

# THE DARK DIMENSIONS

By A Bertram Chandler

A Commodore Grimes Novel

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## I

"I've another job for you, Grimes," said Admiral Kravitz.

"Mphm," grunted Commodore Grimes, Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, "sir." He regarded the portly flag officer with something less than enthusiasm. There had been a time, not so very long ago, when he had welcomed being dragged away from his rather boring civilian duties as Rim Runners' astronomical superintendent, but increasingly of late he had come to appreciate a relatively quiet, uneventful life. Younger men than he could fare the starways, he was happy to remain a desk-sitting space commodore.

"Rim Runners are granting you indefinite leave of absence," went on Kravitz.

"They would," grumbled Grimes.

"On full pay."

Grimes' manner brightened slightly. "And I'll be drawing my commodore's pay and allowances from the Admiralty, of course?"

"Of course. You are back on the active list as and from 00:00 hours this very day."

"We can always use the extra money . . ." murmured Grimes.

Kravitz looked shocked. "I never knew that you were so mercenary, Grimes."

"You do now, sir." The Commodore grinned briefly, then once again looked rather apprehensive. "But it's not Kinsolving's Planet again, is it?" The Admiral laughed. "I can understand your being more than somewhat allergic to that peculiar world."

Grimes chuckled grimly. "I think it's allergic to me, sir. Three times I've landed there, and each time was unlucky; the third time unluckiest of all." "I've read your reports. But set your mind at rest. It's not Kinsolving."

"Then where?"

"The Outsider."

"The Outsider..." repeated Grimes slowly. How many times since the discovery of that alien construction out beyond the Galactic Rim had he urged that he be allowed to take *Faraway Quest* to make his own investigation? He had lost count. Always his proposals had been turned down. Always he could not be spared or was required more urgently elsewhere. Too, it was obvious

that the Confederacy was scared of the thing, even though it swam in space that came under Rim Worlds' jurisdiction. The Federation was scared of it, too. "Let well enough alone," was the attitude of both governments.

"The Outsider..." said Grimes again. "I was beginning to think that it occupied top place on the list of untouchables. Why the sudden revival of interest?"

"We have learned," Kravitz told him, "from reliable sources, that the Waldegren destroyer *Adler* is on her way out to the... *thing*. I needn't tell you that the Duchy of Waldegren is making a comeback, or that Federation policy is that Wal-degren will never be allowed to build its fleet up to the old level. But sophisticated weaponry can give a small navy superiority over a large one."

"The Outsiders' Ship, as we all know, is a storehouse of science and technology thousands—millions, perhaps—of years in ad-vance of our own. *Your* Captain Calver got his paws on to some of it, but passed nothing of inter-est on to us before he flew the coop. Since then we, and the Federation, and the Shaara Empire, and probably quite a few more, have sent expeditions. Every one has ended disastrously. It is possible, probable, even, that this Waldegren effort will end disastrously. But we can't be sure."

"It should not take long to recommission your *Faraway Quest*. She's only just back from the Fleet Maneuvers, at which she was present as an auxiliary cruiser...."

"I know," said Grimes. "I should have been in command of her."

"But you weren't. For all your early life in the Federation's Survey Service, for all your rank in our Naval Reserve, you don't make a good naval officer. You're too damned independent. You like to be left alone to play in your own little corner. But—I grant you this—whatever sort of mess you fall into you always come up smelling of roses."

"Thank you, sir," said Grimes stiffly.

Kravitz chuckled. "It's true, isn't it? Anyhow, you should be on the spot, showing the flag, before *Adler* blows in. You'll be minding the shop. Play it by ear, as you always do. And while you're about it, you might try to find out something useful about The Outsider."

"Is that all?" asked Grimes.

"For the time being, yes. Oh, personnel for *Faraway Quest*.... You've a free hand. Make up the crew you think you'll need from whatever officers are available, Regulars or Reservists. The Federation has intimated that it'd like an observer along. I think I'm right in saying that Commodore Verrill still holds a reserve commission in the Intel-ligence Branch of their Survey Service...."

"She does, sir. And she'd be very annoyed if she wasn't allowed to come along for the ride."

"I can well imagine. And now we'll browse through The Outsider files and try to put you in the picture."

He pressed a button under his desk, and a smartly uniformed W.R.W.N. officer came in, car-rying a half dozen bulky folders that she put on the Admiral's desk. She was followed by two male petty officers who set up screen, projector and tape recorders.

Kravitz opened the first folder. "It all started," he said, "with Commander Maudsley of the Fed-eration Survey Service's Intelligence Branch...."

## II

"It all started," said Grimes, "with Com-mander Maudsley of the Federation Survey Service's Intelligence Branch...."

As soon as he had spoken the words he regretted them. Sonya, his wife, had known Maudsley well. They had been more, much more, than merely fellow officers in the same service. Grimes looked at her anxiously, the reddening of his prominent ears betraying his embarrassment. But her strong, fine-featured face under the high-piled, glossy, au-burn hair was expressionless. All that she said, coldly, was, "Why bring that up, John?"

He told her, "You know the story. Mayhew knows the story. I know the story. But Clarisse doesn't. And as she's to be one of my key officers on this expedition it's essential that she be put in the picture."

"I can get it all from Ken," said Clarisse Mayhew.

"Not in such detail," stated Sonya. "We have to admit that my ever-loving husband has always been up to the eyebrows in whatever's happened on the Rim."

"You haven't done so badly yourself," Grimes told her, breaking the tension, returning the smile that flickered briefly over her face.

"One thing that I *like* about the Rim Worlds," murmured Clarisse, "is that the oddest things al-ways seem to be happening. Life was never like this on Francisco. But go on, please, John."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. "Talking is thirsty work."

He raised a hand, and on silent wheels a robot servitor rolled into the comfortable lounge room. Most people who could afford such luxuries pre-ferred humanoid automatons and called them by human names, but not Grimes. He always said, and always would say, that it was essential that machines be kept in their proper place. The thing that had answered his summons was obviously just a machine, no more than a cylindrical tank on a tricycle carriage with two cranelike arms. It stood there impassively waiting for their orders, and then from a hatch in its body produced a tankard of cold beer for Grimes, Waverley Scotch and soda for Mayhew, iced Rigellian dragon's milk for the ladies.

"Here's to all of us," said Grimes, sipping ap-preciatively. He looked over the rim of his glass at his guests—at Mayhew, tall, gangling, deceptively youthful and fragile in appearance, at Clarisse, attractively plump in face and figure, her rich brown hair hanging down to waist level. On Fran-cisco, the world of her birth, she had been one of the so-called Blossom People, and still looked the part.

"Get on with it, John," said Sonya after sam-pling her own drink.

"Very well. It all started, as I've already said, with Commander Maudsley. As well as being a fully qualified astronaut, he was an Intelligence Officer...."

"It didn't start with Maudsley," said Sonya sharply. "No one knows *when* it started."

"Oh, all right. I'll go back a few more years in time. It was suspected for quite a long while that there was *something out there*. Many years ago, long before

the Rim Worlds seceded from the Fed-eration, Faraway was a penal colony of sorts. The Survey Service actually manned a ship with the sweepings of the jails and sent her out to find that ... *something*. What happened to her is not known to this day. After we'd established our own Con-federacy, the Federation's Survey Service was still snooping around the Rim—and Maudsley, passing himself off as the master of a star tramp called *Polar Queen*, did quite a lot of work out there. So far as we know he was the first *human* spaceman to set eyes on the Outsiders' Ship. Shortly thereafter he crashed his own vessel coming in to a landing at Port Farewell on Faraway. He was the only sur-vivor. After that he stayed out there. He served in a few of our Rim Runners' ships, but he was practically unemployable. We didn't know then that he was a Survey Service Commander, Intelligence Branch at that, but it wouldn't have made any difference. He finished up as mate of a ship called, funnily enough, *The Outsider*. Her master, Cap-tain Calver, had been master in our employ, but he and his officers made a pile of money out of the salvage of the T.G. Clipper *Thermopylae* and invested it in an obsolescent Epsilon Class tramp, going into business as shipowners. To comply with regulations, Calver had to ship a chief officer with at least a Chief Pilot's Certificate—and Maudsley was the only one that he could find on Nova Caledon."

"Maudsley was hitting the bottle, almost drink-ing himself to death. (Forgive me, Sonya, but that's the way that it was.) He talked in his drunken delirium. He talked about the Outsiders' Ship, the finding of which had somehow wrecked his life. Then he committed suicide...."

Grimes paused, looking at his wife. Her face was expressionless. He went on, "For quite a while after that Calver got by in his *Outsider*. Toward the finish, Sonya was his chief officer—she holds her Master Astronaut's papers, as you know. Trade on the Rim was expanding faster than Rim Runners' fleet and there was plenty of cargo for an independent operator. But, eventually, times got bad for Calver. Rim Runners had suffi-cient tonnage for all requirements, and a small, one ship company just couldn't compete. It was then that he and his co-owners remembered Maudsley's story, and decided to find the Ship From Outside for themselves. They knew that there was something out beyond the Rim that could make them impossibly rich. They had Maudsley's sailing directions, such as they were. The Confederacy evinced some slight interest in the matter, and I was able to help out with the loan of a Mass Proximity Indicator—which, in those days, was a *very* expensive hunk of equipment. Even the Federation chipped in. As *you* know, my dear.

"Calver found the Outsiders' Ship. He and his people boarded... her?... it? A ship? A robot intelligence? A quarantine station? Who knows? But they found the thing. They boarded it. But I'll let Calver speak for himself. This is a recording of the report he made to me."

Grimes switched on the small recorder that was standing ready on the coffee table. He hated him-self for raising so many ghosts from Sonya's past—she and Calver had been lovers, he knew—but these ghosts were bound to have been raised during the expedition. Her face was stony, expressionless, as the once familiar voice issued from the little machine.

"Did you ever read a twentieth century Terran author called Wells? He's recommended reading in the 'Fathers of the Future' course they have at most

schools. Anyhow, there's one of his stories, a fantasy, called *A Vision Of Judgment*. Wells imagined a Judgment Day, with all living and all who have ever lived called by the Last Trump to face their Maker, to be tried and punished for their sins or, perhaps, to be rewarded for their good deeds. Everyone has his session of Hell as his naked soul stands in full view of the multitude while the Re-cording Angel recites the long, long catalog of petty acts of meanness and spite.... All the trivial (but not so trivial) shabby things, all the things in which even the most perverted nature could never take pride, and even the spectacular wrongdoings made to look shabby and trivial....

"It was left there, the Outsiders' Ship, out beyond the Rim, in the hope that with the development of interstellar flight techniques it would be discovered. It was left there, in the far outer reaches of this galaxy, to test the fitness of its discoverers to use the treasures of science and technology that it contains, to build ships capable of making the Big Crossing. We passed the test without cracking.... quite. Had we cracked there is little doubt that we should have been bundled off the premises as unceremoniously as Maudsley must have been, bundled outside with memories of fear and of horror, and of loss, and with some sort of posthypnotic inhibition to stop us from ever talking about it. It's possible, of course, that some of Maudsley's crew did pass the test—but they died with *Polar Queen*.

"The test.... yes, it's ingenious, and amazingly simple. It's... it's a mirror that's held up to you in which you see... everything. Yes, *everything*. Things that you've forgotten, and things that you've wished for years that you could forget. After all, a man can meet any alien monster without fear, without hate, after he has met and faced and accepted the most horrible monster of all....

"Himself."

Grimes switched off, then busied himself refueling and lighting his pipe. He said, through the acrid smoke cloud, "Calver came back, as you've gathered, and then he and his engineers did a few odd things to his ship's Mannschenn Drive, and then they all pushed off to...? Your guess is as good as mine. To the next galaxy but three? The general impression was that they had some sort of intergalactic drive. Calver was decent enough to leave me a pile of things—notes and diagrams and calculations. Unfortunately I'm no engineer...."

"You can say that again!" interjected Sonya.

Grimes ignored this. "Our own bright boys tried to make something of them. They actually rebuilt a Mannschenn Drive unit as allegedly specified, but it just won't work. Literally. Every moving part has absolute freedom to move on bearings that are practically frictionless, but...." He grinned. "Mayhew reckons that the thing won't work unless its operator is approved by it. Frankly, I can't approve of a *machine* that thinks it has the right to approve or disapprove of me!"

"That's only my theory, John," put in Mayhew.

"But you believe it, don't you? Where was I? Oh, yes. After the Calver affair there was quite a flurry of interest in the Outsiders' Ship. The Federation, with our permission, sent *Starfinder* to nose around. She located quite a few derelicts in the vicinity—a Shaara ship, an odd vessel that must have belonged to some incredibly ancient culture, a Dring cruiser. Then she became a

dere-lict herself. When her Carlotti transmissions suddenly stopped we sent *Rim Culverin* to investigate. The *Culverin's* captain reported that he had boarded *Starfinder* and found all hands very dead; a few had been shot and the rest wiped out by a lethal gas in the air circulation system. Whether or not any of *Starfinder's* people boarded the Outsiders' Ship we don't know. Probably some, at least, did. *Rim Culverin* was ordered not to investigate The Outsider but to tow *Starfinder* in to Lorn. She did just that. Then our big brothers of the Federation tried again, this time with a Constellation Class cruiser, *Orion*. *Orion* blew up with no survivors. *Rim Carronade* was with her and saw it happen. *Orion* had put quite a large boarding party onto—or into—the Outsiders' Ship, and it was after their return to their own vessel that the big bang happened. *Rim Carronade* was damaged herself, with quite a few casualties, and returned to Lorn."

"All of you here know me. I'm not one of those people who say, in a revoltingly pious voice, that there are some things that we are not meant to know. For years I've been wanting to take my own expedition out to investigate that hunk of alien ironmongery. I've got my chance at last—and I'm just a little scared."

"And I'm damn glad that I shall have all of you with me.

### III

She was an old ship, was *Faraway Quest*, but in first class condition. She had started life as an Epsilon Class tramp, one of those sturdy work-horses of the Federation's Interstellar Transport Commission. Sold to Rim Runners during the days when practically all of the tonnage out on the Rim was at best secondhand, she had been converted into a survey ship. In her, Grimes had discovered and explored the worlds of the Eastern Circuit: Tharn, Mellise, Grollor and Stree. In her he had made the first contact with the antimatter systems to the galactic west.

After secession, the setting up of the Rim Worlds Confederacy, she had been subject to further conversion, this time being fitted out as an auxiliary cruiser. Even though the Rim Worlds Navy now possessed a sizable fleet built to its own specifications, this was still her official status. Nonetheless, Commodore Grimes regarded her as *his* ship.

As Admiral Kravitz had told him, she was practically ready to lift off at once to where The Outsider drifted in the intergalactic nothingness. She was almost fully stored. Her "farm" was in a flourishing state; her tissue culture, yeast and algae tanks were well stocked and healthy. Main and auxiliary machinery were almost fresh from thorough overhaul. Sundry weaponry had been mounted so that she could play her part in the fleet maneuvers, and this Grimes decided to retain. He liked to think of himself as a man of peace these days but was willing to admit that it is much easier to be peaceful behind laser projections and rocket batteries than in an unarmed ship.

The selection of personnel for the expedition posed no great problems. Billy Williams, normally skipper of the deep space tug *Rim Mamelute*, was available. On more than one occasion he had served as Grimes' second-in-command.

James Carnaby, second officer with Rim Runners and an outstandingly competent navigator, had just come off leave and was awaiting reappointment. Like Williams, he held a commission in the Reserve, as did Hendrikson, another Rim Runners' second officer, just paid off from *Rim Griffon*. There was Davis, an engineer whom Grimes knew quite well and liked, and who was qualified in all three Drives: Mannschenn, inertial and reaction. There was Sparky Daniels, currently officer in charge of the Port Forlorn Carlotti Station but who frequently pined for a deep space appointment. And there was Major Dalzell of the Rim Worlds Marines. Grimes had heard good reports of this young space soldier and, on being introduced to him, had liked him at once.

There was what Grimes described as a brain trust of buffoons from the University of Lorn. There was a team of technicians.

There was an officer of the Intelligence Branch of the Federation's Survey Service—just along, as she said, "to see how the poor live." This, of course, was Commander Sonya Verrill, otherwise Mrs. Grimes, who, in spite of her marriage to a Rim Worlder, had retained both her Federation citizenship and her Survey Service commission. There were the psionics—Ken Mayhew, one of the last of the psionic communications officers, and Clarisse, his wife. He was a highly trained and qualified telepath. She, born on Francisco, was a descendant of that caveman artist from the remote past who, somehow, on Kinsolving's Planet, had been dragged through time to what was, to him, the far future. Like her ancestor, Clarisse was an artist. Like him, she was a specialist. Inborn in her was the talent to lure victims to the hunter's snare. Twice, on Kinsolving itself, she had exercised this talent—and on each occasion the hunters had become the victims.

The work of preparing the ship for her voyage went well and swiftly. There was little to be done, actually, save for the rearranging of her accommodations for the personnel that she was to carry, the conversion of a few of her compartments into laboratories for the scientists. Toward the end of the refit Grimes was wishing that on that long ago day when the Rim Worlds had decided that they should have their own survey ship somebody had put up a convincing case for the purchase of an obsolescent Alpha Class liner! Not that there was anything wrong with *Faraway Quest*—save for her relative smallness. And it was not only the civilians who demanded space and yet more space. Officer Hendrikson—who, as a Reserve officer had specialized in gunnery—sulked hard when he was told that he could not have the recreation rooms as magazines for his missiles. (Dr. Druthen, leader of the scientists, was already sulking because he had not been allowed to take them over as workshops.)

Grimes knew that he could not hasten matters, but he chafed at every delay. As long as the *Quest* was sitting on her pad in Port Forlorn far too many people were getting into every act. Once she was up and outward bound he would be king of his own little spaceborne castle, an absolute monarch. Admiral Kravitz had made it clear to him that he would be on his own, that he was to act as he saw fit. It was a game in which he was to make up the rules as he went along.

It was a game that Grimes had always enjoyed playing.

## IV

*Faraway quest* lifted from Port Forlorn without ceremony; it could have been no more than the routine departure of a Rim Runners' freighter. Grimes had the controls; he loved ship handling and knew, without false modesty, that he was a better than average practitioner of this art. In the control room with him were Sonya, Billy Williams, Carnaby, Hendrikson and Sparky Daniels. Also there, as a guest, was Dr. Druthen. Grimes already did not like Druthen. The physicist was a fat slug of a man, always with an oily sheen of perspiration over his hairless skin, always with an annoyingly supercilious manner. He sat there, a silent sneer embodied. Had he been a crew member he would have faced a charge of dumb insolence.

Daniels was at the NST transceiver, a little man who looked as though he had been assembled from odds and ends of wire, highly charged wire at that. Williams—bulky, blue-jowled, with shaggy black hair—lounged in the co-pilot's seat. He slumped there at ease, but his big hands were ready to slam down on his controls at a microsecond's notice. Slim, yellow-haired, a little too conventionally handsome, Carnaby was stationed at the radar with Hendrikson, also blond but bearded and burly, looking as though he should have been wearing a horned helmet, ready to take over if necessary. He managed to convey the impression that fire control was his real job, not navigation.

