANED UP after a fashion, but still feeling physically ill, he was back in the Control Room. Craven was there, and Baxter was with him. Jane Pentecost had been relieved so that she could attend to her duties in the galley. "Not that *I* feel like a meal," the Captain had said. "And I doubt very much that Mr. Grimes does either."

"Takes a lot ter put *me* off me tucker," the engineer declared cheerfully as he worked on the airlock door telltale panel.

"You didn't see Mr. Wolverton, Mr. Baxter," said Craven grimly.

"No, Skipper. An' I'm not sorry I didn't." He paused in his work to rummage in his tool bag. He produced bulbs of brandy. "But I thought you an' the Ensign might need some o' this."

Craven started to say something about cargo pillage, then changed his mind. He accepted the liquor without further quibbling. The three men sipped in silence.

Baxter carelessly tossed his squeezed empty bulb aside, continued with what he had been doing. The Captain said to Grimes, "Yes. We got the thing started again. And we've improved upon it."

"Improved upon it, sir? How?"

"It's no longer only a beacon. It's also an alarm. As soon as it picks up the radiation from the similar pieces of apparatus aboard the enemy frigates, the buzzer that Mr. Baxter is fitting up will sound, the red light will flash. We shall have ample warning . . ."

"She'll be right, Skipper," said the engineer.

"Thank you, Mr. Baxter. And now; if you don't mind, I'd like a few words in private with Mr. Grimes."

"Don't be too hard on him, Skipper."

Baxter winked cheerfully at Grimes and left the control room.

"Mr. Grimes," Craven's voice was grave. "Mr. Grimes, today, early in your career, you have learned a lesson that some of us never have to learn. You have killed a man—yes, yes, I know that it was not intentional—and you have been privileged to see the end result of your actions.

"There are many of us who are, who have been, killers. There are many of us who have pushed buttons but who have never seen what happens at the other end of the trajectory. Perhaps people slaughtered by explosion or laser beam do not look quite so horrible as Wolverton—but, I assure you, they often look horrible enough, and often die as slowly and as agonizingly. You know, now, what violent death looks like, Mr. Grimes. So tell me, are you still willing to push your buttons, to play pretty tunes on your battle organ?"

"And what did the bodies in this ship look like, Captain?" asked Grimes. Then, remembering that one of the bodies had belonged to the woman whom Craven had loved, he bitterly regretted having asked the question.

"Not pretty," whispered Captain Craven. "Not at all pretty."

"I'll push your buttons for you," Grimes told him.

*And for Jane Pentecost, he thought. And for the others. And for myself? The worst of it all is that I haven't got the excuse of saying that it's what I'm paid for . . .*

## XVII

DOWN THE DARK dimensions fell *Epsilon Sextans*, falling free through the warped continuum. But aboard the ship time still possessed meaning, the master chronometer still ticked away the seconds, minutes and hours; the little man-made world was still faithful to that puissant god of scientific intelligences everywhere in the universe—the Clock. Watch succeeded watch in Control Room and engine room. Meals were prepared and served on time. There was even, toward the end, a revival of off-duty social activities: a chess set was discovered and brought into use, playing cards were produced and a bridge school formed.

But there was one social activity that, to Grimes' disappointment was not resumed—the oldest social activity of them all. More than once he pleaded with Jane—and every time she laughed away his pleas. He insisted—and that made matters worse. He was (as he said), the donkey who had been allowed one nibble of the carrot and who could not understand why the carrot had been snatched away. He was (she said), a donkey. Period.

He should have guessed what was happening, but he did not. He was young, and inexperienced in the ways of women—of men *and* women. He just could not imagine that Jane would spare more than a casual glance for any of the engineers or for the flabby, pasty youth who was the psionic radio officer—and in this he was right.

*Epsilon Sextans* was, for a ship of her class, very well equipped. In addition to the usual intercom system she was fitted with closed circuit television. In the event of emergency the Captain or watch officer, by the flip of a switch, could see what was happening in any compartment of the vessel. Over the control panel, in big, red letters, were the words: EMERGENCY USE ONLY. Grimes did not know what was the penalty for improper use of the apparatus in the Merchant Navy—but he did know that in the Survey Service officers had been cashiered and given an ignominious discharge for this offense. The more cramped and crowded the conditions in which men—and women—work and live, the more precious is privacy.

It was Grimes' watch.

When he had taken over, all the indications were that it would be as boring as all the previous watches. All that was required of the watchkeeper was that he stay awake. Grimes stayed awake. He had brought a book with him into Control, hiding it inside his uniform shirt, and it held his attention for a while. Then, following the example of generations of watch officers, he set up a game of three dimensional tic-tac-toe in the chart tank and played, right hand against left. The left hand was doing remarkably well when a buzzer sounded. The Ensign immediately cleared the tank and looked at the airlock indicator panel. But there were no lights on the board, and he realized that it was the intercom telephone.

"Control," he said into his microphone.

"P.R.O. here. I . . . I'm not happy, Mr. Grimes . . ."

"Who is?" quipped Grimes.

"I . . . I feel . . . smothered."

"Something wrong with the ventilation in your shack?"

"No. NO. It's like . . . it's like a heavy blanket soaked in ice-cold water . . . . You can't move . . . you can't shout . . . you can't *hear* . . . . *It's like it was before* . . . ."

"*Before what?*" snapped Grimes—and then as the other buzzer sounded, as the additional red light flashed on the telltale panel, he realized the stupidity of his question.

At once he pressed the alarm button. This was it, at last. Action Stations! Throughout the ship the bells were shrilling, the klaxons squawking. Hastily Grimes vacated the pilot's chair, slipped into the one from which he could control his weapons—and from which he could reach out to other controls. But where was the Old Man? Where was Captain Craven? This was the moment that he had longed for, this was the consummation toward which all his illegalities had been directed. Damn it all, *where was he?*

Perhaps he was floating stunned in his quarters—starting up hurriedly from sleep he could have struck his head upon some projection, knocked himself out. If this were the case he, Grimes, would have to call Jane from her own battle station in Sick Bay to render first aid. But there was no time to lose.