And Sonya conveyed the impression that she was just along as an observer. She was slim and beautiful in her Survey Service uniform, with the micro-skirt that would have been frowned upon by the rather frumpish senior female officers of the Confederacy's Navy. She was a distracting influence, decided Grimes. Luckily he knew her well; even so he would find it hard to keep his attention on the controls.

"Mphm," he grunted. Then, "Commander Williams?"

"All stations secured for lift-off, Skipper. All drives on Stand By."

"Mr. Daniels, request clearance, please."

"*Faraway Quest* to Tower. *Faraway Quest* to tower. Request clearance for departure. Over."

The voice of the Aerospace Control officer came in reply. "Tower to *Faraway Quest*. You have clearance." Then, in far less impersonal accents, "Good questing!"

Grimes grunted, keeping his face expressionless. He said into his intercom microphone, "Count down for lift-off. Over to you, Commander Williams."

"Ten..." intoned Williams. "Nine... Eight..."

"A touching ritual," muttered Dr. Druthen. Grimes glared at him but said nothing.

"Five... Four..."

The Commodore's glance swept the control room, missing nothing. His eyes lingered longer than they should have done on Sonya's knees and exposed thighs.

"Zero!"

At the touch of Grimes' finger on the button the inertial drive grumbled into



life. The ship qui-tered, but seemed reluctant to leave the pad. *I should have been expecting this*, he thought. *The last time I took this little bitch out I wasn't inflicted with this excess tonnage of personnel...* He applied more pressure, feeling and hearing the faint *clicks* as the next two stages were brought into operation. The irregular beat of the drive was suddenly louder.

"Negative contact, sir," stated Carnaby. "Lift-ing... lifting..."

Grimes did not need to look at the instruments. He was flying by the seat of his pants. He could feel the additional weight on his buttocks as accel-eration, gentle though it was, augmented gravity. He did not bother to correct lateral drift when the wind caught *Faraway Quest* as soon as she was out of the lee of the spaceport buildings. It did not really matter at which point she emerged from the upper atmosphere of the planet.

Up she climbed, and up, and the drab, gray landscape with the drab, gray city was spread be-neath her, and the drab, gray cloud ceiling was heavy over the transparent dome of the control room. Up she climbed and up and beyond the dome; outside the viewports there was only the formless, swirling fog of the overcast.

Up she climbed—and suddenly, the steely Lorn sun broke through, and the dome darkened in compensation to near opacity. Up she climbed....

"Commodore," asked Druthen in his unpleas-antly high-pitched voice, "isn't it time that you set course or trajectory or whatever you call it?"

"No," snapped Grimes. Then, trying to make his voice pleasant or, at least, less unpleasant, "I usually wait until I'm clear of the Van Allen."

"Oh. Surely in this day and age that would not be necessary."

"It's the way that I was brought up," grunted Grimes. He scowled at Sonya, who had assumed her maddeningly superior expression. He snapped at Carnaby, "Let me know as soon as we're clear of the radiation belt, will you?"

The sun, dimmed by polarization, was still di-rectly ahead, directly overhead from the view-point of those in the control room, in the very nose of the ship. To either side now there was almost unrelieved blackness, the ultimate night in which swam the few, faint, far nebulosities of the Rim sky; the distant, unreachable island universes. Be-low, huge in the after vision screen, was the pearly gray sphere that was Lorn. Below, too, was the misty Galactic Lens.

"All clear, sir," said Carnaby quietly.

"Good. Commander Williams, make the usual announcements."

"Attention, please," Williams said. "Atten-tion, please. Stand by for free fall. Stand by for free fall. Stand by for centrifugal effects."

Grimes cut the drive. He was amused to note that, in spite of the ample warning, Druthen had not secured his seat belt. He remarked mildly, "I thought that you'd have been ready for free fall, Doctor."

The physicist snarled wordlessly, managed to clip the strap about his flabby corpulence. Grimes returned his full attention to the controls. Di-rectional gyroscopes rumbled, hummed and whined as the ship was turned about her short axis. The Lorn sun drifted from its directly ahead posi-tion to a point well abaft the *Quest's* beam. The cartwheel sight set in the ship's stem was centered on ... nothingness. Broad on the bow was the Lens, with a very few bright stars, the suns of the Rim Worlds, lonely in the blackness beyond its

edge.

Williams looked toward Grimes inquiringly. The Commodore nodded.

"Attention, please," Williams said. "Stand by for resumption of acceleration. Stand by for initiation of Mannschenn Drive."

Grimes watched the accelerometer as he re-started the engines. He let acceleration build up to a steady one G, no more, no less. He switched on the Mannshenn Drive. Deep in the bowels of the ship the gleaming complexity of gyroscopes began to move, to turn, to precess, building up speed. Faster spun the rotors and faster and their song was a thin, high keening on the very verge of audibility. And as they spun they precessed, tumbling out of the frame of the continuum, falling down and through the dark dimensions, pulling the vessel and all aboard her with them.

The Commodore visualized the working of the uncanny machines—as he always did. It helped to take his mind off the initial effects: the sagging of all colors down the spectrum, the wavering insubstantiality of the forms, the outlines of everything and everybody, the distortion of all the senses, the frightening feeling of *deja vu*. He said, making a rather feeble joke of it, "This is where we came in."

The others might be paid to laugh at their commanding officer's witticisms, but Dr. Druthen made it plain that he was not. He looked at Grimes, all irritated and irritating inquiry. "Came in *where*?" he demanded.

Sonya laughed without being paid for it.

Grimes glared at his wife, then said patiently to the scientist, "Just a figure of speech, Doctor."

"Oh. I would have thought that 'this is where we are going out' would have been more apt." Druthen stared out through the viewport, to the distorted Galactic Lens. Grimes, seeing what he was looking at, thought of making his usual remark about a Klein flask blown by a drunken glassblower, then thought better of it. He found it hard to cope with people who had too literal minds.

"And talking of going out," went on Druthen, "why aren't we going out?"

"What do you mean, Doctor?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Commodore, but I always understood that the Outsiders' Ship lay some fifty light years out beyond the outermost Rim sun. I'm not a spaceman, but even I can see that we are, at the moment, just circumnavigating the fringe of the galaxy."

Grimes sighed. He said, "Finding The Outsider is like trying to find a tiny needle in one helluva big haystack. At the moment we are, as you have said, circumnavigating the Lens. When we have run the correct distance we shall have the Lead Stars in line or almost in line. I shall bring the Leads astern, and run out on them for fifty light years. *Then* I shall run a search pattern...."

Druthen snorted. What he said next revealed that he must have acquainted himself very well with Grimes' history, his past record. He said sardonically, "What a *seamanlike* like way of doing it, Commodore. But, of course, you're an honorary admiral of the surface Navy on Tharn, and your Master Mariner's Certificate is valid for the oceans of Aquarius. I would have thought, in my

layman's innocence, that somebody would have laid a marker buoy, complete with Carlotti beacon, off The Outsider years ago."

"Somebody did," Grimes told him tersely. "No less than three somebodies did. According to last reports those buoys are still there, but none of them is functioning as a Carlotti transmitter. None of them ever did function for longer than three days, Galactic Standard."

"Steady on trajectory, Skipper," announced Williams.

"Thank you, Commander. Set normal deep space watches," replied Grimes. Slowly he un-buckled himself from his chair. It was customary for the captain of a ship, at this juncture, to invite any important passengers to his quarters for an ice-breaking drink or two. He supposed that Druthen was a passenger of sorts—he had signed no Articles of Agreement—and, as leader of the scientific team he was important enough. Too im-portant.

"Will you join me in a quiet drink before dinner, Doctor?" Grimes asked.

"Too right," replied Druthen, licking his thick lips.

Sonya's eyebrows lifted, although her fine-featured face showed no expression.

## V

Druthen drank gin, straight, from a large glass. Sonya sipped a weak Scotch and soda. Grimes drank gin, but with plenty of ice and a touch of bitters. Druthen managed to convey the impres-sion of being more at home in the Commodore's day cabin than its rightful occupants. He talked down at Grimes and Sonya. It was obvious that he considered himself to be the real leader of the expedition, with the astronomical personnel along only as coach drivers.

Patronizingly he said, "Your trouble, Grimes, is that you're too old fashioned. You don't move with the times. I really believe that you'd have been happy in the days of wooden ships and iron men."

"You can say that again," agreed Grimes. He was pleased to note that Sonya was not taking sides against him, as she usually did when the conversation got on to these lines. He went on, "Then, the shipmaster wasn't at the mercy of his technicians to the extent that he is now."

"And you really believe that...." Druthen's pale eyebrows were almost invisible against the unhealthy pallor of his skin, but it was obvious that they had been raised. "But why, my dear Grimes, must you persist in this passion for the archaic? To take just one glaring example—the invention and subsequent development of the Carlotti deep space communications system should have put every over glamorized but unreliable psionic communications officer out of a job. And yet I was amazed to discover that you carry a representative of that peculiar breed aboard this very vessel."

"Ken Mayhew—Commander Mayhew—is an old friend and shipmate...."

"Sentiment, Grimes. Sentiment."

"Let me finish, Druthen." Grimes was child-ishly pleased to note that the physicist had been offended by the omission of his title. "Let me finish. Commander Mayhew is outstanding in his own field. As long as I have him on board, as well as the Carlotti gadgetry, I shall never be at the mercy of a single

fuse. Throughout this voyage he will be in continuous touch, waking and sleeping, with his juniors at the PC Station at Port Forlorn. Too...." But Grimes suddenly decided not to come out with what he had been going to say.

"Go on, Commodore."

*I always like to keep at least one ace up my sleeve* thought Grimes. He said nothing further about Mayhew's abilities, but went on, "Too, it's just possible that we shall be able to make use of his wife's talents."

Druthen laughed sneeringly. "What sort of outfit *is* this? A telepath and a ghost raiser con-sidered essential to the success of a *scientific* ex-pedition." He raised a pudgy hand. "Hear me out. I've done my homework Grimes. I've read the reports written by you and about you. I know that you experienced some odd hallucinations on Kinsolving's Planet—but surely you can distinguish between the objective and the subjective. Or can't you?"

"He can," put in Sonya. "And I can. I was there too, one of the times."

"And on the second occasion," said Grimes nastily, "we had a scad of scientists along."

"Agreed," remarked Druthen smugly. "But second-raters, all of them. On the first occasion—correct me if I'm wrong—it was an expedition organized by a group of religious fa-natics. On the third occasion there was, with the Commodore and you, Mrs. Grimes, a shipload of fellow spacemen and—women. So...."

Grimes managed to keep his temper. "So it all never happened, Doctor?"

"That is my opinion, Commodore." He refilled his glass without invitation. "Frankly, I maintain that *this* expedition should have been under the command of a hardheaded scientist rather than a spaceman who has shown himself to be as superstitious as the old-time seamen regarding whom he is such an expert."

Grimes grinned mirthlessly. "But I am in com-mand, Doctor."

"That is quite obvious. For example, this wast-ing of time by running to bring your famous Lead Stars in line rather than steering directly for the last reported position of The Outsider."

Grimes laughed. "As long as I'm in command, Dr. Druthen, things will be done my way. But I will tell you why I'm doing things this way. The Out-sider... wobbles. Unpredictably. Sometimes it is this side of the Leads, sometimes the other. Some-times it is further in, toward the Rim, sometimes it is further out. In the unlikely event of its being in the vicinity of the position at which I shall bring the Lead Stars in line it will be within the detection range of several planet-based observatories. It just might be there, but the chances are that it will not be. So I stand out, and out, until I've run my distance, and then if I've picked up nothing on the mass proximity indicator I just cruise around in circles, through an ever expanding volume of space. Quite simple, really."

"Simple!" snorted Druthen. He muttered something about people who must have learned their navigation in Noah's Ark. He splashed more gin into his glass. Grimes was pleased to see that the bottle was empty.

Sonya made a major production of consulting her wristwatch. She said, "It's time that we got dressed for dinner."

Surlily, Druthen took the hint. He finished his drink, got up clumsily.

"Thank you, Commodore. Thank you, Mrs. Grimes. I suppose I'd better freshen up myself. No, you needn't come with me. I can find my own way down."

When the door had shut behind him Grimes looked at Sonya, and she looked at him. Grimes demanded, of nobody in particular, "What have I done to deserve this?"

"Plenty," she told him. Then, "Pour me a drink, a stiff one. I just didn't want to be accused of setting that bastard a bad example."

He complied. "I don't think that anybody could possibly."

She laughed. "You're right." Then, "But don't underestimate him, John. He wasn't the only one doing his homework before we lifted off. I did, too, while you were getting the ship ready. I was able to get my paws on his dossier. To begin with, he's brilliant. Not quite a genius—although he likes to think that he is—but not far from it. He is also notorious for being completely lacking in the so-cial graces."

"You can say that again!"

"But,.. and it's an interesting 'but'. But this he turns to his advantage. When he wants to pick anybody's brains he goes out of his way to annoy them—and, as like as not, they spill far more beans than they would do normally."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes, feeling smugly pleased with himself. "Mphm."

"He resents all authority...."

"Doesn't he just!"

"He feels that he has not received his just due."

"Who doesn't? But since when was this a just universe?"

"In short, he's dangerous."

"Aren't we all in this rustbucket? Aren't we all?" he refilled his glass from the whiskey bottle. "Here's tae us. What's like us? De'il a yin!"

"And thank all the odd gods of the galaxy for *that*," she riposted.

## VI

The run out to the departure position was une-ventful and reasonably pleasant. It could have been more pleasant; spacemen welcome company aboard their ships whom they can impress with their shop talk. But the scientists and technicians each had their own mess and, obedient to Druthen, kept themselves to themselves. It could have been unpleasant, Grimes conceded, if Druthen had forced his company upon Sonya and himself. He was content to let well enough alone.

Meanwhile, he could and did enjoy the society of Mayhew and Clarisse, of Billy Williams, of young Major Dalzell, of the other officers. But during the drink and talk sessions it was hard to keep the conversation away from the purpose of their expedition, from the findings and the fates of earlier expeditions.

Why had Calver been successful (if he had been successful)? Why had those

before him and after him met disaster? "There's only one way to find out, Skipper," Williams had said cheerfully. "We'll just have to see what happens to *us!* And if you're around, the fat always gets pulled out of the fire somehow!"

"There has to be a first time for everything," Grimes told his second in command with grim humor. "There'll be a first time when the fat won't be pulled out of the fire."

"She'll be right," Williams told him. "Mark my words, Skipper. She'll be right."

And all of them studied the sailing directions, such as they were, until they knew them by heart. "Put Macbeth and Kinsolving's sun in line," the long dead Maudsley had told somebody. "Put Macbeth and Kinsolving's sun in line, and keep them so. That's the way that we came back. Fifty light years, and all hands choking on the stink of frying lubricating oil from the Mannschenn Drive...." And for fifty light years Calver had run, but with the Lead Stars in line astern. He had logged the distance, but found nothing. He had initiated a search pattern, and at last he had been successful. Those following him had not experienced the same difficulties—but each successive ship had been fitted with an improved model of the mass proximity indicator. Calver's instrument had been no more than a prototype, capable of detection at only short ranges.

On the ship sped, running the Rim, and Carnaby checked and rechecked the fixes that he got from the Carlotti beacons set along the very edge of the galaxy. They were not very accurate fixes; the navigational aids had been positioned to assist vessels running under Mannschenn Drive from known world to known world, not a ship out where no ship, normally, had any business to be. But Carnaby was a good navigator, possessing the valuable quality of intuition. He could look at a spider's web of intersecting lines and mutter, "That can't be right." He could look at another one and say, "That could be right." Now and again he would state, "This *is* right."

He said firmly, "This *is* right."

Grimes and Williams were with him in the control room. The Commodore did not hesitate. "All right, Commander Williams," he ordered. "You know the drill."

Williams spoke into the most convenient inter-com microphone. "Attention, attention. All bridge officers to Control. All hands stand by for shutdown of Mannschenn Drive, free fall and centrifugal effects." Throughout the ship the alarm bells that he had actuated were ringing.

Sonya came in, followed by Hendrikson and Daniels. Each of them went to a chair, strapped himself securely. Druthen came in, bobbing up through the hatch like some pantomime monster. His normally pale face was flushed. He sputtered, "What is the meaning of this, Commodore? We were in the middle of a most important experiment."

"And we, Doctor, are in the middle of a most important piece of navigation."

"There should have been warning."

"There was warning. Three hours ago the announcement was made that the adjustment of trajectory would be at about this time."

"Sir, we shall overrun...." warned Carnaby.

"Get into a chair, Druthen!" snapped Grimes.

The scientist, moving surprisingly fast for one of his build, complied, sat there glowering.

"Inertial drive—off!" Grimes ordered.

"Inertial drive—off!" repeated Williams.

The irregular throbbing slowed, ceased. There were weightlessness and loss of spacial orientation.

"Mannschenk Drive—off!"

Down in the Mannschenk Drive room the spinning, processing gyroscopes slowed to a halt, their thin, high whine dropped to a low humming, a rumble, then was silenced. Sight and hearing were distorted; the time sense was twisted. Grimes heard Sonya whisper, "Odd, very odd. This is the first time I've seen double. Is it *me*, or is something wrong with the Drive?"

"Did you see double?" asked Carnaby, with professional interest. "I didn't, Commander Verrill."

She laughed shakily. "It must have been a manifestation of wishful thinking, or something. It was only my husband, the Commodore, that I saw two of..." She was recovering fast. "And did you see two *of me*, John?"

"One is ample," he replied.

But he had not seen even one of her. The woman who, briefly, had occupied Sonya's seat had not been Sonya, although it was somebody who once had been as familiar to him as Sonya was now.

"I would have thought," commented Druthen, "that you people would have been accustomed by now to the psychological effects of changing rates of temporal precession."

"It's just that we haven't lost our sense of wonder, Doctor," Grimes told him.

He looked out through the viewport. The Lens was there, looking as it should look when viewed in the normal continuum, a glowing ellipsoid against the absolute blackness. Visible against the pearly mistiness were the Rim Suns, sparks upon the face of the haze. Carnaby was busy with his instruments. "Yes," he muttered, "that's Kinsolving all right. Its spectral type can't be confused with anything else... Macbeth must be obscured, directly in line with it... yes...."

"Set trajectory, Mr. Carnaby?" asked Grimes.

"Yes, sir. You may set trajectory."

"Good." Grimes gave the orders decisively. *Faraway Quest* turned on her directional gyroscopes until the Kinsolving sun was directly astern. Inertial and Mannschenk Drives were restarted. She was on her way.

"I saw two of you again, John," said Sonya in a peculiarly flat voice.

Druthen laughed sneeringly.

And Grimes asked himself silently, *Why did I see her?*

## VII

Ever since the first ships, captains have had their confidants. Usually this role is played by a senior officer, but very rarely is it the second-in-command. Ship's doctors, with their almost priestly status, have enjoyed—and still do so

enjoy—the status of privileged listeners. But it was not *Faraway Quest's* doctor whose company Grimes sought when he wished to talk things out. It was Mayhew.

Grimes sat with the psionic communications officer in the cabin that had been put to use as the ship's Psionic Communications Station. As a general rule PCOs used their own living quarters for this purpose, but PCOs did not often carry their wives with them. On this voyage Mayhew was accompanied by Clarisse. Clarisse did not think that the psionic amplifier—the so-called "dog's brain in aspic"—was a pleasant thing to have in plain view all the time, to live with and to sleep with. So Lassie—the name by which Mayhew called his disembodied pet—was banished to a spare cabin that was little more than a dogbox anyhow.

Those wrinkled masses of cerebral tissue suspended in their transparent tanks of nutrient solution gave most people the horrors, and the Commodore was no exception. As he talked with Mayhew he was careful not to look at Lassie. It was hard, in these cramped quarters, to avoid doing so.

"We're on the last leg, Ken," he remarked.

"Yes, John."

"Have you picked anything up from anybody—or anything?"

"I've told Lassie to keep her telepathic ears skinned for any indication that the Waldegren destroyer is in the vicinity. So far—nothing."

"Mphm. Of course, she mightn't have any telepaths on board. Let's face it, Ken, you're one of the last of a dying breed."

"We aren't quite extinct, John, as well you know. Too, everybody transmits telepathically, to a greater or lesser extent. People like myself and Clarisse are, essentially, trained, selective receivers."

"I know." Grimes cleared his throat. "You must have been receiving quite a few things from the personnel of this vessel...."

Mayhew laughed. "I can guess what's coming next. But, as I've told you on quite a few past occasions, I'm bound by my oath of secrecy. We just don't pry, John. If we did pry—and if it became known, as it certainly would—we'd find ourselves the most popular guests at a lynching party. And, in any case, it's not done."

"Not even when the safety of the ship is involved?"

"The old, old argument. All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I'll not be a party to your corruption."

But Grimes was persistent. "Even when you're not actually prying you must pick a few things up, without trying to, without meaning to...."

"Well, yes. But it's just—how shall I put it?—background noise. Here's a good analogy for you, and one that you'll understand. After all, you're the Rim Worlds' own authority on Terran sea transport from Noah's Ark to the dawn of the Space Age. Think of the early days of radio—or wireless telegraphy as it was then called. Telegraphy, not telephony. Messages tapped out in Morse code, with dots and dashes. There'd be one of the old time Sparkses on watch, his earphones clamped over his head, listening. He'd hear the crash and crackle of static; he'd hear relatively close stations booming in, and thin, mosquito voices of distant ones. But—the only one that he'd actually hear would be the one that he wanted to hear."



"Go on."

"It's like that with Clarisse and myself. We hear a horrid jumble of thoughts all the time but ignore them. But if there were the faintest whisper from the Waldegren ship or from The Outsider we'd do our damndest to read it loud and clear."

"Yes, I see, But...."

"Something's worrying you, John."

"You don't have to be a telepath to realize that."

Mayhew scowled. "Unless you can convince me that the ship—or anybody aboard her—is in danger I'll not pry."

"Not even on me?"

"With your permission I might. But what seems to be the trouble? Tell me out loud. I'll not put on my thoughtreading act unless I have to."

"It was during the alteration of trajectory. You know as well as any of us that there are all kinds of odd psychological effects when the Mannschenn Drive is stopped or restarted."

"Too right."

"This time they were odder than usual. To two of us, at least. To Sonya and myself."

"Go on."

"Sonya... saw two of me. No, she wasn't seeing double. There was only one of anybody and anything else in the control room."

"Interesting. I'd have thought that one of you would be ample. And what did you see?"

"Whom did I see, you should have said. I was looking at Sonya. But it was not Sonya whom I saw. Years ago I knew a woman called Maggie Lazenby. She was a specialist officer in the Survey Service, an ethologist, with a doctorate in that science, and commander's rank. Very similar to Sonya in appearance. She married a bloke called Mike Carshalton. He's an admiral now, I believe."

"Local girl makes good. If she'd married you she'd only be Mrs. Commodore—and a commo-dore of the Reserve at that."

"I *like* being a commodore of the Reserve. I don't think I'd like being an admiral. But—it was all rather oddish...."

Mayhew laughed. "You, of all people, should be used to the odd things that happen out on the Rim. Don't tell me that you've forgotten the Wild Ghost Chase, in this very ship!"

"Hardly. It was during that when Sonya and I decided to get hitched. But I just don't like these odd things happening at this time."

"Getting choosy in your old age."

"Who's old? But what I'm driving at is this. There's some sort of tie-in with the Outsiders' Ship and Kinsolving's Planet. After all, this business of the Lead Stars—Macbeth and Kinsolving in line. Kinsolving—*and* Macbeth. Years ago, long before our time, there was that odd business on one of the Macbeth planets. A ship from nowhere, old, dere-lict. A gift horse for the colonists, who didn't look the gift horse in the mouth carefully enough. It came from nowhere and it went back to nowhere—with a few hundred men and women aboard."

"Yes. I've read the story."

"So...." murmured Grimes softly.

"So what?"

"I was hoping you'd have some sort of a clue."

"I only work here, John."

"But you're a sensitive."

"A selective sensitive. Do you think it would help if I... pried?"

"Go ahead. It's my mind."

"Then... relax. Just relax. Don't think of anything in particular...."

Grimes tried to relax. He found that he was looking at that obscenely named animal brain in the transparent container. He tried to look elsewhere, but couldn't. And *it* was aware of him. A dim, wavering image formed in his mind—that of a large, furry dog of indeterminate breed, a friendly dog, but a timid one. What was in his mind's eye was far better than what was in his physical eye, and he was grateful for it. He saw his hand go out and down to pat, to stroke the vision-ary dog. He saw the plumed tail waving.

Maggie had liked dogs with a sentimentality rare in one qualified in her science. Maggie would like this dog—if she were here. But she was not. She was who knew how many light years distant, and probably very happy as an admiral's lady. But what of all the other Maggies? What of the Maggie whom he had met again, briefly, in that other uni-verse, the doorway into which he had stumbled through on Kinsolving's Planet? How many uni-verses were there—and how many Maggies?

He was jerked back to reality with a start.

Mayhew's voice was coldly censorious. He said, "I wish that you hadn't asked me to do this, John. It's time you realized how bloody lucky you are."

"Eh, what?"

"Lucky I said—and mean. Lucky being mar-ried to Sonya. *Her* temporal precession hallucina-tion was just *you*, in duplicate. Yours was an old flame. *You're* still hankering after her."

Some men are naturally monogamous, Ken...."

"And some, like you, are not." He laughed. "Oh, well, it takes *all* sorts to make a universe. Forgive me if I sounded shocked, but I'd always thought of you and Sonya as being as close as it's possible for two nontelepaths to be. Even a mind reader can be wrong."

"Why shouldn't a man have bread *and* cake?" asked Grimes reasonably. "But the odd part is that Sonya and Maggie are as alike as two slices from the same loaf. They'd pass for sisters. Almost as twin sisters."

Mayhew allowed himself to smile. "I suppose you're in love with a type, John, rather than a person. Oh, well."

Grimes changed the subject. "And how do you find our scientific passengers? Dr. Druthen, I'm sure, regards you and Clarisse as sort of commis-sioned teacup readers."

"He would. But that's one mind, John, that I wouldn't care to pry into. The man just oozes bigotry. He's a second-rater, and although he'd hate to admit it, he knows it. That accounts for his attitude toward the universe in general. He has this driving ambition to be on top, no matter what the cost to other people."

"And you haven't pried?"

"No. I have not pried. But every trained telepath is something of a

psychologist—not that one needs to be one to figure out what makes a man like Druthen tick."

"Mphm." Slowly Grimes filled and lit his pipe. "Well, thanks, Ken. There're one or two things I'd like to check in Control. I'll see you later."

He let himself out of the little cabin and then, by way of the axial shaft, made his way to the control room. He chatted there for a while with Billy Williams, then went to his own quarters to join Sonya for a drink or two before dinner.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked him.

"There are times," he told her, "when I realize how lucky I am."

## VIII

There were times—rather more frequent than he cared to admit—when Grimes was lucky. This was one of them. Part of his luck, perhaps, was in having a really outstanding navigator aboard his ship. Carnaby's last captain had said of him, "He could find a black cat in a coal mine at midnight in three seconds flat." This was not far from the truth.

There had been no need whatsoever for *Fara-way Quest* to run a wearisome search pattern after the fifty light year plunge outward from the Lead Stars. Carnaby had applied this course correction and that course correction, each time a matter of seconds rather than of minutes or degrees, had played a complicated game of three dimensional—or four dimensional, even—noughts and crosses in the plotting tank, had overworked the ship's computer to such an extent that Williams had said to Grimes, "If the bloody thing had a *real* brain it would go on strike!"

And then the mass proximity indicator had picked up a target just inside its one light year maximum range. Almost directly ahead it was, a tiny spark, a minute bead on the thin, glowing filament that was the extrapolated trajectory. It was time to slow down, although there was no danger of collision. Two solid bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time—but when one of those solid bodies is proceeding under Mannschenn Drive it is in a time of its own.

Grimes took over personally as the range closed. The tiny spark in the screen slowly expanded to a globe, luminescent, with other tiny sparks in orbit about it. There could be no doubt as to what it was.

The Mannschenn Drive was shut down and *Faraway Quest* proceeded cautiously under inertial drive only, a run of about twelve hours at one G acceleration. The Commodore stayed in Control, smoking, drinking coffee, nibbling an occasional sandwich. His officers, their control room watches completed, stayed on with him. Sonya was there, of course, and so were Mayhew and Clarisse. Major Dalzell was there for most of the time, and even Druthen, uninvited, came up.

The Outsiders' Ship was within radar range now, it and the derelicts circling it. It was within radar range and it could be seen visually at last, a tiny, not very bright star in the blackness where no star had any right to be. The powerful telescope was trained on it, adjusted, and its picture glowed on the

forward vision screen. It was.... There was only one word for it. It was fantastic. It shone with a light of its own, a cold luminosity, bright but not harsh. It was not a ship so much as a castle out of some old fairy tale, with towers and turrets, cupolas and minarets and gables and buttresses. It should have looked absurd, but it did not. It should have looked grotesque, and it did, but for all the grotesquerie it was somehow... right. Its proportions were the only possible proportions.

Grimes stared at the picture, the somehow frightening picture, as did the others. He felt Sonya's hand tighten on his shoulder. The very humanness of the gesture helped him, brought him back to the prosaic reality of the control room of his own ship. There were things to be done.

"Mr. Carnaby," he snapped, "let me have the elements of a stable orbit about this... *thing*. Mr. Hendrikson, see if you can ascertain how many derelicts there are in this vicinity. Plot their or-bits."

"And have the weaponry in a state of readiness, sir?" asked Hendrikson hopefully.

"Use your tracking system for plotting those orbits," Grimes told him coldly. "It can be used for other things besides gunnery, you know."

Daniels, the radio officer, had not waited for specific orders. He was dividing his attention between the normal space time equipment and the Carlotti transceiver. He reported to Grimes: "I think there's the faintest whisper on the Carlotti, sir. I have it on broad band, but I'll try to get a bearing."

Grimes looked at the pilot antenna, at the ellipsoid Mobius strip rotating about its long axis and quivering, hunting, on its universal mount. There was something there, *something*, but it didn't know quite where. He was about to get up from his chair to join Daniels at the communications equipment when, to his annoyance, Druthen re-marked, "So you got us here, Commodore." The tone of his voice implied more than mild surprise.

"Yes. I got us here. Excuse me, I'm busy...."

"Sir...." It was the navigator.

"Yes, Mr. Carnaby?"

"All ready, sir. But we'd better not bring her in closer than a couple of miles. That *thing* has the mass of a planetoid."

"Mphm." Carnaby was exaggerating, of course. It was one of his failings. Even so... an artificial gravitational field? A distortion of the framework of space itself?

"Sir, I think I have something..." broke in Daniels.

"Commander Williams, take over the pilotage, please. Be careful not to run into any of the derelicts that Mr. Hendrikson is using for his make-believe target practice!"

"Good-oh, Skipper."

Grimes unsnapped his seat belt, strode swiftly to the vacant chair beside Daniels, buckled himself in just as the inertial drive was stopped and the ship went into free fall. He saw that the pilot antenna had stopped hunting, was now steady on a relative bearing almost dead astern of *Faraway Quest*, a bearing that slowly changed as Williams began to put the ship into her orbit.

Yes, he could hear a whisper, no more than a faint, faraway muttering, even though the volume control was turned full on. He could not distinguish the

words. He did not think that the speaker was using Standard English. He regretted, as he had done before, that he was and always had been so distressingly monolingual.

"New German, I think..." Daniels said slowly.

"Sonya," called Grimes, "see if you can get the drift of this!"

But when she joined her husband and Daniels the set was silent again. Perhaps, thought Grimes, Mayhew might be able to pick something up. It was not necessary for him to say it aloud.

"Yes, sir," the telepath almost whispered, "there *is* something, somebody. No, it's not the Waldegren warship you're expecting.... It's... it's...."

"Damn it all, Commander, who the hell is it?" demanded Grimes.

Mayhew's voice, as he replied, held reproof. "You've broken the very tenuous contact that I'd just begun to make."

"Sorry. But do your best, Commander Mayhew."

"I'm... trying...."

"Orbit established, Skipper," reported Williams.

"No dangerous approach to any of the other orbits, sir," reported Carnaby and Hendrikson, speaking as one.

"Yes, yes. Commander Mayhew?"

"I'm trying... to try." Mayhew's expression was both very faraway and more than a little pained. "But... so much interference. There's somebody we know... and there are strangers...."

"Are they in these derelicts? Aboard The Outsider?"

"No, sir. If they were close, I should know. But they are distant still. But please, please try not to interrupt any more...."

"Let him go into his trance and get on with the clairvoyance," sneered Druthen.

"Shut up, Doctor! Do you want to be ordered out of Control?" snarled Grimes.

The scientist subsided.

"Please..." pleaded Mayhew.

Then there was silence in the control room, broken only by the sibilant whisperings of such machines as, with the ship now in free falling orbit, were still in operation. The souging of fans, the whining of generators, the very occasional sharp click of a relay....

"Metzenter..." muttered Mayhew.

Grimes and Sonya exchanged glances. They were the only two, apart from the psionic communications officer, to whom the name meant anything.

"Trialanne..." He was vocalizing his thoughts for Grimes' benefit.

"Metzenter, Trialanne.... Where are you bound?" He seemed to find the answer amusing. "No, *we* haven't any company yet, apart from a half dozen or so derelict ships.... Be seeing you... Or shall we...? I wouldn't know. I'm not a physicist or a mathematician.... And can *you* pick up anybody else...? We think we heard a Waldegren ship on our Carlotti.... And *I* got the faintest mutter from somebody else.... No, not a telepath, just unconscious broadcasting.... A servant of some empire or other.... Not *yours*, by any chance...? No...?"

"And are we to have the pleasure of meeting that big, blonde cow again?" demanded Sonya coldly.

"She was quite attractive, in a hefty sort of way," Grimes told her.

"You *would* think so."

Mayhew grinned. "I rather think, Commander Verrill, that we shall shortly experience the pleasure of renewing our acquaintance with the ex-Empress Irene, and Captain Trafford, and all the rest of *Wanderer's* people."

"But they're on a different time track," said Sonya. "And thank all the odd gods of the galaxy for that!"

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. "Mphm." He gestured toward the viewport through which the Outsiders' Ship was clearly visible. "But here, I think, is where all the time tracks converge."

"I hope you're wrong," said Sonya. "I hope you're wrong. But I'm rather afraid that you're not."

"He's not," confirmed Mayhew.

## IX

"Mphm." Grimes made a major production of filling and lighting his foul pipe. "How long before your odd friends get here, Commander Mayhew?"

"*My* friends, sir?"

"Yes. Your friends. Metzenter and his ever-loving. You telepaths always seem to stick to-gether." Grimes grinned. "Frankly, I regarded that ex-Empress woman and her bunch of Imperial Navy throwouts as a pain in the arse...."

Mayhew grinned back. "They thought about you and Commander Verrill in rather the same way."

"Good. But when do they get here?"

The psionic communications officer shut his eyes, concentrated. He said slowly, "In about three hours fifteen minutes Standard."

"That gives us time.... Commander Williams, I think you'll find one or two Confederate ensigns in the flag locker. You'll want one with wire stiffening, and a pole with a magnetic base. We'll plant our colors on the... The Outsider. I doubt if the legality of the claim will be recognized in a court of interstellar law, but it will give us some sort of talking point.

"Meanwhile, probably quite a few of you are wondering what this is all about. *You* know, Commander Williams, and Mayhew knows, but none of the rest of you will have heard the full story. It'll be as well if I put you in the picture." He turned to Williams. "You'd better get your flag planting under way, Commander, just in case Mayhew's ETA is out. And could you lend Commander Williams a couple or three hands for the job, Major Dalzell? And Mr. Daniels, I shall want everything I say put through on the intercom. Thank you." Williams and Dalzell left the control room. Grimes cleared his throat. He said into the microphone that Daniels handed him, "Attention, all hands. Attention, all hands. This is important. You will all have seen, in the public information screens, our objective, the Outsiders' Ship. Most of you will have realized that we are now in orbit about it. Shortly you will see a landing party jetting off from this vessel toward The Outsider. They will be planting a flag on it. The reason for this is that we shall soon be having company. This will not be

the Waldegren warship that we have been expecting—although she, probably, will be along before very long.

"A few years ago," Grimes continued, "I was instructed to take *Faraway Quest* out to investi-gate some strange, drifting wreckage—wreckage that, obviously, had not originated in *this* uni-verse. It was the remains of a lifeboat that had belonged to a ship called *Star Scout*, and this *Star Scout* had been a unit of the Imperial Navy. The only empire that *we* know is the Empire of Waverley, and its navy is officially called the Imperial Jacobean Navy. So....

"So we were stooing around, trying to find a few further clues, when this ship, quite literally, appeared from nowhere. Her name was *Wanderer*. She was quite heavily armed, the equivalent to one of our destroyers, but she was privately owned. She had been the yacht of the Empress Irene. She was still owned by the ex-Empress Irene, who was married to her Captain. She carried only a small crew—this Irene woman was mate, as well as owner; a Mr. Tallentire, who had been a gunnery officer in the Imperial Navy was second mate, and his wife, Susanna, had been lady-in-waiting to the Empress, and was now radio-officer-cum-purser. The psionic communications officer was—and still is—a Mr. Metzenthler, almost the double of *our* Commander Mayhew. This Metzenthler had—has—an Iralian wife called Trialanne. We don't have any Iralians on this time track. They were all wiped out by a plague. Bronheim was the engineer. He, too, had an Iralian wife—Denelleen...."

"Not now he doesn't," Mayhew said soberly. "I've been catching up on past history with Met-zenthler. Do you mind if I take over, sir?"

"Go ahead, Commander."

"Mayhew speaking. As you all will, by this time, have gathered, I am in psionic touch with the yacht *Wanderer*. She was thrown, somehow, onto this time track when she attempted the passage of the Horsehead Nebula. She was pursued by two New Iralian cruisers—the New Iralians being in-surgents. She was carrying Iralian passengers, some of whom were in sympathy with the rebels. With our help she shook off pursuit, and then tried to get back into her own universe by running back through the Nebula. She was overtaken, but came out on top in the running fight. But the rebels among the passengers tried to take over the ship. Denelleen was one of them.... Anyhow, the mutineers were defeated. And that's about all."

"That was *then*," said Grimes. "What are these people doing here *now*?"