The Ensign reached out, flipped the switches that would give him the picture of the interior of the Captain's accommodation. The screen brightened, came alive. Grimes stared at the luminous presentation in sick horror. Luminous it was—with that peculiar luminosity of naked female flesh. Jane was dressing herself with almost ludicrous haste. Of the Captain there was no sign—*on the screen*.

Craven snarled, with cold ferocity, "You damned, sneaking, prurient puppy!" Then, in a louder voice, "Switch that damn thing off! I'll deal with you when this is over."

"But, sir . . ."

"Switch it off, I say!"

Cheeks burning, Grimes obeyed. Then he sat staring at his armament controls, fighting down his nausea, his physical sickness. Somehow, he found time to think bitterly, *So I was the knight, all set and ready to slay dragons for his lady. And all the time, she . . .* He did not finish the thought.

He heard a voice calling over the intercom, one of the engineers. "Captain, they're trying to lock on! Same as last time. Random precession, sir?"

"No. Cut the Drive!"

"Cut the Drive?" Incredulously. "You heard me. *Cut!*" Then, to Grimes, "And what the hell are *you* waiting for?"

The Ensign knew what he had to do; he had rehearsed it often enough. He did it. From the nozzles that pierced the outer shell spouted the cloud of reflective vapor, just in time, just as the enemy's lasers lashed out at their target. It seemed that the ship's internal temperature rose suddenly and sharply—although that could have been illusion, fostered by the sight of the fiery fog glimpsed through the viewports before the armored shutters slammed home.

There were targets now on Grimes' fire control screen, two of them, but he could not loose a missile until the tumbling rotors of the Drive had ceased to spin, to precess. The use of the anti-laser vapor screen had been risky enough. Abruptly the screens went blank—which signified that the temporal precession rates of hunted and hunters were no longer in synchronization, that the fields of the pirates had failed to lock on. In normal spacetime there would be no need to synchronize—and then the hunters would discover that their quarry had claws and teeth.

Aboard *Epsilon Sextans* the keening note of the Drive died to a whisper, a barely audible murmur, fading to silence. There was the inevitable second or so of utter disorientation when, as soon as it was safe, the engineers braked the gyroscopes.

Craven acted without hesitation, giving his ship headway and acceleration with Inertial Drive. He was not running—although this was the impression that he wished to convey. He was inviting rather than evading combat—but if the Waldegren captains chose to assume that *Epsilon Sextans* was, as she had been, an unarmed merchantman (after all, the anti-laser screen could have been jury rigged from normal ship's stores and equipment), taking evasive action, that was *their* error of judgment.

Grimes watched his screens intently. Suddenly the two blips reappeared, astern, all of a hundred kilos distant, but closing. This he reported.

"Stand by for acceleration!" ordered Craven. "Reaction Drive—stand by!"

It was all part of the pattern—a last, frantic squandering of reaction mass that could do no more than delay the inevitable. It would look good from the enemy control rooms.

"Reaction Drive ready!" reported Baxter over the intercom.

"Thank you. Captain to all hands, there will be no countdown. *Fire!*"

From the corner of his eye Grimes saw Craven's hand slam down on the key. Acceleration slammed him brutally back into his chair. There was a roar that was more like an explosion than a normal rocket firing, a shock that jarred and rattled every fitting in the Control Room.

Craven remarked quietly. "That must have looked convincing enough—but I hope that Baxter didn't really blow a chamber."

There was only the Inertial Drive now, and the two blips that, very briefly, had fallen astern, were now creeping up again, closing the range. "Anti-laser," ordered Craven briefly. "But, sir, it'll just be wasting it. They'll not be using laser outside twenty kilometers."

"They'll not be expecting a gunnery specialist aboard this wagon, either."

Once again the nozzles spouted, pouring out a cloud that fell rapidly astern of the running ship, dissipating uselessly.

Craven looked at his own screens, frowned, muttered, "They're taking their sweet time about it . . . probably low on reaction mass themselves." He turned to Grimes. "I think a slight breakdown of the I.D.'s in order."

"As you say, sir." The Ensign could not forget having been called a damned, sneaking, prurient puppy. Let Craven make his own decisions.

"Stand by for Free Fall," ordered the Captain quietly. The steady throbbing of the Inertial Drive faltered, faltered and ceased. There were two long minutes of weightlessness, and then, for five minutes, the Drive came back into operation. *A breakdown*, the enemy must be thinking. *A breakdown, and the engineers sweating and striving to get the ship under way again.* A breakdown—it would not be surprising after the mauling she had endured at the first encounter.

She hung there, and although her actual speed could be measured in kilometers a second she was, insofar as her

accelerating pursuers were concerned, relatively motionless. Grimes wondered why the warships did not use their radio, did not demand surrender—*Epsilon Sextans'* transceiver was switched on, but no sound issued from the speaker but the hiss and crackle of interstellar static. He voiced his puzzlement to Craven.

Craven laughed grimly. "They know who we are—or they think that they know. And they know that we know who *they* are. After what happened before, why should we expect mercy? All that we can do now—they think—is to get the Mannschenn Drive going again. But with that comic beacon of theirs working away merrily they'll be able to home on us, no matter how random our precession." He laughed again. "They haven't a care in the world, bless their little black hearts."

Grimes watched his screens. Forty kilometers—thirty—"Sir, the ALGE?" he asked.

"Yes. It's your party now."

For the third time reflective vapor gushed from the nozzles, surrounding the ship with a dense cloud. Craven, who had been watching the dials of the external temperature thermometers, remarked quietly, "They've opened fire. The shell plating's heating up. Fast."