"You may remember, sir," Mayhew told him, "that when we last met them they were on charter to an organization called GLASS—Galactic League Against Supression and Slavery. They're still on charter to GLASS. GLASS has the idea that the science and technology in the Outsiders' Ship will be useful to them in their work."

"So *they*; the ex-Empress, GLASS and all the rest of 'em have an Outsiders' Ship in *their* uni-verse. So—as I've already guessed—it's not a dif-ferent one, but the same one as we have. So the time tracks meet and mingle right here." The Commodore laughed. "Who else shall we meet, I wonder...."

Sony a said flatly, "Williams has planted the flag."

"And so we, more or less legally, own *it*," said Grimes. He added softly, "Unless *it* owns us."

"Rubbish!" sneered Druthen.

Grimes ignored the man.

## X

"I just might," suggested Daniels diffidently, "be able to establish Carlotti contact with *Wan-derer*. I think that the time tracks will almost have converged by now."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes, giving thought to the possibility. Technologically his universe and the universe of the ex-Empress Irene were almost twins. At the time of his previous encounter with the so-called yacht she had possessed Carlotti equipment almost identical to his own. "Mphm." Then, "No, Mr. Daniels. Concentrate on that Waldegren destroyer. She's our main worry." He looked out through the view port and was relieved to see that Williams and the two marines, silvery figures trailing luminous blue exhausts, were al-most back to the ship.

"Looks like being quite a party," commented Sonya. "The big, fat blonde, Irene, with her playmates, *and* our dear friends from Waldegren...."

"No friends of mine," growled Grimes. "I was at the Battle of Dartura... Remember?"

"Long before my time, dearie," she com-mented.

"Commodore! Sir!" broke in Carnaby. "A target, on the radar!"

"Not one of the derelicts, Mr. Carnaby?"

"No. It just appeared out of nothingness. It's closing on us, fast."

"Mr. Hendrikson—all weapons to bear. Do not open fire without orders. Mr. Daniels, try to estab-lish contact. Commander Mayhew—is it *Wa-derer*?"

"No, sir."

"Then who the hell... or *what* the hell...?"

"Locked on, sir," reported Hendrikson.

"Good."

"Range still closing, but less rapidly. We should have her visually in a few seconds." said Carnaby.

"Thank you. Commander Williams, the tele-scope."

"Aye, aye, Skipper!"

"No contact, sir," murmured Daniels. "But I *can* hear the Waldegren ship again. She's still dis-tant."

"I've got her in the telescope," drawled Wil-liams. "Odd looking bitch... she's on the screen now, if you care to take a butcher's."

Grimes took a "butcher's hook," reflecting that life was already sufficiently complicated without his second-in-command's rhyming slang. The strange ship was there, exactly in the center of the circle of blackness, a silver moth pinned against the backdrop of the night. As she approached, her image expanded rapidly. She was a gleaming disc—but, Grimes realized, he was looking at her head on—from which sprouted a complexity of antennae. And then, slowly, she turned, present-ing her profile. Apart from that veritable forest of metallic rods she was not unlike the Survey Serv-ice courier that had been Grimes' first command long ago, so very long ago, one of the so-called "flying darning needles." As yet she had made no hostile move. But, assuming that she was



alien, captained by a nonhuman or, even, by a nonhumanoid, would a hostile move be recognized as such before it was too late?

Grimes flashed a glance at Hendrikson, hushed intently over his console. *He* was ready; possibly rather too ready. He looked back at the screen. He thought, he was almost sure, that the lines of the strange vessel showed a human sense of proportion. He snapped at Daniels, "Haven't you raised her yet?"

"I'm... I'm trying sir. I've tried every frequency known to civilized Man, and a few that aren't... Ah! Got it!"

There was a babble of sound from the speaker of the NST transceiver. Alien gibberings? No.... It sounded more like human speech, but horribly distorted, garbled.

Daniels spoke very slowly and distinctly into his microphone. "Rim Worlds Confederacy's cruiser *Faraway Quest* to unknown vessel. *Faraway Quest* to unknown vessel. Come in, please. Come in, please. Over."

In reply came the meaningless gabble.

Daniels was patient, carefully adjusting his tuning. "*Faraway Quest* to unknown vessel. Please identify yourself. Please identify yourself. Over."

"A shi? A shi?"

*What ship? What ship? It could be,* thought Grimes.

"A shi? A shi? Dringle na puss. Gleeble."

*Tickle my puss?* Hardly.

"We'll try visual," said Grimes. "Pass me the key, will you? I don't think that my Morse is too rusty."

Williams passed him the Morse key on its long lead. Grimes took it in his right hand, his thumb on the button. He sent a series of "A"s, the general calling sign. He assumed that somebody, by this time, would have the *Quest's* big searchlight trained on the stranger. He kept his attention on the image in the telescope screen.

Yes, he, whoever (or whatever) he was seemed to know Morse. The acknowledgment, the long flash, the Morse "T," was almost blindingly obvious.

"What ship?" sent Grimes. "What ship?"

From the other came a succession of "A"s. Grimes replied with "T". Then, "What ship?" he read. "What ship?"

So... so was the stranger repeating parrot fashion, or was he being cagey?

"What ship?" sent Grimes again. "What ship?"

"What ship?" he received.

He sent, not too slowly but carefully, making sure that each word was acknowledged, "Identify yourself, or I open fire."

He grinned when the reply came, "You'd better not."

He said aloud, "Not only human, but our sort of people." He flashed, "This is the Rim Worlds Confederacy's cruiser *Faraway Quest*. You are intruding into our sector of space. Please identify yourself."

"Imperial Navy's armed scout *Vindictive*. Rim Worlds Confederacy's Navy not listed in Jane's. Never heard of Rim Worlds Confederacy. Who the hell are you?"

"Commander Williams," said Grimes, "*Jane's Fighting Ships* is in the computer's library bank. Check *Vindictive*, will you? And the Imperial Navy."

"Will do, Skipper. But the only Imperial Navy *we* have is the Waverley one."

"I know. But check it, anyhow." Again his thumb worked rhythmically on the key. "This is *Faraway Quest*. This is Rim Worlds space. You are intruding."

"You are intruding."

Grimes grinned again, sent, "Can't we talk this over?"

For long seconds there was no reply. Carnaby reported that the stranger was no longer closing the range, was maintaining her distance. Hendrikson announced, unnecessarily, that his weaponry was still in a state of readiness.

Daniels asked, "Can I have the key, sir? If I have a yarn with her radio officer I shall be able to find out what frequencies to use...."

And then *Vindictive* started flashing again. "Request permission to board."

"One man only," Grimes replied.

More time passed. Then, "Please prepare to receive my boat."

*Oh, no*, thought Grimes. *Oh, no*. The dividing line between a boat and a torpedo is a very narrow one. He was satisfied by now that *Vindictive's* people were humans; but the human race has a long record of viciousness and treachery, far too often actuated by the very highest motives.

"One man in a suit," he sent, "will meet one man in a suit, midway between our two vessels. They will return to *Faraway Quest* together. You may close the range between ships to ten miles. Do not forget that all my weapons are trained on you, and that my gunnery officer has a very itchy trigger finger." He said aloud, "And I have a very sore thumb."

"Agreed," sent *Vindictive* at last. "Closing. Please remember that you are a big target."

"Commander Mayhew," asked the Commo-dore, "can you pick up anything, anything at all, from those people?"

"Faintly..." replied the telepath slowly. "Very faintly. I sense suspicion, distrust. They will fire if they think that they are about to be fired upon."

"And so will we. And now—who's for the space walk? Don't all answer at once."

There was no shortage of volunteers, but "Mayhew's rather high voice was distinctly heard above the others. "There's only one possible choice, sir. Me. When I get close to whoever *they* send I should be able to read his thoughts more easily. And Clarisse can look after the shop in my absence."

"Mphm. Very well, Ken. Get suited up. And—look after yourself."

"I always have done, John, all the years that you've known me." He said nothing to Clarisse, but it was not necessary. Accompanied by Williams he left the control room.

"Please let me know when you are ready," flashed *Vindictive*.

"Willco," replied Grimes.

## XI

"I suppose that it has occurred to you," said Sonya, "that this *Vindictive*, of

which no mention is made in *our* version of *Jane's Fighting Ships*, could be from that Irene woman's universe. After all, she is supposed to be a unit of the Imperial Navy."

"The thought had flickered across my mind," admitted Grimes, "even though I'm not, and never have been, an intelligence officer." In spite of the absence of gravity he contrived to lay back in his chair. "We rather gathered, the last—and the only, so far—time that we met the ex-Empress that her employers, these GLASS people, were regarded by the Imperial Government as more than somewhat of a nuisance. Shit stirrers, if you'll pardon the expression."

"I've heard worse. Continue."

"So it is reasonable to suppose that if GLASS want to get their paws on The Outsider and The Outsider's secrets, the Imperial Navy could be sent out to make sure that they didn't. But...."

"What is your 'but'?"

"But I don't think that *Vindictive* was built by the same technology as Irene's *Wanderer*. *Wan-derer*, like *Faraway Quest*, had all sorts of odd lumps and bumps on her hull, but she didn't look like a deep space hedgehog. Too, neither *Wanderer* nor ourselves experienced any trouble in initiating either Carlotti or NST radio telephone hookups."

"H'm. I suppose we could get Clarisse to ask that man Metzenthler, aboard *Wanderer*, if they're being followed. Not that you can call it being followed when the pursuer gets there hours before the pursued."

"That, my dear, is very sound tactics, when you can manage it."

Williams' voice came over the intercom. "Commander Mayhew suited up and in the after airlock."

Then, over the transceiver that was operating on the suit frequencies, Mayhew reported, "All ready, sir."

Grimes flashed the signal to *Vindictive*, read the reply, "The Captain is on his way."

"A do-it-yourself-trust-nobody type," commented the Commodore. "Tell Commander Mayhew to shove off."

He felt a slight twinge of anxiety—but, after all, Mayhew was a spaceman as well as a telepath, and Williams would have given him a thorough briefing. It would be simple enough; just switch on the suit's reaction unit and steer straight for the other ship, keeping eyes skinned for the blinker that would be flashing from *Vindictive's* captain's helmet. But did this peculiar Empire in some peculiar universe observe the same rules of spacemanship as were observed in Grimes' continuum?

Obviously it did. All the lights of *Vindictive* went out, as had all the lights showing from *Faraway Quest*. This would make it easier for the space walkers; each of them now would see only the little, but bright beacon toward which he was steering.

Carnaby had the radar on short range, was tracking both space suited men. He was speaking into the microphone of the transceiver. "That's fine, Commander. Steady... Steady as you go... Better shut off your propulsion.... Be ready for a retro-blast...."

Grimes, staring through the viewport, could see the two blinking lights almost as one, so nearly in line were they. Surely Mayhew hadn't much

further to go....

"Brake, Commander," came Carnaby's voice. "Brake! Yes, he's braking too. Now... just a nudge ahead... that's it!"

And from the transceiver's speaker came Mayhew's whisper. "Contact. Contact established. He's tough, Commodore. Hard to get in-side.... But... I can assure you that he intends no treachery."

Grimes took the microphone. "Does he know that you're... prying?"

"I don't think so."

"Can he hear you? Me?"

"No, sir. I'm careful that our helmets don't come into contact."

"Good. Go through the motions of searching him for any weapons that he may have outside his suit. Then you can touch helmets and talk to him."

"Very good, sir."

There was a silence that seemed to drag on and on. At last Mayhew said, "Be ready to receive us on board, Commodore."

Williams called up from the after airlock to say that Mayhew and the man from *Vindictive* were aboard, and that he was bringing them up to Control. Grimes found himself wondering what his visitor would be like. He was an officer in the armed forces of an empire—and Empire sounded far more glamorous than Federation or Confederacy. *He's probably got a title*, thought Grimes idly, *and a string of letters after his name half a light year long*. He glanced around his control room, missing nothing. All of his officers were in correct uniform, although some of them were more than a little untidy in appearance. Druthen, of course, was his usual slovenly self—but he was a mere civilian, a passenger.

Williams came up through the hatch. "Commander Mayhew, Skipper," he announced cheerfully. Mayhew, still suited up but carrying his helmet under his left arm, followed Williams. "And Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, of the Imperial Navy. Sir Dominic, may I present Commodore John Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve?" Commander Williams was plainly enjoying himself.

Grimes looked at Flandry. He was not at all sure if he liked what he saw. The Captain of *Vindictive* was a tall man, and conveyed the impression of slimness even in his bulky spacesuit. The suit itself was gleaming black with gold trimmings. The helmet that Flandry carried tucked under his arm was also black, with a wreath of golden oak leaves on its visor, with, as an ornate badge, a golden eagle with outspread wings gripping a conventionalized planetary globe in its talons. His face was harsh, with a fierce beak of a nose, and the pencil line black moustache over the sensual mouth should have looked foppish—but somehow didn't. The glossy black hair was touched with gray at the temples. The eyes were a pale blue, and very bleak.

"Your servant, Commodore," said Flandry stiffly.

*That'll be the sunny Friday when you're any man's servant*, thought Grimes. He said, "Good to have you aboard, Captain. Or should I say, 'Sir Dominic'?"

"Either will do, Commodore." Flandry's sharp eyes were flickering around the control room, missing nothing, missing nobody. They lingered for a few seconds on Clarisse—and for longer on Sonya. *Of course*, thought Grimes, *she*

would be wearing that indecent micro-skirted Federation uniform. Flandry said, "You carry a mixed crew, Commodore."

"Mphm. Yes. Although the ladies are specialist officers. Mrs. Mayhew...." Clarisse unbuckled herself from her chair, came forward. "This is Captain Flandry, of *Vindictive*. Captain Flandry, this is Mrs. Mayhew, our assistant psionic com-munications officer...."

"Psionic communications? A telepath.... and I take it that Commander Mayhew, whom you sent out to meet me, is your chief psionic communica-tions officer...."

He looked at Clarisse again, and suddenly she flushed. Flandry laughed. "Sorry," he said. "Sorry, my dear. I should have had the sense to keep my thoughts under proper control." But he did not sound sorry, and Clarisse, although embar-rassed, did not look at all resentful.

"And this is Commander Verrill, of the Federa-tion's Survey Service. She is acting as the Federa-tion's observer on this expedition."

"And not a telepath, I take it," murmured Flan-dry. He looked as though he were undressing Sonya with his eyes—not that she needed much undressing, thought Grimes, in that apology for a uniform. And he did not like the way that she was looking back at the Imperial captain.

Grimes introduced his other officers, and then Druthen. He said, "And now, Sir Dominic, I suggest that we withdraw to my quarters for dis-cussion. Commander Williams, please accompany us. Commander Mayhew, Mr. Daniels—please let me know at once if either of you hear anything further from *Wanderer* or Adler."

"*Wanderer*?" asked Flandry, with a lift of one eyebrow.

"One of yours, possibly. She's the private yacht of the ex-Empress Irene."

"Then *not* one of ours," laughed the other. "We don't have an empress. We never have had an empress. I, sir, have the honor..." and he made it sound a dubious honor... "of serving His Imper-ial Majesty Edouard XIV. And this *Adler*?"

"A destroyer sailing under the flag of the Duchy of Waldegren."

"The Duchy of Waldegren? Never heard of it."

The officers were looking at Grimes and his visitor curiously. The Commodore decided that they had better continue their discussion in greater privacy. He said, "This way, please, Sir Dominic."

On the way to his suite he noticed that Flandry did not handle himself very well in free fall. So, probably, *Vindictive* ran to some sort of artificial gravity, and when in orbit her officers did not have to cope with the problems of weightlessness. He decided to get one of his engineers aboard the armed scout if it were at all possible. There must be quite a few technologies aboard her well worth copying.

The sliding door opened as Grimes approached it. He stood to one side, waving the others into his day cabin ahead of him. Flandry moved clumsily, shuffling his feet, in their magnetically soled boots, on the deck.

Grimes said, "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

Sonya looked at him coldly. "This is the first time I've heard you say that for

quite some time, John. I'd hoped you'd forgotten it."

Flandry flashed her a smile. "It *is* a vivid figure of speech, Commander Verrill. Have you known the Commodore for a long time?"

"Yes. I'm married to him."

"Commodore Grimes, have you any *unmarried* ladies among your crew as attractive as the two ladies I have already met?"

"No, I haven't." Then, in a less surly tone of voice, "Sit down, Captain. And perhaps you will take a drink with us...."

"I'll be glad of the drink—but this suit's not made for sitting in. And when in a strange ship, quite possibly a hostile ship, I prefer to keep it on."

"As you please, Captain Flandry. And you'll have to take my word for it that the drinks aren't drugged or poisoned." Grimes pulled himself into his own chair, strapped himself in. Sonya followed suit. Williams was about to do likewise when Grimes told him to look after the refreshments. Efficiently the Commander produced bulbs of the drink required. Flandry asked for Scotch.

"Your health, Captain Sir Dominic!"

"Your health, Commodore Grimes." Again there was that sardonic smile. "But should I, as a loyal servant of His Imperial Majesty, be drinking your health?"

"And why the hell shouldn't you be?" de-manded Grimes crustily.

"And why should I, Commodore—if you *are* a commodore. Oh, I'll let you have your rank. Even pirates must have officers."

"Pirates? What the hell are you getting at?"

"Pirates." Flandry's voice was harsh. "Pirates, setting themselves up as petty kings on the fringes of a disintegrating Empire. Laying their grubby paws on Imperial property, even planting their absurd flag on it. Tell me, Commodore Grimes, what genius thought up that black banner with a golden wheel on it? What does it signify?"

Grimes didn't answer the question directly. He snapped. "*Imperial* property? I suppose you're referring to that heap of alien ironmongery that somebody left in *our* back yard. The Outsiders' Ship, as we call it, lies within Rim Worlds' territo-rial space."

"Does it? And who, or what, are the Rim Worlds? The Outsider, as we call it, was first dis-covered by Admiral Lord Wolverhelm, who com-manded the *Fringe Sweep*."

Grimes eyed Flandry cautiously. He thought, *The bastard's enjoying himself. He's trying to make us lose our tempers.* He said, "Neither the Federation nor the Confederacy runs to 'sirs' and 'lords.' The Empire of Waverley does, of course—but it would never dream of sending an expedition out here without our permission."

"Odd name for a ship—the *Fringe Sweep*..." commented Williams.

"That, sir, was the designation of the mission," Flandry told him coldly.

"In any case," put in Sonya, who had been silent for too long, "the Outsiders' Ship was first discovered by Commander Maudsley of the Fed-eration's Survey Service. But the Federation rec-ognizes the territorial rights of the Confederacy."

"Somebody," grinned Flandry, "is going to have a good laugh over this conversation." He lifted a gloved hand to tap the collar of his suit, just below

the throat. Grimes thought with no surprise, *A concealed microphone*. "In the unlikely event of my not getting back to my ship, all that's being said is being recorded aboard *Vindictive*. It is also being relayed to our nearest base. My masters will already have come to the conclusion that I have blundered into a nest of pirates...."

"Watch it, mate," growled Williams. "Watch it!"

In a blur of motion Flandry snapped on his helmet. His voice, only slightly distorted, issued from a diaphragm. He said, "This suit, gentlemen—and Commander Verrill—is proof against anything that you can throw at me. Probably I should not survive a nuclear blast—but neither would you. And now, if you will excuse me, I must return to my own vessel. I strongly advise that nobody try to stop me."

Grimes said dryly, "As I recollect it, Captain, the main purpose of this meeting was that we should talk things over. I suppose that you can hear what I'm saying inside that gaudy carapace of yours."

"Of course. Say what you must say."

"Well, Captain Flandry, we haven't talked things over. You've jumped to conclusions, assumed that I'm a pirate king or some such. If I were, I'd not be content with the rank of commodore! It's a wonder that you didn't see that wheel of ours on the black flag as a skull and crossbones! Just try to understand this. As far as we are concerned, *you* are the intruder."

"And how can that be, Commodore?"

"Been out on the Rim before, Captain Flandry? Or the Fringe, as you people call it?"

"Nobody comes out here but outlaws."

"And yourself, of course. And that Admiral Lord what's-his-name before you. But we live on the Rim. We *know* that here, at the very edge of the expanding universe, the walls between the alter-nate time tracks are very thin indeed, at times nonexistent. We have good reason to believe that the Outsiders' Ship has warped the continuum about itself so that this small volume of space is common ground for ships—and people—from all the universes...."

"You tell a good fairy story, Commodore."

The intercom buzzed sharply; then Carnaby's voice came through the speaker. "Commodore, sir. *Wanderer* has just broken through! And Mr. Daniels thinks that *Adler* is very close. She is reporting back to her base in some sort of code."

"Reinforcements, Commodore Grimes?" asked Flandry coldly.

Briefly Grimes was tempted to say yes. But that could have been dangerous. This Flandry, feeling himself to be outnumbered, would be quite capable of ordering his ship to lash out with all weapons like a vicious cornered animal. "No," he said slowly. "No. Just old friends—or acquaintances, rather—and old enemies."

"Commodore, sir!" It was Carnaby again. "Mr. Daniels says there's *another* ship using a Carlotti transmitter!"

"Cor stone me Aunt Fanny up a gum tree!" marveled Williams. "How many *more* are goin' to turn up at the Vicar's flamin' afternoon tea party?"

"So," said Flandry, "we seem to have met at the crossroads of the universe. If

you are to be believed, that is.... But I think you will agree that I should return to my own vessel."

"If I were in your shoes I should be saying the same," agreed Grimes. "Commander Williams, escort Captain Flandry to the airlock."

"And how shall I keep in touch—assuming, of course, that I wish to do so? By flashing lamp?"

"Get your radio officer to talk to mine on the blinker. Perhaps, between the pair of them, they'll be able to cook something up."

"I'll tell him now." Grimes could see, through the frontal transparency of Flandry's helmet, the man's lips moving, but he could hear nothing. Then: "Before I go, just one more question. These people in *Wanderer*.... are they friendly or hos-tile?"

"They could be either. And, to save you the trouble of asking another question, I haven't a clue as to who or what this other strange ship is."

"If this is the Rim," said Flandry, "you're wel-come to it." He bowed stiffly to Sonya. "Although life out here seems to have its compensations."

Then he followed Williams out to the axial shaft.

## XII

Grimes and Sonya hurried back to the control room.

As Carnaby had told him, *Wanderer* had arrived. She was hanging there in the blackness, slim, sleek and deadly looking, no more than a couple of cables from *Faraway Quest*. Typical, thought Grimes, of Irene Trafford or the ex-Empress Irene or whatever she called herself these days. But the Commodore, over the years, had become more of a merchant officer than a naval officer in his outlook and just could not see the point of exposing a vessel, any vessel, to unnecessary hazard.

Anyhow, there she was, and close, too close. Grimes thought of actuating his inertial drive to put more distance between himself and the armed yacht—but, damn it all, he was here first. Why should he shift?

The screen of the NST transceiver glowed into life. Colors swirled, coalesced; and then Grimes was looking into the control room of the other ship. Yes, there was Irene, big and brassy as ever, with the careful touch of nonuniform color, the crimson cravat with the white polka dots, added to her otherwise correct attire. Before she became empress, she had been a tough mate in the Dog Star Line, and this outfit, in Grimes' universe as well as in hers, was notorious for its rough and ready star tramps. She had been mate in the Dog Star Line, and was determined that nobody should ever be allowed to forget it. Beside her sat Benjamin Trafford, officially master of *Wanderer*. The little, wiry, sandy-haired man was as neat and correct as he would have been had he still been serving in the Imperial Navy. And behind them Grimes saw the dark, dapper Tallentire, alert at his fire control console; and with him was Susanna: tall, slender and with high-piled and glossy auburn hair. There was Metzenthner who, if he shaved off his beard, would be almost the double of Grimes' Mayhew. There was Trialanne, the Italian woman: frail, willowy, beautiful, looking as though she had been blown from translucent glass by a



master craftsman who was also a superb artist.

And there was a stranger, a most undistinguished looking man of medium height, dressed in a drab, gray coverall suit. Normally one would not look at him twice. But in *Wanderer's* control room he was a sparrow among hawks and drew attention. Grimes decided suddenly, *He's hard and dangerous, whoever he is....*

"Commodore Grimes," said Irene in the voice that was almost a baritone.

"Your servant, ma'am," replied Grimes politely—after all, she had been an empress—while, behind him, Sonya snorted inelegantly.

"Come off it, Commodore. Nature never intended you to be a courtier."

"You can say that again," remarked Sonya quietly.

"Commodore Grimes, may I ask what the hell you and your spaceborne junk heap are doing in *our* universe?"

"I might ask the same question of you, Mrs. Trafford."

"Just because I jumped time tracks once—and that accidentally—you needn't think that I make a habit of it."

"Neither do I," said Grimes flatly. This was not quite true, but Irene and her people would not know this.

"And what's that odd looking ship like a tin sea urchin? You must know. We saw a man in a spacesuit jetting off from your vessel to her."

"One of yours, isn't she? Her captain says that she's the Imperial Navy's armed scout *Vindictive*."

"*Not* one of ours," said Trafford firmly. "We *do* have a *Vindictive*, Commodore, but she's a light cruiser. I should know. I've served in her."

"Irene," asked that drab, too ordinary man in a voice that matched his appearance, "would you mind putting me in the picture? Who *are* these people?"

"Mr. Smith," said the big blonde, "allow me to present Commodore Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve. In *his* cockeyed continuum the Rim Worlds are self-governing. And Commander Sonya Verrill, who is also Mrs. Grimes, of the Federation's Survey Service. Their Federation is roughly analogous to our Empire. The only other person I know is Mr. Mayhew, who is *Faraway Quest's* psionic communications officer.

"And this gentleman, Commodore, is Mr. Smith, managing director of GLASS. We have been chartered by him to lay claim to and to investigate the Outsiders' Ship."

"The Outsiders' Ship," Grimes told her firmly, "is in the territorial space of the Rim Worlds Confederacy. Furthermore, we have planted our flag on it."

"According to Space Law," stated Irene, "the mere planting of a flag is not sufficient for laying claim to any planet, planetoid, satellite or whatever. For a claim to be valid a self-sustaining colony must be established. I doubt very much if you have gone so far as that. In any case, the Outsiders' Ship is within Imperial territorial space."

"And *which* Empire, madam?" demanded a sardonic voice.

Daniels whispered, "I've managed a hookup with *Vindictive*, sir. That was Captain Flandry."

"Who the hell was that?" demanded Irene.

"The captain of *Vindictive*," Grimes replied. "But let us continue our discussion of the finer points of Space Law. As I see it, that *thing* is neither a planet, a planetoid nor a satellite. It is a derelict...."

"It could be held to be a satellite," insisted Irene. "An artificial satellite...."

"A satellite must have a primary."

"Oh, all right, you bloody space lawyer. It's a derelict. But have you put a prize crew on board? Have you got a towline fast to it?"

"My flag...."

"You know what you can do with that!"

In the little screen Trafford looked both shocked and embarrassed. Tallentire tried to hide a grin. Smith did not try to hide his.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes disapprovingly; and, "What charming friends you have, Commodore," commented Flandry.

"Acquaintances, Captain," Grimes told him.

"As you wish. But might I suggest, sir, that all three parties convene to discuss matters in a *civilized* fashion?"

"That could be worth considering," admitted Grimes reluctantly.

"And might I urge that we do it as soon as possible, if not before? As yet our three ships haven't opened fire on each other—but who knows what might happen when the other two vessels in the vicinity put in an appearance?"

"He's talking sense," said Sonya.

"*What* other two vessels?" demanded Irene. "We only know of the Waldegren destroyer, *Adler*. Who is the other one?"

"I wish I knew," sighed Grimes.

"Well, Commodore?" snapped Flandry. Grimes was sorry that Daniels had not been able to arrange a visual as well as an audio hookup. He would have liked to have been able to read the other's expression.

"Well, Commodore?" echoed Irene.

"Your place or mine?" asked Grimes, with an attempt at humor.

"Neutral territory," said Flandry. "While all the nattering was going on my first lieutenant sent a boarding party to that odd, dome-shaped derelict about 10 kilometers beyond *Vindictive* from your viewpoint. Its late owners were oxygen breathers, although not human. All its life-support systems were intact, and are now functioning...."

"A Shaara ship," stated Grimes.

"The *Shaara*?" asked Irene and Flandry simultaneously. And then Flandry demanded, "And who the hell are they when they're up and dressed?"

"Never mind," said Grimes. "The Shaara ship will do very nicely."

### **XIII**

The shaara derelict was a good place for a meeting. The ship was in good order and condition; her interior lighting glowed brightly; her humming fans kept the clean, untainted air in circulation. How long had they been doing so? Not for too long. The mosslike growth in the hydroponics tanks that the Shaara used for atmospheric regeneration was neither running wild nor

withering for lack of the organic wastes that were its food. But of her crew: of the Queen-Captain, the Princess-Officers, the Drones, the Workers, there was no sign—not even so much as a dry exoskeleton. The logbook was still on its ledge in the control room; but no human could hope to read that straggling script.

She was a latter day *Mary Celeste*. She was one of several *Mary Celestes* in orbit about The Out-sider.

Boats from the three ships had rendezvoused at the airlock of the derelict. Grimes himself had piloted *Faraway Quest's* pinnace. With him he had Sonya and Mayhew. Irene had brought with her Trialanne and Stanley Smith, the man from GLASS. Flandry was accompanied only by a si-mian young officer, almost as broad as he was tall, whom he introduced as Ensign Bugolsky.

This, of course, was when they were all assembled in the Shaara ship's control room, standing among the equipment and instruments, some familiar (although modified to suit arthropodal claws instead of human hands) and some weirdly alien. There were cradles of flimsy-looking webbing but no seats. As the vessel was in free fall, to stand was no hardship.

Flandry, resplendent in his black and gold space armor, removed his helmet. The others removed theirs. Grimes didn't like the way that the man looked at Irene and Trialanne. He most certainly didn't like the way that the man looked at Sonya. And he disapproved most strongly of the way in which the three women looked at Flandry. Mental undressing can be a two-way process.

"And now," announced Flandry with a wide grin, "I declare this meeting open."

"Not so fast, Captain," Grimes told him. "As the senior officer present I feel that that should be my privilege."

"Senior officer? But I represent the Imperium."

"What Imperium?" demanded Irene nastily.

"Commodore!" Mayhew's usually soft voice was sharp with urgency.

"Commodore! Sir!"

Grimes waved him aside. "Later, Commander Mayhew—unless my ship's in danger. She's not? Good. Then let's get this business settled first." He turned to the others. "I'm not overly rank-conscious, and I'm insisting on my seniority only because Rim Worlds' sovereignty is involved. To begin with—we are in Rim Confederacy's territorial space. Secondly, I outrank everybody present in this control room...."

"In a pig's arse you do!" flared Irene. "But I do, madam. I concede that you *were* an empress, but you're not now. Legally speaking you're only the chief officer of *Wanderer*...."

"And the owner of *Wanderer*, Grimes! Which is more than you can say regarding yourself and your precious rustbucket!"

"And I still claim," stated Flandry, "that *Wanderer* and *Faraway Quest* are no better than pi-rates, attempting to steal Imperial property."

"It's a great pity that GLASS is not operative in *your* universe," said Smith in a flat voice. "But since we are discussing legalities, I feel that I, as the charterer of Mrs. Trafford's vessel, should have some voice in the matter."

"Irene!" Trialanne was trying to gain the attention of the ex-Empress. "Irene!"

"Pipe down, damn you! Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Obviously," said Sonya coldly, "it would be pointless to put it to the vote who should be chairman of this meeting. Everybody is quite convinced that he has a more valid claim than anybody else. I could say—and, come to that, I *do* say—that I represent the Federation, but I have no desire to be yet another complication...."

"But a very charming one," murmured Flandry, flashing that dazzling grin.

"Thank you, Sir Dominic."

"Very charming, and, I feel, highly competent. For the record, I do not recognize the Interstellar Federation. Nonetheless, I feel that Mrs. Grimes—or, if you prefer it, Commander Verrill—should preside over this meeting. She appears, in spite of her marriage..." he made it sound as though he meant "disastrous marriage"... "to be the nearest thing we have to a neutral. Will you, then, take charge, Commander Verrill?"

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Sir Dominic. I will." She raised her voice slightly. "To begin with, all of you, this situation calls for straight thinking. We are met together in what is, to all of us, an alien ship. We represent, between us, three different cultures, at least four different govern-ments. But we are all—and I include you, Trialanne—human...."

"So *you* say," growled Irene.

Sonya ignored this, went on. "As an aid to straight thinking, recapitulation will be in order. We are all of us *here*, all of us *now*—that much is obvious. But it should be obvious, too, that The Outsider, the Outsiders' Ship, warps normal space time. It exists simultaneously in our uni-verse, and in yours, Sir Dominic, and in yours Irene—and yet it is from outside all our uni-verses...."

Somebody was grabbing Grimes' arm, the pres-sure evident even through the thick sleeve of his suit. It was Mayhew. The telepath was pointing to the hatch which gave access to the control room from the body of the ship. Through it a helmeted head was rising slowly.

"I—we—were trying to tell you!" muttered Mayhew.

"Tell me *what*?" growled Grimes.

In reply the other shrugged—no easy feat in a space suit—infuriatingly. *Bloody prima donna!* thought Grimes. *But it can't be all that important. Probably somebody from one of the ships with some trivial message.*

"It could be," Sonya was continuing, in a schoolmistress' voice, "that we are all of us here on sufferance...."

The shoulders of the new arrival were now visi-ble, but the faceplate of his helmet was almost opaque. Grimes stared at those armored shoul-ders. They carried the broad gold stripe of a com-modore, the winged wheel of the Rim Worlds Navy. Who the hell could it be? Lannigan? DuBois? Why should either of them be sent out here to interfere with him, Grimes? And this inter-loping commodore had somebody with him, wear-ing commander's badges of rank, and the stylized star cluster of the Federation....

Sonya's voice trailed off into silence. She had seen the newcomers at last. So had all the others.

The stranger put gloved hands to his helmet, twisted, lifted. He stared at Grimes—and Grimes stared at him. It was long seconds before Grimes

recognized him. One is used to seeing one's own face in a mirror, but one spends very little (if any) time studying solidographs of oneself. Dimly, Grimes was aware that the other stranger, standing to one side and a little behind the commodore, had removed her helmet. He didn't really notice her until she spoke.

"This is a surprise, John," said Maggie Lazenby.

Flandry laughed. "Getting back to our original argument—just which of you two gentlemen is the senior?"

#### XIV

"Mphm," grunted Grimes.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes.

Slowly he opened the pouch at his belt, took from it his tobacco tin and his battered pipe. Care-fully he filled the pipe, returned the tin to the pouch, brought out a lighter. He lit the pipe. He squinted at Grimes through the swirl of blue, acrid smoke.

Slowly he opened the pouch at his belt, took from it his tobacco tin and his battered pipe. Care-fully he filled the pipe, returned the tin to the pouch, brought out a lighter. He lit the pipe. He squinted at Grimes through the swirl of blue, acrid smoke.

Sonya made a major production of a lung-wracking cough.

Maggie said, "Let the man have his little pleasures—and his aid to cerebration."

Sonya demanded, "What are *you* doing with *him*?"

Maggie replied, "I could ask you the same, duckie."

Grimes demanded, "How the hell did *you* get here?"

Grimes replied, "The same way as you." He gestured toward the nearest hexagonal viewport with the hand that held the pipe.

Grimes stared out into the blackness. There had been three vessels there: Flandry's *Vindictive*, Irene's *Wanderer*, his own *Faraway Quest*. Now there were four. He asked, "And what is the name *of your ship*?"

"*Faraway Quest*, of course. She was *Delta Puppis* before the Federation flogged her to us."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes again, feeling a twinge of envy. His *Faraway Quest* was an ex-Epsilon Class tramp. He turned to Mayhew. "You might have kept me better informed, Com-mander."

"Sir, both Trialanne and I tried to tell you as soon as this other *Faraway Quest* broke through. I couldn't tell you anything before then as she does not carry a psionic communications officer."

"Unfortunately, no," agreed Grimes II. "I tried to convince my masters that a good PCO is worth ten thousand times his weight in Carlotti transceivers—but *they* know best." He added after a pause, "I can never understand this craving to put oneself at the mercy of a single fuse...."

"And how many times have you heard *that* be-fore, Maggie?" asked Sonya.

"I've lost count," said Maggie Lazenby.

"But this question of seniority...?" hinted Flandry, obviously determined to extract the ut-most in amusement from the situation.

"I am the senior," stated both Grimeses.

"I was here first," said Grimes I.

"Mine is the larger ship," said Grimes II.

Grimes I laughed. "This is bloody absurd, Grimes. Before we get involved in any futile argu-ments would you mind putting me—us—into your picture?"

"I'll try, Grimes. My masters decided that it was time that somebody took another expedition out to the Outsiders' Ship, and I was given the job. Maggie—you *do* know Maggie, of course...?"

"I do. And so does Sonya."

"And I know Sonya. Quite a family party, isn't it? But where was I? Oh, yes. Maggie, although she's married to me, has retained her Federation citizenship and her commission in the Federation's Survey Service. She's along as an observer for the Federation."

"As Sonya is. But go on."

Grimes II carefully relit his pipe. "Well, we rather suspected that there would be other ships, in addition to the known derelicts, in orbit about The Outsider. But we were certainly surprised to find that one of those other ships, like mine, was named *Faraway Quest*. Your second-in-command, Commander Williams, was even more surprised. It must have been a shock to him to see my face looking out of the screen when we started natter-ing over the NST radio. It put him in rather a dither. There he was, conditioned to say, 'Yes, sir; no, sir,' to Commodore Grimes...."

"That doesn't sound like Williams!" said Grimes I.

"Well, as a matter of fact he called me 'Skipper.' But he was in a fine tangle of conflicting loyalties. He suggested that I'd better make contact with you to get things sorted out, and told me where I'd find you. And now, Commodore Grimes, suppose you introduce your friends to me...."

"Certainly, Commodore Grimes," said Grimes who, in a dazed sort of way, was beginning to enjoy himself. "Irene, Trialanne, this, as you see, is Commodore Grimes, who obviously is from a time track not too far divergent from my own. And the lady is Commander Lazenby, of the Federa-tion's Survey Service, and also Mrs. Grimes. Commodore, may I present Mrs. Trafford, who is chief officer *and* owner of the so-called yacht *Wanderer*, and Trialanne, one of her PCOs. Oh, yes, before I forget—Mrs. Trafford is also the ex-Empress Irene."