And in the Control Room it felt hot—and hotter, Grimes pressed the button that unmasked his batteries. The gas screen, as well as affording protection from laser, hid the ship from visual observation. The enemy would not be expecting defense by force of arms.

He loosed his first salvo, felt the ship tremble as the missiles ejected themselves from their launching racks. There they were on the screens—six tiny sparks, six moronic mechanical intelligences programmed to home upon and destroy, capable of countering evasive action so long as their propellant held out. There they were on the screens—six of them, then four, then one. This last missile almost reached its target—then it, too, blinked out. The Waldegren frigates were now using their laser for defense, not attack.

"I don't think," remarked Craven quietly, "that they'll use missiles. Not yet, anyhow. They want our cargo intact." He chuckled softly. "But we've got them worried."

Grimes didn't bother to reply. The telltale lights on his panel told him that the six AVM launchers were reloaded. The AMMs—the anti-missile missiles—had not yet been fired. Dare he risk their use against big targets? He carried in his magazines stock sufficient for three full salvos only—and with no laser for anti-missile work dare he deplete his supply of this ammunition?

He had heard the AMMs described as "vicious little brutes." They were to the Anti-Vessel Missiles as terriers are to mastiffs. Their warheads were small, but this was compensated for by their greater endurance. They were, perhaps, a little more "intelligent" than the larger rockets—and Grimes, vaguely foreseeing this present contingency, had made certain modifications to their "brains."

He pushed the button that actuated his modifications, that overrode the original programming. He depressed the firing stud. He felt the vibration as the war-rockets streaked away from the ship, and on his screens watched the tiny points of light closing the range between themselves and the two big blips that were the targets. They were fast, and they were erratic. One was picked off by laser within the first ten seconds, but the others carried on, spurting and swerving, but always boring toward their objectives. Grimes could imagine the enemy gunnery officers flailing their lasers like men, armed only with sticks, defending themselves against a horde of small, savage animals. There was, of course, one sure defense—to start up the Mannschenn Drive and to slip back into the warped continuum where the missiles could not follow. But, in all probability, the Waldegren captains had yet to accept the fact, emotionally, that this helpless merchantman had somehow acquired the wherewithal to strike back.

Two of the AMMs were gone now, picked off by the enemy laser. Three were still closing on the target on *Epsilon Sextans'* port quarter, and only one of the target abaft the starboard beam. Grimes loosed his second flight of AMMs, followed it with a full salvo of AVMs. Then, knowing that the protective vapor screen must have been thinned and shredded by his rocketry, he sent out a replenishing gush of reflective gas.

He heard Craven cry out in exultation. The three AMMs of the first flight had hit their target, the three sparks had fused with the blip that represented the raider to port. The three sparks that were the second flight were almost there, and overtaking them were the larger and brighter sparks of the second AVM salvo. The Anti-Missile Missiles would cause only minor damage to a ship—but, in all probability, they would throw fire control out of kilter, might even destroy laser projectors. In theory, one AVM would suffice to destroy a frigate; a hit by three at once would make destruction a certainty.

And so it was.

Seen only on the radar screen, as a picture lacking in detail painted on a fluorescent surface by an electron brush, it was anticlimactic. The blips, the large one, the three small ones and the three not so small, merged. And then there was an oddly shaped blob of luminescence that slowly broke up into a cluster of glowing fragments, a gradually expanding cluster, a leisurely burgeoning flower of pale fire.

Said Craven viciously, "The other bastard's got cold feet . . ."

And so it was. Where she had been on the screen was only darkness, a darkness in which the sparks that were missiles and anti-missiles milled about aimlessly. They would not turn upon each other—that would have been contrary to their programming. They would not, in theory, use their remaining fuel to home upon the only worthwhile target remaining—*Epsilon Sextans* herself. But, as Craven knew and as Grimes knew, theory and practice do not always coincide. Ships have been destroyed by their own missiles.

With reluctance Grimes pushed the DESTROY button. He said to the Captain, gesturing toward the wreckage depicted on the screen, "Pick up survivors, sir? If there are any."

"If there are any," snarled Craven, "that's their bad luck. No—we give chase to the other swine!"

## XVIII

GIVE CHASE . . .

It was easier said than done. The surviving frigate had restarted her Mannschenn Drive, had slipped back into the warped continuum where, unless synchronization of precession rates was achieved and held, contact between vessels would be impossible. The Carlotti Beacon in *Epsilon Sextans*' hold was worse than useless; it had been designed to be homed upon, not to be a direction-finding instrument. (In any case, it could function as such only if the beacon aboard the Waldegren ship were working.) Neither Craven nor Grimes knew enough about the device to effect the necessary modifications. The interstellar drive engineers thought that they could do it, but their estimates as to the time required ranged from days to weeks. Obviously, as long as it was operating it would be of value to the enemy only.

So it was switched off.

There was only one method available to Craven to carry out the pursuit—psionic tracking. He sent for his Psionic Radio Officer, explained the situation. The telepath was a young man, pasty faced, unhealthy looking, but not unintelligent. He said at once, "Do you think, Captain, that the other officers and myself are willing to carry on the fight? After all, we've made our point. Wouldn't it be wisest to carry on, now, for Waverley?"

"Speaking for meself," put in Baxter, who had accompanied Jane Pentecost to Control, "an' fer any other Rim Worlders present, I say that now the bastards are on the run it's the best time ter smack 'em again. An' hard. An' the tame time-twisters think the same as we do. I've already had words with 'em." He glared at the telepath. "Our snoopin' little friend here should know very well what the general consensus of opinion is."

"We do not pry," said the communications officer stiffly. "But I am willing to abide by the will of the majority."

"And don't the orders of the Master come into it?" asked Craven, more in amusement than anger.