"I am honored," said Grimes II, with a stiff little bow.

"You bloody well should be," growled Irene.

"And Mr. Smith, the managing director of GLASS, charterer of *Wanderer*. GLASS is an ac-ronym for GALACTIC LEAGUE AGAINST SUPPRESSION and SLAVERY. It is, I imagine, a severe pain in the neck to quite a few governments in Irene's universe...."

"We try to be just that," agreed Smith mod-estly.

"And this, Commodore, is Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, of the Imperial armed scout *Vindictive*. The young gentleman with him is Ensign Bugolsky."

Flandry smiled, but his eyes were cold, wary. "I am glad to meet you, Commodore. And *you*, Commander Lazenby."

*You would be*, thought Grimes.

"In one way your arrival, sir, is welcome. Until now I have been inclined to doubt your alter ego's stories of alternate time tracks and all the rest of it. But now..." Flandry shrugged. He went on, "You are welcome to join our discussion."

"What discussion?" asked Grimes II.

"As to who can lay claim to *The Outsider*."

"You will agree with me," said Grimes I, "that it lies within Rim Confederacy's territorial space."

"Of course," said Grimes II.

"But *whose* Rim Confederacy?" demanded Flandry and Irene simultaneously. "Yours or his?"

"It's *my* flag that's planted on it," stated Grimes I stubbornly.

"You and your bloody flag!" snarled Irene.

"As I see it," said Grimes II judiciously, "this is a matter to be decided between Commodore Grimes and myself."

"Definitely," said Grimes I.

"We're *surrounded* by the bastards," muttered Irene. Then, to Flandry, "You'll not stand for that, Sir Dominic?"

"*You*," said Sonya, "can fight it out between yourselves which Empire has a claim to ownership."

Flandry flashed a charming smile at Irene. "I really think, ma'am, that we imperialists should stick together."

"GLASS has never approved of imperialism," stated Smith. "In any case, *Wanderer* is on charter to my organization."

"I seem to remember," said Sonya coldly, "that quite some time ago it was decided that I should preside over this meeting. Even though my husband has been duplicated, I have not. There-fore I suggest that we carry on from where we left off."

"And just why were you so honored, Sonya?" asked Maggie curiously.

"Because I, as an officer of the Federation's Survey Service, am the only one who can claim neutral status."

"But I, too, am an officer of the Federation's Survey Service, dearie."

"Commodore Grimes!" Mayhew called excitedly.

Both Grimeses turned to look at him.

"Yes, Commander?" asked Grimes I.

"*Faraway Quest*.... She's... gone!"

"I was in touch with Clarisse," confirmed Trialanne. "But the contact has been broken."

From Flandry's suit radio came a small, tinny voice. "Captian, sir, *Faraway Quest*, the first *Faraway Quest*, has vanished."

There was no need for Grimes to stare out through the viewport, but he did so. There, hanging in nothingness, were the three ships, three only: *Vindictive*, *Wanderer* and what must be the other *Quest*, the wrong *Quest*.

He turned to look at the elaborately grotesque *Outsider* with something akin to hatred. "That bloody thing!" he muttered. "That bloody thing!" And he thought, *My ship, my people... where are they? Where-or when-has It thrown them?*

The Italian woman said softly, "Commodore, *it* is not responsible. Your vessel's Mannschenn Drive was restarted just before she vanished. So I am told by Mr. Tallentire, aboard *Wanderer*."

"Trialanne! Mayhew! Get in touch with Clarisse. Find out what's happening!"

"Don't you think that I'm bloody well trying already?" snarled Mayhew. "Damn your ship. It's my woman I'm worried about!"

"Sorry, Ken," said Grimes. "I needn't tell you to do your best, and better...."

"Mutiny?" asked Grimes II quietly.

"Be your age, Commodore!" flared Grimes I. "With a handpicked crew, like mine, it's impossi-ble."

"The passengers weren't handpicked, John," Sonya told him somberly. "At least, not by you."

Mayhew, his face white and strained, whis-pered, "The blame is mine, John. I should have disregarded the Rhine Institute's code of ethics. I should have pried."

"But you didn't. And I didn't order you to...." He looked around him at the faces of the others in the control room. All realized the gravity of the situation.

Grimes II broke the silence. He said, "Much as I hate to leave the Outsiders' Ship to these.... outsiders, my *Faraway Quest* is at your disposal, Commodore. After all, we may as well keep this in the family."

"Mutiny is a crime," stated Irene. "All law-abiding citizens should combine to capture and to punish the criminals. I am with you. I am sure that I speak for my officers."

"And count me in," said Flandry, not without a touch of regret.

"Thank you," Grimes said. "Thank you. All of you."

"And where," asked Maggie Lazenby, "do we go from here?"

## **XV**

Where did they go from there? Where had *Faraway Quest* gone?

And where was that Waldegren destroyer, *Adler*?

But the discussion, the consideration of these problems was better than the rather childish squabbling as to who had prior claim to the Out-siders' Ship.

It was decided that Grimes, Sonya and Mayhew should take passage in the second *Faraway Quest*, and that Flandry should accompany them. Flandry's own ship, *Vindictive*, was unsuitable for the pursuit of the original *Quest*. She had faster than light drive, of course, and faster than light deep space communications equipment, but neither of these operated on the principles of the Mann-schenn Drive or the Carlotti beacon. She could proceed from Point A to Point B at least as fast as *Faraway Quest* or *Wanderer*, but until she reemerged into normal space time she would be completely out of touch with them.

*Vindictive*, therefore, would remain in orbit about The Outsider as a guard



ship. Flandry impressed upon her acting captain that he was to counter any hostile move made by *Adler*, should she put in an appearance, without hesitation, but that he was to be careful in his dealings with *Faraway Quest I* should she return. As long as there was any possibility that her rightful crew were still alive, as prisoners, as hostages, their safety must be considered at all times.

All this took time, but not too much time. And then Flandry, with his aide, returned briefly to his own vessel, while Irene and her party made their way back to *Wanderer*, while Grimes I in his pin-nace followed his other self, in his pinnace, to *Faraway Quest II*. The stowage of this extra boat in the *Quest's* cargo hold presented no great problems. By the time that it was secured Captain Flandry was alongside, at the airlock, and was being admitted.

And then the control rooms of *Wanderer* and *Faraway Quest* were manned. Grimes sat in one of the spare acceleration chairs, with Mayhew to one side of him and Sonya to the other, and with Flandry beside Sonya. He watched the other Grimes enviously. *He* still had a ship of his own. He looked curiously at the officers at their stations—and they looked curiously at him and at Sonya and at Flandry. He felt that he almost knew them. Almost certainly their counterparts lived in his continuum; he must have met some of them, however briefly. The communications officer, beside whom Mayhew had taken a seat.... Surely that was young Carradine, who held the same rank in Rim Runners in Grimes' universe....

Grimes II was giving his orders unhurriedly, decisively; they were acknowledged smartly. In the little screen of the NST transceiver, Captain Trafford in *Wanderer's* control room was doing likewise. Then Trafford said, facing the iconoscope, "All machinery on full stand by, Commo-dore."

"Thank you, Captain," replied Grimes II, just a fraction of a second before Grimes I could do so. (*I'll have to watch myself*, he thought. *I'm only a passenger....*)

"Execute on the count of zero."

"Aye, aye. Execute on the count of zero."

"Five..." intoned Grimes II. "Four... Three... Two... One... Zero!"

From below came the high, undulating whine of the Mannschenn Drive, and with it the temporal disorientation, the sense of unreality. Grimes looked at Sonya and asked himself, with wry humor, *How many of me is she seeing now?* The picture of *Wanderer's* control room faded from the NST transceiver screen, was replaced by that in the screen of the Carlotti set. Beyond the view-ports the brightly lit *Vindictive* and the distant Shaara derelict faded into invisibility—but the cold-gleaming intricacy of the Outsiders' Ship persisted stubbornly.

*It is in every space*, thought Grimes. *It is in every time. But how is it that nobody else has ever reported this phenomenon?* He answered his own question. *Dead men and missing men do not tell tales.*

And then, suddenly, things were normal—or as normal as they ever are, as they ever can be while the Drive is in operation.

Flandry looked at Grimes. His face was pale. He said, "So this is your Mannschenn Drive. I think I prefer our Standing Wave."

"You get used to it," Grimes told him.

"Speak for yourself," snapped Sonya.

But Grimes II—after all, this was his ship—was taking charge. "Mr. Carradine," he ordered, "keep your ears skinned for the faintest whisper from *anybody* on the main Carlotti. Grab a bearing if you can. Mr. Danby, let me know if you see even the merest flicker in the MPI. And you, Command-er Mayhew, I needn't tell *you* what to do. I'm sorry that this ship doesn't run to psionic amplifier, but Mr. Metzenthler and Trialanne in *Wanderer* have one."

Flandry said something about trying to find a black cat in a coal mine at midnight. Grimes II laughed. "Yes, Captain, that just about sums it up. And once we do find it we may not be much better off. For any physical contact to be made between ships while the Mannschenn Drive is operating there must be exact synchronization of temporal precession rates. There have been devices whereby one vessel can induce synchronization in the Mannschenn Drive unit of another vessel with her own. But most ships today—certainly all warships—are fitted with special governors which make this impossible unless the captain so de-sires."

"And when do you start accelerating, Commo-dore? I'm finding all this free fall rather boring."

"As soon as we know where to accelerate to."

Flandry shrugged. The gesture, now that he was out of his space suit and attired in a close-fitting, beautifully tailored, black and gold uniform, was much more effective.

Irritated, Grimes II asked sharply, "And do *you* have any ideas, Captain Flandry?"

"Why, yes. People don't hijack ships just for the fun of it. We don't have any Duchy of Waldegren in *my* universe—but, from what I have gathered, the Waldegrenese are baddies. The people who have seized the *Faraway Quest*, the first *Faraway Quest* that I was aboard, are also baddies. Could this hijacked *Faraway Quest* be making a rendezvous with *Adler*?"

"What do *you* think, Commodore?" asked Grimes II.

"I think that Captain Flandry could be right, Commodore," replied Grimes I.

"Of course I'm right," said Flandry.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes II thoughtfully. He turned to his navigator. "Mr. Danby," he said, "run up a trajectory for Waldegren. We'll just have to assume that she's coming out by the most direct route, the same as we did from *Faraway*...."

"No," Grimes told him. "She's running out on the Leads astern, the same as we did."

"The *Leads*?" demanded Grimes II.

"Yes. Macbeth and the Kinsolving sun in line."

"You have some most peculiar ideas about navigation on *your* time track, Commodore. However, this *Adler* also belongs to your time track, so.... All right, Mr. Danby, do as the carbon copy Com-modore Grimes says. And Mr. Carradine, inform *Wanderer* of our intentions."

*Carbon copy*... thought Grimes indignantly. But, original or not, this was not his ship. He—or his own version of himself—was not giving the orders. He could only suggest and be thankful that this other Grimes did not seem to be

as pigheaded as he, more than once, had been accused of being.

Briefly the Mannschenn Drive was shut down, and the big, directional gyroscopes rumbled, hummed and then whined as the ship turned about her short axis. Directly ahead—overhead from the viewport of those in Control—the dim, misty Galactic Lens swam into view and was almost immediately distorted beyond recognition as the interstellar drive was restarted. The irregular throbbing beat of the inertial drive made itself felt, and there was gravity again, and weight, and up and down.

"Now we're getting someplace," murmured Flandry a little smugly.

Grimes glared at him and was even more annoyed when he saw that Sonya was looking at the Imperial Captain with what could have been admiration.

## XVI

It was not a long pursuit, and it ended in stale-mate.

Falling through the non-space, non-time between the dimensions were the four ships: *Adler*, *Wanderer*, both versions of *Faraway Quest*. Trajectories had been matched, in spite of the initial efforts of *Adler* and *Faraway Quest I* to throw off their pursuers; but it was only those two vessels that had synchronized temporal precession rates.

Back toward The Outsider they ran, all four of them, a mismatched squadron. And they would run past their objective, and go on running, until somebody did something, somehow, to break the deadlock.

Meanwhile, Grimes had learned that his crew was safe, although they were now prisoners. At last, at long last, and with assistance from Metzenter and Trialanne, Mayhew had been able to reestablish his *rapport* with Clarisse. It had not been easy, but after many hours of concentrated effort the three telepaths had been able to drag her mind up out of its drugged sleep to a condition of full awareness. She was able, then, to supply the details of Druthen's take-over of the ship. It had been done with surprising ease, merely by the introduction of an instantaneously anesthetic gas into the air circulatory system. In theory, this should have been impossible. Alarms should have sounded; pumps and fans should have stopped; baffle plates should automatically have sealed off the ducts. But Druthen was a scientist, and his people were scientists and technicians. He had a very well equipped laboratory at his disposal. And, most important of all, Mayhew and Clarisse had obeyed that commandment of the Rhine Institute: Thou shall not pry into the mind of a ship-mate.

"It's no use crying over spilt milk, Ken," Grimes told his psionic communications officer. "At least we know that Clarisse and the others are unhurt...."

"What the hell's the use of having these talents if you don't use 'em?" wondered Flandry, all too audibly.

"Some of us," Grimes told him coldly, "subscribe to ethical codes."

"Don't we all, Commodore? Do unto others as they would do unto you—but do it first!"

"Captain Flandry is right, John," said Sonya.

Yes, thought Grimes, *I suppose the bastard is right. And, come to that, I've tried often enough, and sometimes successfully, to get PCOs to pry for me.... Like Spooky Deane, who loved his gin—or my gin.... Even so....*

Anyhow, there was now telepathic communication between the two *Faraway Quests*, and communication regarding which neither Druthen nor the captain of *Adler* was aware. Not that it would have worried them much if they had known about it. Clarisse was locked up in the quarters that she had shared with her husband. There was little that she could tell him, and nothing that she could do. She could not communicate with the other prisoners, who were nontelepaths. She could not even pry into the minds of Druthen and his people—and neither could Mayhew and Metzenter and Trialanne. The scientist had, somehow, succeeded in stimulating Mayhew's psionic amplifier—it could, of course, have been just a side effect of the anesthetic gas that had been used during the take-over—and the continual howling of that hapless, disembodied dog's brain blanketed all stray thoughts. Trained telepaths could punch their signals through the psionic interference, but that was all.

In any case, Druthen was willing enough to talk.

He, fat and slovenly as ever, glowered out at Grimes from the screen of the Carlotti transceiver. Grimes stared back at him, trying to keep his own face emotionless. It was all wrong that he should be looking into his own control room this way, from outside, that he should see the nerve center of his own ship in the hands of strangers, of enemies. With Druthen were two of the scientist's own people, and in the background were three uniformed men: large, blond, obviously officers of the Waldegren Navy.

The senior among them, a full commander by his braid, came to stand beside Dr. Druthen. Druthen seemed to resent this, tried to push the officer out of the field of the iconoscope. He muttered, "Nehmen Sie mal Ihre Latschen weg."

The other replied, "Sie sind zwar dick genug für zwei, aber Sie haben nur für einen Platz gezahlt. Riicken Sie weiter."

Sonya laughed. Grimes asked her, "What's the joke?"

"Just that they don't seem to love each other. Druthen told the commander to get his big feet out of his way, and the commander told *him* that even though he's big enough to fill two seats he's only paid for one...."

"Paid?" asked Grimes.

"Obviously. He's bought his way into the Duchy of Waldegren."

"Ja," agreed the Waldegren commander. And then, speaking directly to Grimes, "And you the captain of this ship were? But...." His eyes widened. "Vich of you der kapitan vas?"

"I suppose we're twins, of a sort," grinned Grimes I. "The gentleman standing behind me is Commodore Grimes, commanding *Faraway Quest*. And I am Commodore Grimes, commanding *Faraway Quest*—the *Faraway Quest* aboard which you, sir, are trespassing."

"But I am the captain now," stated Druthen, smugly.

Grimes ignored this. He asked coldly, "Where are my people?" (There was no point in letting Druthen and the officers of the prize crew know that he was already fully informed on that subject.)

"Do you want them back?" countered Druthen, with an infuriating expression of deliberate in-credulity.

"Yes. And my ship."

Druthen laughed sneeringly. "You don't want much, Commodore. Or should I say, ex-Commodore? Your masters will not be very pleased with you. The ship—I keep. Doubtless the Duchy will pay me a fair price for her. The crew.... They are useful hostages. You and your allies dare make no hostile move for fear of hurting them." The fat face was suddenly gloat-ing, evil. "And, perhaps, I can use them to per-suade you to call off this futile chase. Suppose I have them thrown, one by one, unsuited, out of the airlock...?"

"Herr Doktor!" snapped the commander. "Enough. That I will never countenance. I am an officer, not an executioner."

"Sie glauben wohl Sie sind als Schiffsoffizier was besonderes!"

"Hau'ab!" The commander struck rather than pushed Druthen away from the screen. Those in the control room of *Quest II* watched, fascinated, a brief scuffle in the control room of the other ship.

And then the senior officer of the prize crew was addressing them again. "Herr Commodore, my apologies. But I my orders must follow, even when I am told to cooperate with *schwein*. Aber, my word I give. I, Erich von Donderberg, promise you that your crew will be treated well as long as I in this ship am."

"Thank you, Commander," said Grimes stiffly.

Druthen, with one eye puffed and almost shut, bleeding from the corner of his mouth, reap-peared.

"Officers!" he spat. "Gold-braided nincom-poops, survivals from a past age who should have become extinct millennia ago! I'm cutting you off, Grimes. I want the transceiver so that I can call Captain Blumenfeld in *Adler*. There'll be some changes made in the composition of this so-called prize crew!"

The screen went blank.

"What now?" asked Flandry. "You know these Waldegren people. I don't."

"They're naval officers," said Grimes at last. "They're professional naval officers. They can be ruthless bastards—but they do, at times, sub-scribe to a rather antique code of honor...."

"I concur," said Grimes II.

"Would you mind," asked Grimes I, "passing the recording of this rather odd interview on to *Wanderer*? Irene and her people may have some comments."

"Certainly, Commodore."

"And you should be able to let us know, Ken, if Druthen is able to persuade Captain Blumenfeld to let him play the game his way?"

"I'll try," said Mayhew doubtfully. "I'll try. With Clarisse alert and with Metzenthler and Trialanne to help us.... Yes, I should manage."

"And so," commented Flandry, "we just, all of us, go on falling through sweet damn' all until somebody condescends to make something happen."

"That's the way of it," agreed Grimes.

## **XVII**

They, all of them, went on falling through sweet damn' all.

They swept past the Outsider's Ship, which was still dimly visible, although the derelicts in orbit about it were not. Neither was Flandry's *Vindictive*. The Imperial Captain complained rather bit-terly that he was unable to communicate with his ship. Both Grimeses growled, simultaneously, that it was the fault of his culture for developing neither psionic communications nor the Carlotti system. Both Mrs. Grimeses were inclined to commiserate with Flandry. Relations aboard *Faraway Quest II* were becoming strained. Aboard *Wanderer* there were not the same prob-blems. There was only one of each person, and there were no outsiders.