"Lawful commands, sir?" asked Grimes who, until now, had been silent.

"Shut up!" snapped Jane Pentecost.

"Unluckily, sir," the young man went on, "I do not possess the direction-finding talent. It is, as you know, quite rare."

"Then what *can* you do?" demanded Craven.

"Sir, let me finish, please. The psionic damping device—I don't know what it was, but I suspect that it was the brain of some animal with which I am unfamiliar—was in the ship that was destroyed. The other vessel carries only a normal operator, with normal equipment—himself and some sort of organic amplifier. He is still within range, and I can maintain a listening watch—"

"And suppose *he* listens to you?" asked the Captain. "Even if you transmit nothing—as you will not do, unless ordered by myself—there could be stray thoughts. And that, I suppose, applies to all of us."

The telepath smiled smugly. "Direction-finding is not the only talent. I'm something of a damper myself—although not in the same class as the one that was blown up. I give you my word, sir, that this vessel is psionically silent." He raised his hand as Craven was about to say something. "Now, sir, I shall be able to find out where the other ship is heading. I know already that her Mannschenn Drive unit is not working at full capacity; it sustained damage of some kind during the action. I'm not a navigator, sir, but it seems to me that we could be waiting for her when she reemerges into the normal continuum."

"You're not a navigator," agreed Craven, "and you're neither a tactician nor a strategist. We should look rather silly, shouldn't we, hanging in full view over a heavily fortified naval base, a sitting duck. Even so . . ." His big right hand stroked his beard. "Meanwhile, I'll assume that our little friends are headed in the general direction of Waldegren, and set course accordingly. If Mr. Grimes will be so good as to hunt up the target star in the Directory . . ."

Grimes did as he was told. He had made his protest, such as it was, and, he had to admit, he was in favor of continuing the battle. It was a matter of simple justice. Why should one shipload of murderers be destroyed, and the other shipload escape unscathed? He was still more than a little dubious of the legality of it all, but he did not let it worry him.

He helped Craven to line the ship up on the target star, a yellow, fifth magnitude spark. He manned the intercom while the Captain poured on the acceleration and then, with the ship again falling free, cut in the Mannschenn Drive. When the vessel was on course he expected that the Old Man would give the usual order—"Normal Deep Space routine, Mr. Grimes,"—but this was not forthcoming.

"Now," said Craven ominously.

"Now *what*, sir?"

"You have a short memory, Ensign. A conveniently short memory, if I may say so. Mind you, I was favorably impressed by the way you handled your armament, but that has no bearing upon what happened before."

Grimes blushed miserably. He knew what the Captain was driving at. But, playing for time, he asked, "What do you mean, sir?"

Craven exploded. "What do I mean? You have the crust to sit there and ask me that! Your snooping, sir. Your violation of privacy. Even worse, your violation of the Master's privacy! I shall not tell Miss Pentecost; it would be unkind to embarrass her. But . . ."

Grimes refrained from saying that he had seen Miss Pentecost wearing even less than when, inadvertently, he had spied upon her. He muttered, "I can explain, sir."

"You'd better. Out with it."

"Well, sir, it was like this. I knew that we'd stumbled on the enemy—or that the enemy had stumbled upon us. I'd sounded Action Stations. And when you were a long time coming up to Control I thought that you must have hurt yourself, somehow . . . there have been such cases, as you know. So I thought I'd better check—"

"You thought . . . *you* thought. I'll not say that you aren't paid to think—because that's just what an officer *is* paid for. But you didn't think hard enough, or along the right lines." Grimes could see that Craven had accepted his explanation and that all would be well. The Captain's full beard could not hide the beginnings of a smile. "Did you ever hear of Sir Francis Drake, Ensign?"

"No, sir."

"He was an admiral—one of Queen Elizabeth's admirals. The first Elizabeth, of course. When the Spanish Armada was sighted he did not rush down to his flagship yelling 'Action Stations!' He knew that there was time to spare, and so he quietly finished what he was doing before setting sail."

"And what was he doing, sir?" asked Grimes innocently.

Craven glared at him, then snapped, "Playing bowls."

Then, suddenly, the tension was broken and both men collapsed in helpless laughter. In part it was reaction to the strain of battle—but in greater part it was that freemasonry that exists only between members of the same sex, the acknowledgment of shared secrets and shared experiences.

Grimes knew that Jane Pentecost was not for him—and wished Craven joy of her and she of the Captain. Perhaps they had achieved a permanent relationship, perhaps not—but, either way, his best wishes were with them.

Craven unbuckled his seat strap.

"Deep Space routine, Mr. Grimes. It is your watch, I believe."

"Deep Space routine it is, sir."

Yes, it was still his watch (although so much had happened). It was still his watch, although there were barely fifteen minutes to go before relief. He was tired, more tired than he had ever been in his life before. He was tired, but not unhappy. He knew that the fact that he had killed men should be weighing heavily upon his conscience—but it did not. They, themselves, had been killers—and they had had a far better chance than any of their own victims had enjoyed.

He would shed no tears for them.

## XIX

CRAVEN CAME BACK to the Control Room at the change of watch, when Grimes was handing over to Jane Pentecost. He waited until the routine had been completed, then said, "We know where our friends are headed. They were, like us, running for Waldegren—but they're having to change course." He laughed harshly. "There must be all hell let loose on their home planet."

"Why? What's happened?" asked Grimes.

"I'll tell you later. But, first of all, we have an alteration of course ourselves. Look up Dartura in the Directory, will you, while I get the Drive shut down."

*Epsilon Sextans* was falling free through normal spacetime before Grimes had found the necessary information. And then there was the hunt for and the final identification of the target star, followed by the lining up by the use of the directional gyroscopes. There was the brief burst of acceleration and then, finally, the interstellar drive was cut in once more.