Out they fell, the four ships, out into the ultimate night.

Druthen and Captain Blumenfeld made an occa-sional attempt at evasion, which was countered with ease by the pursuers. Once Blumenfeld, using the Carlotti equipment, tried to reason with Grimes—either or both of him—and with Irene, who had been hooked into the conversation.

Blumenfeld was an older and stouter version of von Donderberg, and he was more of the politician and less of the space officer. His accent was not so heavy. He appeared in the screens of *Faraway Quest II* and *Wanderer* by himself, a fatherly-grandfatherly, almost—figure, smoking an elabo-rate pipe with a porcelain bowl. It was a pity that his cold, very cold, blue eyes spoiled the effect.

"Come now, Commodore," he said, "we are both reasonable men. And you, Kaiserin, are a reasonable lady. What do any of us gain by this pointless chase?"

"You gain nothing," Grimes told him. "Fur-thermore, you are intruding in Rim Worlds' territorial space. I order you, legally, to hand my ship and my personnel back to me, and also Dr. Druthen and his people so that they may be dealt with by our courts...."

"You order, Commodore?" asked the other Grimes softly.

"Yes. I order, Commodore. *Faraway Quest I* is mine, and Druthen and his accomplices will be my prisoners."

"Speak up, Commodores," put in Blumenfeld jovially. "Do I detect a slight dissension in your ranks? And you, Kaiserin, do you acknowledge the right of these gentlemen to give orders? And you, Captain Sir Dominic Flandry? What is your view?"

"We'll settle our own differences after you have been disposed of," growled Irene.

"I second that," said Flandry.

Captain Blumenfeld puffed placidly at his pipe. Grimes wondered what tobacco it was that he was smoking. The man seemed to be enjoying it. At last he said, through a wreathing blue cloud, "My pa-tience is not inexhaustible, Commodore. Or Commodores. I am addressing, however, whichever one of you it is who commanded the *Faraway Quest* aboard which I have placed my prize crew. The good Herr Doktor Druthen has made certain proposals to me regarding the pris-oners. I was horrified, and told him so, in no uncertain terms. But..." There was a great exhalation of smoke. "But... I have thought about what he said to me. I still do not like it." He shrugged heavily.

"Nonetheless, my loyalty is to the Duchy, not to citizens of a Confederacy that the Duchy still has not recognized. It may—note that I say 'may,'

Commodore, not 'will'—it may be expedient to use those prisoners as a lever to force a certain degree of compliance from you." Again he shrugged. "I shall not like doing it—assuming, that is, that I am obliged to do it. And I shall not resort to painful or... messy methods. Just a simple shooting, to be watched by all of you. And then, after a suitable interval, another. And then, if it is necessary, another." He smiled coldly. "But there is no real urgency. You will be given time to think it over, to talk it over. Three days' subjective time, shall we say? Call me on this frequency. Over. And out."

The screen went blank, but the other screen, that showing *Wanderer's* control room, stayed alive... "Well?" demanded Irene harshly. "Well?"

"Suppose," said Grimes, "just suppose that I do knuckle under, to get my people back, my ship back. Suppose that I, as the ranking officer of the Rim Worlds Confederacy, do allow him prior rights to *The Outsider*.... What about *you* and *you*, Commodore Grimes, and *you*, Captain Flandry?"

"I shall abide by your decision, John," said the other Grimes.

"Speaking for the Federation," said Sonya, "I shall be with you."

"You beat me to it," said Maggie Lazenby.

"I'll have to think about it," stated Irene.

"As tour charterer," Smith told her, "I have *some* say. A great deal of say. I sympathize with Commodore Grimes. But it's a matter of evaluation. Are the lives of a handful of people of greater importance than the lives of the millions of oppressed men and women and children who look to GLASS for help?"

"Anybody mind if I shove in my two bits' worth?" asked Flandry. "I owe allegiance neither to the Federation nor to the Confederacy and certainly not to GLASS. I swore an oath of fealty to the Emperor." He looked at Irene's face in the screen, and added, "*My* Emperor. But my sympathies are with the Commodore."

"Thank you, Sir Dominic," said Grimes.

"Wait till you see the bill. Furthermore, sir, I would remind you that you have at your disposal equipment and personnel which I have not. The same applies to you, ma'am. You have your espers. Can't you make full use of them?"

"I would remind you, Sir Dominic," said Mayhew, "that my wife is among the prisoners aboard the *Quest*."

"All the more reason why you should pull your finger out. All of you."

*You arrogant bastard*, thought Grimes.

"Sir Dominic's talking sense," said Sonya. "*We* have the telepaths. *Adler* hasn't. Furthermore, one *of our* telepaths is aboard *your Quest*, John. There must be something that Clarisse can do to help herself. And the others."

"It's all we can do to get through to her," objected Mayhew. "There's too much interference from Lassie...."

Sonya muttered something about a poodle's brain in aspic. Then she said, "Why don't you silence the bitch? Lassie, I mean. There's three of you here: Metzenter and Trialanne aboard *Wan-derer*, and yourself. You told us once—remember?—that thoughts can kill."

"I... I couldn't, Sonya...."

"Damn it all!" exploded Grimes. "Do you put that animal brain before your wife? What sort of man are you?"

"But... but Lassie's so... helpless."

"So is Clarisse, unless we do something to help her—and fast. It is *essential* that she be able to keep us informed as to what Druthen is thinking, and von Donderberg... and with that psionic interference snuffed out you should be able to keep us informed as to Captain Blumenfeld's intentions. You must do it, Ken."

"Yes," agreed the telepath slowly. "I... must. Metzenter and Trialanne will help. They have already told me that."

"Then go to it," ordered Grimes.

Not for the first time he thought, *They're odd people. Too bloody odd. But I suppose when you live inside your pet's brain, and it lives inside yours, you feel more intensely for and about it than any normal man feels for his dog.... There'll be guilt involved, too.... You'll blame yourself for its absolute helplessness....*

He watched Mayhew stumbling out of the control room, his features stiff, too stiff. He saw the sympathy on the face of Grimes II, and rather more than a hint of a sneer on that of Flandry.

Grimes II looked at his watch. He said, "There's nothing much that we can do, Commodore, until your Commander Mayhew reports results. I suggest that we all adjourn for dinner."

"An army marches on its stomach," quipped Flandry. "I suppose that the same saying applies to a space navy."

"I've never known John to miss a meal," Sonya told him, "no matter what the circumstances."

*Women....* thought Grimes—both of him.

"You said it," agreed Maggie Lazenby.

## **XVIII**

This was the first proper, sit down meal that anybody had enjoyed for quite a while. Not that Grimes really enjoyed it. He was used to eating at the captain's table—but at the head of the board. To see himself sitting there, a replica of himself, was... odd. He derived a certain wry pleasure from the fact that this other Grimes, like himself, was not one to let conversation interfere with the serious business of feeding. He did not think, somehow, that Maggie appreciated this trait any more than Sonya did.

There were five of them at the Commodore's table. Grimes II was at the head of it, of course, with Maggie Lazenby at his right and Sonya at his left. Grimes I sat beside Maggie, and Flandry beside Sonya. The Imperial Captain was a brilliant conversationalist, and the two women were lapping it up. He made his own time track sound so much more glamorous than the time tracks of the two Grimeses—which, in any case, differed only very slightly from each other. He made the two Commodores seem very dull dogs in comparison with his flamboyant, charming self. And, in spite of the nonstop flow of outrageous anecdotes, his plate was clean before any of the others.

The meal, Grimes admitted, was a good one. Grimes II kept an excellent table, and the service, provided by two neatly uniformed little stewardesses, matched the quality of the food. There was wine, of which Grimes II partook



sparingly, of which the others partook not so sparingly. Grimes thought, with disapproval, *That man Flandry is gulping it down as though it were lager...* then realized that he was doing the same.

At last they were finished, sipping their coffee. Grimes—both of him—pulled out his pipe. His wife—both of her—objected, saying, "John! You *know* that the air conditioners can't cope with the *stink!*" Flandry, sleek and smug, lit a cigar that one of the stewardesses brought him. The ladies accepted lights from him for their cigarillos.

Grimes, from the head of the table, looked at Grimes with slightly raised eyebrows. He said, "I'm going up to Control, Commodore, to enjoy my pipe in peace. The officer of the watch mightn't like it, but he daren't say so. Coming?"

"Thank you, Commodore."

He (they) excused himself (themselves), got to his (their) feet. Flandry and the wives were enjoy-ing liqueurs with their coffee and hardly noticed their going. Grimes II led the way out of the dining saloon, which, as a public room in a much larger ship, was luxurious in comparison with that aboard *Faraway Quest I*. Indoor plants, the lush, flowering vines of Caribbea twining around every pillar. Holograms, brightly glowing, picture win-dows opening onto a score of alien worlds. Grimes paused before one that depicted a beach scene on Arcadia. Maggie was an Arcadian. He looked closely to see if she were among the naked, golden-skinned people on the sand and in the surf. But what if she was? He grunted, followed his counterpart into the axial shaft.

The control room seemed bleak and cold after the warm luxury of the dining saloon. The officer of the watch got to his feet as the two Commodores entered, looked doubtfully from one to the other before deciding which one to salute. But he got it right. Outside the viewports was—nothingness. To starboard, Grimes knew, were his own ship and *Adler*, and beyond them was Irene's *Wanderer*— but unless temporal precession rates were synchronized they would remain invisible. One of the Carlotti screens was alive. It showed a bored look-ing Tallentire slumped in his chair, his fingers busy with some sort of mathematical puzzle.

"Any word from our tame telepaths yet, Mr. Grigsby?" asked Grimes II.

"No, sir. Commander Mayhew did buzz me to tell me that he and the people aboard *Wanderer* are still trying but aren't getting anywhere."

"Mphm." Grimes slumped into an acceleration chair, motioning to Grimes to follow suit. He (they) filled and lit his (their) pipes. "Mphm."

"There must be a way," said Grimes thought-fully.

"There always is," agreed Grimes. "The only trouble is finding it."

The two men smoked in companionable silence. Grimes I was almost at ease but knew that he would be properly at ease only aboard his own *Faraway Quest*. He looked around him, noticing all the similarities—and all the differences. From the control room he went down, in his mind, deck by deck. And then... and then the idea came to him.

"Commodore," he said, "I think I have it. Do you mind if I borrow your O.O.W.?"

"Help yourself, Commodore. This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

Grimes winced. So that was the way it sounded when he said it. He caught

the attention of the watch officer. "Mr. Grigsby...."

"Sir?"

"Ask Commander Mayhew to come up here, will you?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

The young man spoke into a telephone, then said, "He's on his way."

"Thank you."

When Mayhew came in the two Commodores were wrapped in a pungent blue haze. "Sir?" asked the telepath doubtfully, looking from one to the other. "Sir?"

"Damn it all, Ken," growled Grimes. "*You* should know which one of us is which."

"There was a sort of... mingling."

"Don't go all metaphysical on me. I take it that you've made no headway."

"No. We just can't get through to Lassie. And it takes effort, considerable effort, to maintain Clarisse in a state approaching full awareness."

"But you are getting through to her."

"Yes."

"Good. Now tell me, Ken, *where* is she? Yes, Yes—I know bloody well that she's aboard my *Faraway Quest*—but where aboard the *Quest*? In your living quarters—or in your watch room?"

"In... in the watch room, sir. She hates Lassie, as you know, but she went to the watch room to maintain better communications when we left the ship to go aboard the Shaara derelict. The watch room is fitted up as a living cabin, and Druthen and his crowd left her there after the take-over."

"That makes things easier, a lot easier. Now, get in touch with your cobbers aboard *Wan-derer*...."

"I already am." Mayhew's voice was pained.

"Punch this message through, the three of you. *Stop Lassie's life-support system.*"

"You can't mean...."

"I do mean. It's the only way to quiet that help-less hound of yours. With that source of telepathic interference wiped out we might be able to learn something. After all, it's only short range work. You don't need an amplifier."

"But...."

"*Do it!*"

"All right, Sir." Mayhew's face was white and strained. "But you don't understand. If I could do it myself, kill Lassie, I mean, it wouldn't be as bad. Because... because Clarisse has always hated Lassie. She'll... she'll enjoy it...."

"Good for her," said Grimes brutally. "And have Mr. Metzenthler inform Captain Trafford of what's going on."

He visualized Clarisse's slim fingers switching off the tiny pumps that supplied oxygen and nutri-ent fluid to the tank in which floated that obscenely naked brain—but only a dog's brain—and, sud-denly, felt more than a little sick.

He said, "I think I'll go below, Commodore."

"As you please, Commodore," replied Grimes II. "I shall stay up here. There should be informa-tion coming through at any time now. If things start happening, this is my place."

"Too right," agreed Grimes. "And there's an old saying about two women in the same kitchen. Two shipmasters in the same control room would be at least as bad.

## **XIX**

He made his way down from the control room to the deck upon which the master's quarters and the V.I.P. suite—in which he and Sonya had been housed—were situated. The general layout was very similar to that of his own ship. There was no extra accommodation in this compartment; every-thing was on a larger scale.

Absentmindedly he paused outside the door that had above it, in gold lettering, CAPTAIN. It was ajar. He had started to enter when he realized his error, but too late for him to pull back. He could see through into the bedroom. His wife was there, sitting up in bed, reading. The spectacles that she was wearing enhanced her nakedness.

*His wife?*

But she might have been.

On another time track she was.

"Come in," she not quite snapped. "Don't dither around outside."

He went in.

She put down her book and looked at him gravely, but there was a quirk at the corners of her mouth. She was very beautiful, and she was... different. Her breasts were not so full as Sonya's but were pointed. Her smooth shoulders were just a little broader.

She said, "Long time no see, John."

He felt a wild, impossible hope, decided to bluff his way out—or in. He asked gruffly, "What the hell do you mean?"

She replied, "Come off it, John. She's put her mark on you, just as I've put my mark on him. Once you were identical, or there was only one of you. That must have been years ago, round about the time that we had the fun and games on Sparta. Remember?"

Grimes remembered. It had been very shortly after the Spartan affair that he and Maggie had split brass rags.

"Furthermore," she went on, "my ever-loving had the decency to buzz down to tell me that he'd be in Control all night, and not to wait up for him...."

"But Sonya...."

"Damn Sonya. Not that I've anything against her, mind you. We've known each other for years and have always been good friends. But if you must know, John, she and I have just enjoyed a girlish natter on the telephone, and she's under the impression that you're sharing *my* John's sleepless vigil."

*Get the hell out of here, you lecherous rat!* urged the rather priggish censor who inhabited an odd corner of Grimes' brain.

"Don't just stand there," she said.

He sat down at the foot of the wide bed.

"John! Look at me."

He looked. He went on looking. There was so much that he remembered

vividly, so much that he had almost forgotten.

"Have I got Denebian leprosy, or something?"

He admitted that she had not. Her skin was sleek, golden gleaming, with the coppery pubic puff in delicious contrast, the pink nipples of her breasts prominent. He thought, *To hell with it. Why not?* He moved slowly toward her. Her wide, red mouth was inviting. He kissed her—for the first time in how many years? He kissed her and went on kissing her, until she managed to get her hands between their upper bodies and push him away.

"Enough...." she gasped. "Enough... for the time being. Better shut the outer door... and snap on the lock...."

He broke away from her reluctantly. He said, "But suppose *he*..." he could not bring himself to say the name "... comes down from Control...."

"He won't. I know him. I should, by this time. The only thing in his mind will be the safety of his precious ship." She smiled. "And, after all, I am an ethologist, specializing in animal behavior, the human animal included. ..."

Grimes asked rather stiffly, "I suppose you knew that I would be coming in?"

"I didn't know, duckie, but I'd have been will-ing to bet on it. The outer door was left ajar on purpose."

"Mphm." Grimes got up, went into the day cabin, shut and locked the door. He returned to the bedroom.

She said, "You look hot. Better take off your shirt."

He took off his shirt. It was a borrowed one, of course. And so was the pair of trousers. So were the shoes. (He had boarded this ship, of course, with only the usual long Johns under his space suit.)

Borrowed clothing, a borrowed wife....

But was it adultery?

Grimes grinned. What were the legalities of the situation? Or, come to that, the ethics?

"What the hell are you laughing at?" she de-manded.

"Nothing," he told her. "Everything."

She said, "I'll do my best to make this a happy occasion."

It was. There was no guilt, although perhaps there should have been. There was no guilt—after all, Grimes rationalized, he had known Maggie for years; he (or one of him) had been married to her for years. It was a wild, sweet mixture of the soothing familiar and the stimulating unfamiliar. It was—right.

They were together on the now rumpled bed, their bodies just touching, each of them savoring a fragrant cigarillo.

Grimes said lazily, "After all that, I'd better have a shower before I leave. I don't suppose I—*he*—will mind if I use his bathroom...."

She said, "There's no hurry...." And then the telephone buzzed. She picked up the handset. "Mrs. Grimes..." she said drowsily, with simulated drowsiness. "Yes, John. It's me, of course. Maggie.... Yes, I *did* lock the door...." She covered the mouth-piece with her hand, whispered, "Get dressed, and *out*. Quickly. I'll try to stall him off." Speak-ing into the telephone again, "Yes, yes. I know that I'm the Commodore's wife and that nobody would dream of making a pass at me. But have you for-gotten that *wolf*, Sir Dominic Flandry, who's aboard at

*your* invitation, duckie, is *prowling* around your ship seeking whom he may devour? And you left me all by myself, to sit and *brood*, or whatever it is you do up there in your bloody control room.... No, Sir Dominic didn't make a pass at me, but I could tell by the way he was looking at me.... All right, then...."

Grimes was dressed, after a fashion. As he walked fast toward the door, he saw that Maggie was punching the buttons for another number on the ship's exchange. She called over her shoulder, "Wait a moment!"

"Sorry. See you later." He went out into the alleyway. He hesitated outside the door to his own quarters. Dare he face Sonya? It would be obvious, too obvious, what he had been doing, and with whom.

The door opened suddenly—and Grimes was staring at Flandry, and Flandry was staring at him, staring and smiling knowingly.

"You bastard!" snarled Grimes, swinging wildly. The punch never connected, but Flandry's hand around Grimes' right wrist used the momentum of the blow to bring Grimes sprawling to the deck.

"Gentlemen," said Grimes II coldly. "Gentlemen—if you will pardon my misuse of the word—I permit no brawling aboard my ship."

Grimes I got groggily to his feet assisted by Flandry. They looked silently at the Commodore. He looked at them. He said, "Such conduct I expected from you, Captain Flandry. But as for you, Commodore Grimes, I am both surprised and pained to learn that your time track is apparently more permissive than mine."

At last Grimes felt the beginnings of guilt. In a way it was himself whom he had cuckolded, but that was no excuse. And what hurt was that during this night's lovemaking it had been his own counterpart, himself although not himself, who had been the odd man out. He knew how this other Grimes must be feeling.

He thought, *I wish I were anywhere but here.*

He said, "Believe me, Commodore, I wish I were anywhere but here." Then he grinned incredulously, looking like a clown with that smile on a face besmeared with lip rouge. "And why the hell shouldn't I be?"

"If I had any say in the matter you would be, Commodore. You *and* Captain Sir Dominic Flandry." He made it sound as though the honorific were a word of four letters, not three.