The Captain made a business of selecting and lighting a cigar. When the pungent combustion was well under way he said, "Our young Mr. Summers is a good snooper. Not as good as some people I know, perhaps." Grimes flushed and Jane Pentecost looked puzzled. "He's a super-sensitive. He let me have a full transcript of all the signals, out and in. It took us a little time to get them sorted out—but not too long, considering. *Adler*—that's the name of the surviving frigate— was running for home. Her Captain sent a rather heavily edited report of the action to his Admiral. It seems that *Adler* and the unfortunate *Albatross* were set upon and beaten up by a heavily armed Survey Service cruiser masquerading as an innocent merchantman. The Admiral, oddly enough, doesn't want a squadron of Survey Service battlewagons laying nuclear eggs on his base. So *Adler* has been told to run away and lose herself until the flap's over . . . ."

"And did they send all that *en clair*?" demanded Grimes. "They must be mad!"

"No, they aren't mad. The signal's weren't *en clair*."

"But . . ."

"Reliable merchant captains," said Craven, "are often entrusted with highly confidential naval documents. There were some such in my safe aboard *Delta Orionis*, consigned to the Commanding Officer of Lindisfarne Base. The officer who delivered them to me is an old friend and shipmate of mine, and he told me that among them was the complete psionic code used by the Waldegren Navy. Well, when I had decided to take over this ship, I'd have been a bloody fool not to have Photostatted the whole damned issue.

"So that's the way of it. Herr Kapitan von Leidnitz thinks he can say what he likes to his superiors without anybody else knowing what he's saying. And all the while . . ." Craven grinned wolfishly. "It seems that there's a minor base, of sorts, on Dartura. Little more than repair yards, although I suppose that there'll be a few batteries for their protection. I can imagine the sort of personnel they have running the show—passed-over commanders and the like, not overly bright. By the time that we get there we shall have concocted a convincing story—convincing enough to let us hang off in orbit until *Adler* appears on the scene. After all, we have their precious code. Why should they suspect us?"

"Why shouldn't *we* be *Adler*?" asked Grimes.

"What do you mean, Ensign?"

"The Waldegren Navy's frigates are almost identical, in silhouette, with the Commission's *Epsilon* class freighters. We could disguise this ship a little by masking the dissimilarities by a rough patching of plating. After all, *Adler* was in action and sustained some damage—"

"Complicated," mused the Captain. "Too complicated. And two *Adlers*—each, presumably, in encoded psionic communication with both Waldegren and Dartura . . . . You've a fine, devious mind, young Grimes—but I'm afraid you've out-fixed yourself on that one."

"Let me talk, sir. Let me think out loud. To begin with—a ship running on Mannschenn Drive *can* put herself into orbit about a planet, but it's not, repeat not, recommended."

"Damn right it's not."

"But we have the heels of *Adler*? Yes? Then we could afford a slight delay to carry out the modifications—the disguise—that I've suggested. After all, forty odd light years is quite a long way."

"But what do we gain, Mr. Grimes?"

"The element of confusion, sir. Let me work it out. We disguise ourselves as well as we can. We find out, from intercepted and decoded signals, *Adler's* ETA—and the coordinates of her breakthrough into the normal continuum.

We contrive matters to be more or less in the same place at exactly the same time. And when the shore batteries and the guardships see no less than two *Adlers* slugging it out, each of them yelling for help in the secret code, they won't know which of us to open fire on."

"Grimes," said Craven slowly, "I didn't know you had it in you. All I can say is that I'm glad that you're on *our* side."

"Am I?" asked Grimes wonderingly, suddenly deflated. He looked at the Captain who, after all, was little better than a pirate, whose accomplice he had become. He looked at the girl, but for whom he would not be here. "Am I? Damn it all, whose side *am* I on?"

"You'd better go below," Craven told him gently. "Go below and get some sleep. You need it. You've earned it."

"Jeremy," said Jane Pentecost to Craven, "would you mind looking after the shop for half an hour or so? I'll go with John."

"As you please, my dear. As you please."

It was the assurance in the Captain's voice that hurt. *It won't make any difference to us, it implied. It can't make any difference. Sure, Jane, go ahead. Throw the nice little doggie a bone . . . we can spare it.*

"No thank you," said Grimes coldly, and left the Control Room.

But he couldn't hate these people.

## XX

AFTER A LONG SLEEP Grimes felt better. After a meal he felt better still. It was a good meal, even though the solid portion of it came from tins. Craven's standards were slipping, thought the Ensign. He was reasonably sure that such items as caviar, escargots, pâté de foie gras, Virginia ham, Brie, and remarkably alcoholic cherries were not included in the Commission's inventory of emergency stores. And neither would be the quite reasonable Montrachet, although it had lost a little by being decanted from its original bottles into standard squeeze bulbs. But if the Captain had decided that the laborer was worthy of his hire, with the consignees of the cargo making their contribution toward that hire, that was his privilege . . .? Responsibility?—call it what you will.

Jane Pentecost watched him eat. As he was finishing his coffee she said, "Now that our young lion has fed, he is required in the Control Room."

He looked at her both gratefully and warily. "What have I done now?"

"Nothing, my dear. It is to discuss what you—we—will do. Next."

He followed her to Control. Craven was there, of course, and so were Baxter and Summers. The Captain was enjoying one of his rank cigars, and a limp, roll-your-own cigarette dangled from the engineer's lower lip. The telepath coughed pointedly every time that acrid smoke expelled by either man drifted his way. Neither paid any attention to him, and neither did Grimes when he filled and lighted his own pipe.

Craven said, "I've been giving that scheme of yours some thought. It's a good one."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me. I should thank you. Mr. Summers, here, has been maintaining a careful listening watch. *Adler's* ETA is such that we can afford to shut down the Drive to make the modifications that you suggest. To begin with, we'll fake patching plates with plastic sheets—we can't afford to cannibalize any more of the ship's structure—so as to obscure our name and identification letters. We'll use more plastic to simulate missile launchers and laser projectors—luckily there's plenty of it in the cargo."

"We found more than plastic while we were lookin' for it," said the engineer, licking his lips.

"That will do, Mr. Baxter. Never, in normal circumstances, should I have condoned . . ."

"These circumstances ain't normal, Skipper, an' we all bloody well know it."

"That will do, I say." Craven inhaled deeply, then filled the air of the Control Room with a cloud of smoke that, thought Grimes, would have reflected laser even at close range. Summers almost choked, and Jane snapped, "Jeremy!"

"This, my dear, happens to be *my* Control Room." He turned again to the Ensign. "It will not be necessary, Mr. Grimes, to relocate the real weapons. They functioned quite efficiently where they are and, no doubt, will do so again. And now, as soon as I have shut down the Drive, I shall hand the watch over to you. You are well rested and refreshed."

"Come on," said Jane to Baxter. "Let's get suited up and get that sheeting out of the airlock."

"Couldn't Miss Pentecost hold the fort, sir?" asked Grimes. He added, "I've been through the camouflage course at the Academy."

"And so have I, Mr. Grimes. Furthermore, Miss Pentecost has had experience in working outside, but I don't think that you have."

"No, sir. But . . ."

"That will be all, Mr. Grimes."

At Craven's orders the Drive was shut down, and outside the viewports the sparse stars became stars again, were no longer pulsing spirals of multi-colored light. Then, alone in Control, Grimes actuated his scanners so that he could watch the progress of the work outside the hull, and switched on the transceiver that worked on the spacesuit frequency.

This time he ran no risk of being accused of being a Peeping Tom.

He had to admire the competence with which his shipmates worked. The plastic sheeting had no mass to speak of, but it was awkward stuff to handle. Torches glowed redly as it was cut, and radiated invisibly in the infrared as it was shaped and welded. The workers, in their bulky, clumsy suits, moved with a grace that was in startling contrast to their attire—a Deep Space ballet, thought Grimes, pleasantly surprised at his own way with words. From the speaker of the transceiver came Craven's curt orders, the brief replies of the others.

"*This way a little . . . that's it.*"

"*She'll do, Skipper.*"

*"No she won't. Look at the bend on it!"*

Then Jane's laughing voice. *"Our secret weapon, Jeremy. A laser that fires around corners!"*

*"That will do, Miss Pentecost. Straighten it, will you?"*

*"Ay, ay, sir. Captain, sir."*

The two interstellar drive engineers were working in silence, but with efficiency. Aboard the ship were only Grimes and Summers, the telepath.

Grimes felt out of it, but somebody had to mind the shop, he supposed. But the likelihood of any customers was remote.

Then he stiffened in his chair. One of the spacesuited figures was falling away from the vessel, drifting out and away, a tiny, glittering satellite reflecting the harsh glare of the working floods, a little, luminous butterfly pinned to the black velvet of the Ultimate Night. Who was it? He didn't know for certain, but thought that it was Jane. The ship's interplanetary drives—reaction and inertial— were on remote control, but reaction drive was out; before employing it he would have to swing to the desired heading by use of the directional gyroscopes. But the inertial drive was versatile.

He spoke into the microphone of the transceiver. "Secure yourselves. I am proceeding to rescue."

At once Craven's voice snapped back, "Hold it, Grimes. Hold it! There's no danger."

"But, sir . . ."

"Hold it!"

Grimes could see the distant figure now from a viewport, but it did not seem to be receding any longer. Hastily he checked with the radar. Range and bearing were not changing. Then, with relative bearing unaltered, the range was closing. He heard Jane call out, "Got it! I'm on the way back!"

Craven replied, "Make it snappy—otherwise young Grimes'll be chasing you all over the Universe!"

Grimes could see, now, the luminous flicker of a suit reaction unit from the lonely figure.

Later, he and the others examined the photographs that Jane had taken.

*Epsilon Sextans* looked as she was supposed to look—like a badly battle-scarred frigate of the Waldegren Navy.

## XXI

IN TERMS OF SPACE and of time there was not much longer to go.

The two ships—one knowing and one unknowing—raced toward their rendezvous. Had they been plunging through the normal continuum there would have been, toward the finish, hardly the thickness of a coat of paint between them, the adjustment of a microsecond in temporal precession rates would have brought inevitable collision. Craven knew this from the results of his own observations and from the encoded position reports, sent at six hourly intervals, by *Adler*. Worried, he allowed himself to fall astern, a mere half kilometer. It would be enough—and, too, it would mean that the frigate would mask him from the fire of planet-based batteries.

Summers maintained his listening watch. Apart from the position reports he had little of interest to tell the Captain. *Adler*, once or twice, had tried to get in contact with the Main Base on Waldegren—but, other than from a curt directive to proceed as ordered there were no signals from the planet to the ship. Dartura Base was more talkative. That was understandable. There was no colony on the planet and the Base personnel must be bored, must be pining for the sight of fresh faces, the sound of fresh voices. They would have their excitement soon enough, promised Craven grimly.

Through the warped continuum fell the two ships, and ahead the pulsating spiral that was the Dartura sun loomed ever brighter, ever larger. There were light years yet to go, but the Drive-induced distortions made it seem that tentacles of incandescent gas were already reaching out to clutch them, to drag them into the atomic furnace at the heart of the star.

In both Control Rooms watch succeeded watch—but the thoughts and the anticipations of the watchkeepers were not the same. Aboard *Adler* there was the longing for rest, for relaxation—although *Adler's* Captain must have been busy with the composition of a report that would clear him (if possible) of blame for his defeat. Aboard *Epsilon Sextans* there was the anticipation of revenge—insofar as Craven, Baxter, Jane Pentecost and the survivors of the ship's original personnel were concerned. Grimes? As the hour of reckoning approached he was more and more dubious. He did not know what to think, what to feel. There was the strong personal loyalty to Craven—and, even now, to Jane Pentecost. There was the friendship and mutual respect that had come into being between himself and Baxter. There was the knowledge that *Adler's* crew were no better than pirates, were murderers beyond rehabilitation. There was the pride he felt in his own skill as a gunnery officer. (But, as such, was he, himself, any better than a pirate, a murderer? The exercise of his craft aboard a warship would be legal—but here, aboard a merchantman, and a disguised merchantman at that, the legality was doubtful. What had his motives been when he volunteered—and as a commissioned officer of the Survey Service he had had no right to do so—and what were his motives now?)

He, Grimes, was not happy. He had far too much time to ponder the implications. He was an accessory before, during and after the fact. He had started off correctly enough, when he had tried to prevent Craven from requisitioning the Survey Service cargo aboard *Delta Orionis*, but after that . . . after he and Jane . . . (that, he admitted, was a memory that he wanted to keep, always, just as that other memory, of the bright picture of naked female flesh on the screen, he wished he could lose forever.)

He had started off correctly enough—and then, not only had he helped install the purloined armament but had used it. (*And used it well*, he told himself with a brief resurgence of pride.) Furthermore, the disguise of *Epsilon Sextans* had been his idea.

Oh, he was in it, all right. He was in up to his neck. What the final outcome of it all would be he did not care to contemplate.

But it would soon be over. He had no fears as to the outcome of the battle. The element of surprise would be worth at least a dozen missile launchers. *Adler* would never have the chance to use her laser.

*ADLER*, REPORTED SUMMERS, had shut down her Mannschenn Drive and emerged briefly into normal spacetime to make her final course adjustment. She was now headed not for the Dartura Sun but for the planet itself—or where the planet would be at the time of her final—and fatal—reemergence into the continuum. The last ETA was sent, together with the coordinates of her planetfall. *Epsilon Sextans* made her own course adjustment—simultaneity in time and a half kilometer's divergence in space being Craven's objective. It was finicky work, even with the use of the ship's computer, but the Captain seemed satisfied.

The race—the race that would culminate in a dead heat—continued. Aboard the frigate there was, reported Summers, a lessening of tension, the loosening up that comes when a voyage is almost over. Aboard the merchantman the tension increased. The interstellar drive engineers, Grimes knew, were no happier about it all than

he was—but they could no more back out than he could. Craven was calm and confident, and Baxter was beginning to gloat. Jane Pentecost assumed the air of dedication that in women can be so infuriating. Grimes glumly checked and rechecked his weaponry. It passed the time.

Dartura itself was visible now—not as tiny disk of light but as a glowing annulus about its distorted primary. The thin ring of luminescence broadened, broadened. The time to go dwindled to a week, to days, to a day, and then to hours . . .

To minutes . . .

To seconds . . . .

Craven and Grimes were in the Control Room; the others were at their various stations. From the intercom came the telepath's voice, "He's cutting the Drive—"

"Cut the Drive!" ordered the Captain.

In the Mannschenn Drive room the spinning, precessing gyroscopes slowed, slowed, ceased their endless tumbling, assumed the solidity that they exhibited only when at rest. For perhaps two seconds there was temporal confusion in the minds of all on board as the precession field died, and past, present and future inextricably mingled. Then there was a sun glaring through the viewports, bright in spite of the polarization—a sun, and, directly ahead, a great, green-orange planet. There was a ship . . . .

There were ships—ahead of them, astern, on all sides.

There were ships—and, booming from the intership transceiver, the transceiver that was neither tuned nor switched on (but navies could afford induction transmitters with their fantastic power consumption), came the authoritative voice: "*Inflexible* to *Adler*! Heave to for search and seizure ! Do not attempt to escape—our massed fields will hold you!"

The effect was rather spoiled when the same voice added, in bewilderment, "Must be seeing double . . . there's two of the bastards." The bewilderment did not last long. "*Inflexible* to *Adler* and to unidentified vessel. Heave to for search and seizure!"

"Hold your fire, Mr. Grimes," ordered Craven, quietly and bitterly. "It's the Survey Service."

"I know," replied Grimes—and pressed the button.

## XXII

HE NEVER KNEW just why he had done so.

Talking it over afterward, thinking about it, he was able to evolve a theory that fitted the facts. During the brief period immediately after the shutting down of the Drive, during the short session of temporal disorientation, there had been prescience, of a sort. He had known that *Adler*, come what may, would attempt one last act of defiance and revenge, just as *Adler's* Captain or Gunnery Officer must have known, in that last split second, that *Nemesis* was treading close upon his heels.

He pushed the button—and from the nozzles in the shell plating poured the reflective vapor, the protective screen that glowed ruddily as *Adler's* lasers slashed out at it.

From the speaker of the dead transceiver, the transceiver that should have been dead, roared the voice of the Survey Service Admiral. "*Adler!* Cease fire! Cease fire, damn you!" There was a pause, then: "You've asked for it!"

She had asked for it—and now she got it. Suddenly the blip on Grimes' screen that represented the *Waldegren* frigate became two smaller blips, and then four. The rolling fog outside *Epsilon Sextans'* viewports lost its luminosity, faded suddenly to drab grayness. The voice from the transceiver said coldly, "And *now you*, whoever you are, had better identify yourself. And fast."

Craven switched on the communications equipment. He spoke quietly into the microphone. "Interstellar Transport Commission's *Epsilon Sextans*. Bound Waverly, with general cargo . . ."

"Bound Waverley? Then what the hell are you doing here? And what's that armament you're mounting?"

"Plastic," replied the Captain. "Plastic dummies."

"And I suppose your ALGE is plastic, too. Come off it, Jerry. We've already boarded your old ship, and although your ex-Mate was most reluctant to talk we got a story of sorts from him."

"I thought I recognized your voice, Bill. May I congratulate you upon your belated efforts to stamp out piracy?"

"And may I deplore your determination to take the law into your own hands? Stand by for the boarding party."

Grimes looked at Craven, who was slumped in his seat. The Master's full beard effectively masked his expression. "Sir," asked the Ensign. "What can they do? What will they do?"

"You're the space lawyer, Grimes. You're the expert on Survey Service rules and regulations. What will it be, do you think? A medal—or a firing squad? Praise or blame?"

"You know the Admiral, sir?"

"Yes. I know the Admiral. We're old shipmates."

"Then you should be safe."

"Safe? I suppose so. Safe from the firing squad—but not safe from my employers. I'm a merchant captain, Grimes, and merchant captains aren't supposed to range the spacelanes looking for trouble. I don't think they'll dare fire me—but I know that I can never expect command of anything better than *Delta* class ships, on the drearier runs." Grimes saw that Craven was smiling. "But there're still the Rim Worlds. There's still the Sundowner Line, and the chance of high rank in the Rim Worlds Navy when and if there is such a service."

"You have . . . inducements, sir?"

"Yes. There are . . . inducements. Now."

"I thought, once," said Grimes, "that I could say the same. But not now. Not any longer. Even so . . . I'm Survey Service, sir, and I should be proud of my service. But in this ship, this merchant vessel, with her makeshift armament, we fought against heavy odds, and won. And, just now, we saved ourselves. It wasn't the Survey Service that saved us."

"Don't be disloyal," admonished Craven.

"I'm not being disloyal, sir. But . . . or, shall we say, I'm being loyal. You're the first captain under whom I served under fire. If you're going out to the Rim Worlds I'd like to come with you."

"Your commission, Grimes. You know that you must put in ten years' service before resignation is possible."

"But I'm dead."

"*Dead!*"

"Yes. Don't you remember? I was snooping around in the *Mannschenn Drive* room and I got caught in the temporal precession field. My body still awaits burial; it's in a sealed metal box in the deep freeze. It can never be identified."

Craven laughed. "I'll say this for you. You're ingenious. But how do we account for the absence of the late Mr. Wolverton? And your presence aboard this ship?"

"I can hide, sir, and . . ."

"And while you're hiding you'll concoct some story that will explain everything. Oh Grimes, Grimes—you're an officer I wish I could always have with me. But I'll not stand in the way of your career. All I can do, all I will do, is smooth things over on your behalf with the Admiral. I should be able to manage that."

Jane Pentecost emerged from the hatch in the Control Room deck. Addressing Craven she said formally, "Admiral Williams, sir." She moved to one side to make way for the flag officer.

"Jerry, you bloody pirate!" boomed Williams, a squat, rugged man the left breast of whose shirt was ablaze with ribbons. He advanced with outstretched hand.

"Glad to have you aboard, Bill. This is Liberty Hall—you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

"Not again!" groaned Grimes.

"And who is this young man?" asked the Admiral.

"I owe you—or your Service—an apology, Bill. This is Ensign Grimes, who was a passenger aboard *Delta Orionis*. I'm afraid that I . . . er . . . press-ganged him into my service. But he has been most . . . cooperative? Uncooperative? Which way do you want it?"

"As we are at war with Waldegren—I'd say cooperative with reservations. Was it he, by the way, who used the ALGE? Just as well for you all that he did."

"At war with Waldegren?" demanded Jane Pentecost. "So you people have pulled your fingers out at last."

The Admiral raised his eyebrows.

"One of my Rim Worlders," explained Craven. "But I shall be a Rim Worlder myself shortly."

"You're wise, Jerry. I've got the buzz that the Commission is taking a very dim view of your piracy or privateering or whatever it was, and my own lords and masters are far from pleased with you. You'd better get the hell out before the lawyers have decided just what crimes you are guilty of."

"As bad as that?"

"As bad as that."

"And young Grimes, here?"

"We'll take him back. Six months' strict discipline aboard my flagship will undo all the damage that you and your ideas have done to him. And now, Jerry, I'd like your full report."

"In my cabin, Bill. Talking is thirsty work."

"Then lead on. It's your ship."

"And it's your watch, Mr. Grimes. She'll come to no harm on this trajectory while we get things sorted out."

GRIMES SAT WITH JANE PENTECOST in the Control Room. Through the ports, had he so desired, he could have watched the rescue teams extricating the survivors from the wreckage of *Adler*; he could have stared out at the looming bulk of *Dartura* on the beam. But he did not do so, and neither did he look at his instruments.

He looked at Jane. There was so much about her that he wanted to remember—and, after all, so very little that he was determined to forget.

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Grimes, will you pack whatever gear you have and prepare to transfer with Admiral Williams to the flagship? Hand the watch over to Miss Pentecost."

"But you'll be shorthanded, sir."

"The Admiral is lending me a couple of officers for the rest of the voyage."

"Very good, sir."

Grimes made no move. He looked at Jane—a somehow older, a tireder, a more human Jane than the girl he had first met. He said, "I'd have liked to have come out to the Rim with you . . ."

She said, "It's impossible, John."

"I know. But . . ."

"You'd better get packed."

He unbuckled his seat belt, went to where she was sitting. He kissed her. She responded, but it was only the merest flicker of a response.

He said, "Goodbye."

She said, "Not goodbye. We'll see you out on the Rim, sometime."

With a bitterness that he was always to regret he replied, "Not very likely."

**THE END**

**For more great books visit**

<http://www.webscription.net>

# The Road to the Rim

## Table of Contents

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[XV](#)

[XVI](#)

[XVII](#)

[XVIII](#)

[XIX](#)

[XX](#)

[XXI](#)

[XXII](#)