"You just might have your wish, Commodore. Tell me, have you received any reports from Commander Mayhew and the other PCOs?"

"This is no time to...."

"But it is. The success of our mission, the safety of our ships; these matters, surely, are of overriding importance...."

"He's right, you know," said Sonya, who had appeared in the doorway, looking as though butter would not melt in her mouth.

"Shut up!" snapped Grimes. "You keep out of it."

"He's right, you know," said Maggie, cool and unruffled, who had just joined the party.

"Shut up!" snapped Grimes II. "You keep out of it."

"He's right, you know," drawled Flandry.

Grimes II snarled wordlessly. Then, "As a matter of fact, your Mayhew and

his mates did get Clarisse to... to turn off the amplifier. They're trying to sort out the psionic impressions that they're getting from *Adler* and your *Faraway Quest*, now that the interference has been... switched off. I was thinking of calling you to let you know, but there was no urgency, and I thought you needed your sleep. Ha, ha."

"So now we work out a plan of campaign..." murmured Grimes I.

"Yes. In the control room. It'll be some time before I feel like setting foot in my own quarters again. And might I suggest that you two officers and gentlemen get yourselves looking like officers, at least, before you come up."

Grimes looked doubtfully at Sonya. Then he turned to Flandry. "Do you mind if I make use of your toilet facilities, Sir Dominic?"

"Be my guest, Commodore." Then, in almost a whisper, "After all, I was yours—and you were his."

Grimes didn't want to laugh, but he did. If looks could have killed he would have died there and then. But women have no sense of humor.

## XX

*Wanderer* and *Faraway Quest II* synchronized temporal precession rates, and *Wanderer* closed with the *Quest*, laying herself almost alongside her. It was a maneuver typical of Irene's spacemanship—or spacewomanship—and when it was over Grimes I looked closely at Grimes II's head to see if his counterpart had acquired any additional gray hairs. He thought wryly, *Probably Maggie and I have put a few there ourselves....* It was essential, however, that the meeting of the leaders be held aboard one of the ships; *Adler* would do her best to monitor a conversation conducted over the Carlotti transceivers.

So there they all were in *Faraway Quest's* control room: the two Grimeses, their wives, Sir Dominic, Irene, Trafford, Smith (inevitably), Mayhew and Metzenter. Somehow Grimes I found himself in the chair.

Slowly and carefully, he filled and lit his pipe. (The other Grimes produced and lit a cigarette. *Subtle*, thought Grimes. *Subtle. I didn't think you had it in you, John...*) After he had it going well he said, "All right. I think we can take it as read that our PCOs have silenced the dog, and that they—including, of course, Clarisse—are now doing some snooping into the minds of our mutual enemies. Correct?"

"Correct, sir," answered Mayhew.

"Good. Then report, please, Commander."

The telepath spoke in a toneless voice. "Clarisse is well, although her mind is not yet operating at full capacity. As far as she can determine, as far as we can determine, all the other members of *Faraway Quest's* crew are unharmed. As yet.

"Insofar as their captors are concerned, we have found it advisable to concentrate on key personnel: Dr. Druthen, Captain Blumenfeld and Commander von Donderberg, who is still the senior prize officer aboard *Quest*. Dr. Druthen is not quite sane. He is ambitious. He thinks that the Duchy of Waldegren will appreciate his brilliance, whereas the Confederacy does not. His mother, who exercised considerable influence over him during his

formative years, was an expatriate Waldegren. Druthen, too, has strong sadistic tendencies. Had it not been for the restraining influence of von Donderberg the lot of the prisoners would have been a sorry one. He is still urging Blumenfeld to use them to blackmail us into giving him a free hand with The Outsider.

"Now, von Donderberg. The impression you gained from that talk with him over the Carlotti radio is a correct one. Like many—although not all—naval officers, he regards himself as a space-man first and foremost. The prisoners happen to be wearing the wrong uniform, but they, as far as he is concerned, are also spacemen. He hates Druthen, and Druthen hates and despises him."

"Finally, Captain Blumenfeld. Once again, sir, you summed him up rather neatly. He is essentially a politician, with a politician's lack of conscience. He would stand on his mother's grave to get two inches nearer to where he wants to be. As a spaceman he is, at best, merely competent—but the success of this mission would put him at least two steps up the promotion ladder. He would play along with Druthen if he thought that he could get away with it, but realizes that maltreatment, or even murder of *Faraway Quests'* rightful crew could lead to an outbreak of hostilities between the Duchy and the Confederacy. He knows that his government would welcome this rather than otherwise, but fears, as they fear, that the Confederacy's Big Brother might step in. Should he get the 'all clear' from Waldegren—we gained the impression that the Duchy's political experts are hard at work evaluating the possibility of Federation intervention—he will tell Druthen to go ahead."

"Meanwhile, he is hoping that there will be dissension in our ranks. That was why he gave us time to think things over; not long, but long enough." He looked at Smith. "As you know, at least one of us present puts his own interests before the well-being of *Faraway Quest's* crew."

"Mphm." Grimes puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. Then, "Do you concur, Mr. Metzner?"

"Yes, Commodore. Commander Mayhew has summarized the findings of all four of us."

"And now you know," said Grimes II, who did not seem to be enjoying his cigarette, "what are you going to do about it? Not that you can do much. You haven't a ship of your own, even though...."

"Even though I'm carrying on as though this were my own ship?" asked Grimes. "In a way, she is. Just as...."

"She's not. And neither is Maggie."

"Shut up!" snapped the wife referred to. "Shut up! This is no time to let your personal feelings get in the way of important business."

"You should have thought of that last night," her husband told her.

Flandry laughed.

"Just what has been going on aboard this rustbucket?" asked Irene curiously, looking at Sir Dominic speculatively.

"It's a pity that you weren't here," he told her, while Sonya looked at him nastily.

"Just a slight domestic problem," said Grimes airily.

"Some people's idea of what's *slight*..." snarled Grimes II.

"Don't forget that I, too, am an injured party."

Flandry laughed again.

"Please..." pleaded Grimes. "Please. We're getting no place at all with this petty squabbling." He turned to Mayhew. "You've given us the general background. It's obvious that we have to do something before Blumenfeld gives Druthen the okay, or before Druthen acts off his own bat. I've already thought of something that we—that Clarisse especially—can do. I take it that there are writing materials in your watch room aboard *my Quest*?"

"Of course."

"And writing materials are also drawing materials...."

"Yes. But to call up some peculiar deities or demons at this juncture could make the situation worse than it is now."

"Who mentioned deities or demons?" Grimes saw that Flandry, Irene and Trafford were looking at him curiously, as were his alter ego and Maggie Lazenby. He said slowly, "I suppose I'd better put you in the picture. Clarisse is more than a mere telepath. She is descended from a caveman artist who, displaced in time, was found on Kinsolving's Planet many years ago. He, it seems, had specialized in painting pictures of various animals which, consequently, were drawn into the hunters' traps. Clarisse inherited his talent..."

"Impossible," said Grimes II flatly.

"Not so, Commodore. I've seen it happen. Ken Mayhew has seen it happen. So has Sonya."

"It's true," she agreed soberly.

"So Clarisse could be a sort of Trojan horse..." murmured Flandry.

"You're getting the idea. Of course, there's one snag. Each time that she's... performed she's been under the influence of some hallucinogenic drug."

"And the rest of you," sneered Smith.

"No. Most definitely not. The main problem now is to get her suitably high."

"That's no problem," said Mayhew. A great load seemed suddenly to have dropped from his thin shoulders. He had something to do at last—something to help to save Clarisse. "That's no problem. Two telepaths who are married have more, much more in common than any pair of nontelepaths. There is far greater sensitivity, far more... sharing than in any common marriage. If I get high on anything at all, so will Clarisse. If I go on a trip, so will she."

"Good," murmured Grimes. "Good. So buzz the quack and tell him what you need to put your mind in the proper state. Try to get instructions through to Clarisse. All she has to do is sketch us, one by one, and we'll be with her...." He looked rapidly around the control room. "Not you, Ken. I'm sorry, but you'll be too muzzy with dope. What about you, Mr. Metzenthler? Good. And you, Flandry? And myself, and Sonya...."

"Count me in," Irene said gruffly. "I still don't believe it, but if it works I'd like to be in the party."

"And me," said Trafford, although not overenthusiastically. "Tallentire can look after the ship."

Smith did not volunteer.

Maggie Lazenby was about to, Grimes thought, but lapsed into silence as her husband looked at her long and coldly.



And Grimes II said, "I'll not be sorry to see some of you off my vessel and back aboard your own ships."

## XXI

*This shouldn't be happening*, thought Grimes. *Magic—and what else can it be called? in the control room of an interstellar ship...* But this was the Rim, where the laws of nature, although not repealed, were not enforced with any stringency. This was beyond the Rim.

He looked at Mayhew as the telepath regarded dubiously the little glass of some colorless fluid that he was holding. "This," the too jovial ship's doctor had assured him, "will give you hallucinations in glorious technicolor and at least seven dimensions...." Grimes looked at Mayhew, and everybody else looked at Mayhew. The PCO quipped, "Now I know how Socrates must have felt."

"Get on with it, Ken," urged Grimes.

"I'm drinking this muck, not you. All right, then. Down the hatch." He suited the action to the words.

His prominent Adam's apple wobbled as the draught went down. He licked his lips, enunciated slowly, "Not... bad. Not... too... bad." An odd sort of vagueness crept over his face. His eyes went out of focus. He wavered on his feet, groped almost aimlessly for a chair, slumped down into it.

Grimes whispered to Metzenthler, "Clarisse—is she ready? Are you and Trialanne standing by to help?"

"Of course, Commodore."

Mayhew said with surprising clarity, "The black lambs of Damballa. But they shouldn't. No."

*Never mind the bloody black lambs*, thought Grimes testily.

"Clarisse..." Mayhew's voice was very soft, almost inaudible. "Clarisse. You shouldn't have killed Lassie."

"Damn Lassie," muttered Grimes.

"A man's best friend is his... is his... is his...? But the black lambs. And no sheep dog. Yes."

Metzenthler looked toward Grimes. He whispered reassuringly, "It'll not be long now, Commodore. She's started on her pictures. And they won't be of black lambs. Black sheep, more likely."

"You can say that again," grunted Grimes II.

Grimes I allowed himself a smile. Let Metzenthler enjoy his play on words, and let the other Grimes make what he liked of it. It didn't matter. He would soon be back aboard his own ship. He looked down at the Minetti automatic pistol that he was holding, ready, in his right hand. (Luckily, his counterpart shared his taste in personal weaponry—as in other things.) He, he was sure, would be the first to be pulled aboard the *Quest*. After all, he knew Clarisse, had known her before Mayhew had. He took one last look around at the other members of the boarding party. All were armed. Sonya, Trafford and Metzenthler wore holstered laser handguns; and Irene, two ugly looking pistols of .50 caliber. Flandry had some-thing that looked as though it had been dreamed up by an illustrator of juvenile science fiction thrillers.

Grimes remembered the two occasions on which he had seen Clarisse at work. He recalled, vividly, that bare, windswept mountaintop on Kinsolving, with the black sky overhead, the Galactic Lens a misty shimmer low on the horizon. He visualized, without any effort on his part, the floodlit easel with its square of canvas, the pots of pigment, the girl, naked save for a scanty scrap of some animal pelt, working with swift, sure strokes on her brushes.

Sudden doubt assailed him.

Those had been ideal conditions. Would conditions aboard the hijacked *Faraway Quest* be as ideal?

Mayhew seemed to be completely out, sprawled loosely in his chair, his eyes closed, his mouth slack. A thin dribble of spittle crawled down his chin. Had the telepath taken too much of whatever concoction it was that the doctor had prepared? Was Clarisse similarly unconscious?

Metzenthler smiled reassuringly at the Commodore, whispered, "Any time now...."

Flandry, overhearing, snorted his disbelief.

Grimes turned to admonish him, and....

Flandry was gone.

## XXII

Flandry was gone.

Grimes wondered why there had been no miniature clap of thunder as the air rushed in to fill the vacuum caused by his abrupt departure. Had the exactly correct volume of atmosphere been teleported from the room in which Clarisse was imprisoned to fill the space that the Imperial Captain had occupied? What did it matter, anyhow? Magic is an art, not a science.

Flandry was gone—and who next?

Grimes was more than a little hurt. He had known Clarisse for years. Sonya had known her for almost as long. And yet she called a stranger to her. She had met Sir Dominic only once; he must have made an impression on her.

He turned to the others. "Well, it seems to be working. But why *him*?"

"Why not?" asked Sonya sweetly. "He's resourceful. He's tough."

"And he's out of *my* hair," added Grimes II. He did not say aloud that he hoped that other people would soon be out of his hair. He did not need to.

Mayhew, still unconscious in his chair, twitched. He looked as though he were having a bad dream.

"Is she all right?" demanded Grimes of Metzenthler.

"Yes, Commodore," answered the telepath. "Yes." He looked as though he had been about to say more but had decided against it.

"Can't you tell her to get the rest of us shifted across?"

"I... I will try. But you must realize that teleportation is a strain upon the operator."

"Damn it all, this is urgent."

"I know, Commodore. But... she will not be hurried."

"Druthen, von Donderberg... Do *they* know that Flandry is aboard the ship?"

"No. And with von Donderberg actually in charge everything—including the prisoners' meals—is very much to timetable. There is little chance that Clarissa and Sir Dominic will be dis-turbed."

*Disturbed?* thought Grimes. An odd choice of words....

"You must be patient, Commodore," said Metzenthler.

Grimes was never to know if it was his own imagination, or if the telepath had deliberately planted the picture in his mind. But he *knew* what was happening, what had happened. He saw Clarisse, her clothing cast aside the better to emu-late her savage forebears, working at the sketch she was making on a signals pad. She saw the picture growing out of her swift, sure stylus strokes, the depiction of Sir Dominic. What sub-conscious desires had been brought to the surface by the drug that Mayhew had taken, the effects of which he had shared with her?

And then....

And then Flandry was with her.

Flandry, the unprincipled, suddenly confronted with a beautiful, naked, available and willing wo-man.

If Metzenthler had not put thoughts, impressions into Grimes' brain he had read the Commodore's mind. He said, telepathically, "Mayhew will never know. We shall make sure of that."

"But... but how can she?" asked Grimes silently.

He got the impression of quiet laughter in reply. "How could you? How could Sonya? How could Maggie? Some of us—even you, Commodore—have regarded this straying into other continua as a sort of a holiday. A pubic holiday.... Forgive me. That just slipped out. And Clarisse has been under strain as much as any of us, more than most of us. What's more natural than that she should greet her deliverer in the age-old manner? Are you jealous, Commodore?"

"Frankly, yes," thought Grimes. He grinned ruefully. "What the hell do you find so amusing?" asked Sonya sharply.

"Oh, er... I was just wondering where Sir Dominic had finished up. As we both of us know, this talent of Clarisse's is rather... unreliable."

"You have an odd sense of humor," she told him. She was beginning to look anxious.

There were no pictures in Grimes' mind now. He was rather thankful for that. But still he did not know how long it would be before Clarisse re-sumed her magical activities. He knocked his pipe out into one of the large ashtrays that were placed all around the control room. He refilled it. He lit it.

"Please, John," said Clarisse, "not in here. It's dreadfully stuffy."

She was, as he had visualized her, naked. She was standing at the desk, adding the last touches to the sketch she had made of Grimes. Flandry was seated on the bunk. He was fully clothed.

But....

"Wipe the lipstick off your face, Sir Dominic," said Grimes coldly.

## **XXIII**

Clarisse ignored the exchange. She tore the sheet upon which she had

portrayed Grimes off the pad, put it to one side. She started a fresh sketch. The Commodore peered over her smooth, bare shoulder as she worked. The likeness was unmis-takable.

"Now!" she whispered intently.

Grimes was almost knocked off his feet as Irene materialized. She exclaimed cheerfully, "Oops, dearie! Fancy meeting *you* here!" And then, to Clarisse, "Hadn't you better put something on, ducks? All these *men*...."

"I work better this way," she was told.

"Sssh!" hissed Grimes. "This cabin.... bugged...."

"It was," remarked Flandry, in normal conver-sational tones. "And very amateurishly, if I may say so."

"So you did, at least, take precautions be-fore...." Grimes began.

"Before *what*?" asked Flandry, smiling reminiscently. "I always take precautions, Commo-dore."

Clarisse blushed spectacularly, over her entire body. But she went on sketching.

Sonya appeared, looking around her disapprov-ingly. *What's been going on here?* she asked si-lently. Then it was Trafford's turn, and finally Met-zenther's. The little cabin was uncomfortably crowded. Grimes didn't like the way that his wife was sitting close beside Flandry on the bunk. She, obviously, didn't like the way that he was being pressed between Irene's flamboyance and Clarisse's nudity. Somebody knocked over the tank in which the psionic amplifier was housed. It did not break, but the cover came off it, allowing the stag-nant nutrient solution to spill on the deck. It smelled as though something had been dead for a very long time.

Sonya sniffed. "And now what do we do?" she demanded. "I'd suggest that Clarisse get dressed, but I realize that it's almost impossible in these circumstances."

"This is *your* ship, Commodore," said Flandry.

"Mphm. When is your next meal due, Clarisse?"

"I... my watch... with my clothes. On the bunk..."

Flandry rummaged in the little pile of garments and found the timepiece. He announced, "It is 1135 hours, this ship's time."

"Twenty-five minutes," said Clarisse.

"So we wait," said Grimes. "It'll not be for too long. Then we overpower whoever brings the tray and any other guards and take over."

Flandry laughed jeeringly. "Brilliant, Commo-dore. Really brilliant. And if anybody fires into this dogbox he'll get at least four of us with one shot."

"Have you any better ideas, Captain?"

"Of course," Flandry replied smugly. "If I am not mistaken, those weapons being toted around by Sonya, Captain Trafford and Mr. Metzenther are laser pistols. They are not used much in my continuum, but you people seem to like them. A laser pistol can be used as a tool as well as a handgun. A cutting tool...."

"So we break out, rather than wait to be let out."

"A truly blinding glimpse of the obvious, sir."

Trafford was nearest the door. "Go ahead, please, Captain," said Grimes.

The little man unholstered his weapon. He pulled out a slender screwdriver

that had been recessed in the butt of it. Carefully, not hurrying, he made adjustments to the power settings. He replaced the screwdriver.

Grimes took a pencil from Clarisse. He managed to shove his way through the crowd to stand beside Trafford. He drew a rough circle on the smooth, painted metal panel of the door. He said, "The lock should be there, Captain. If you burn around it...."

"I'll try, Commodore."

The narrow beam of intensely bright light shot from the muzzle of the pistol. Metal became blue white incandescent immediately but was reluctant to melt. The structural components of a starship are designed to withstand almost anything. Trafford removed his finger from the trigger, used the screwdriver to make further adjustments. Then he tried again.

Grimes had foreseen what was going to happen. After all, as Flandry had pointed out, this was *his* ship. Grimes should have warned the others, but this chance to see the silly grin wiped off Sir Dominic's face was not one to be passed over.

The air in the watch room became stiflingly hot, and acrid with the fumes of burning paint and metal. And then....

And then there were bells ringing, some close and some distant, filling the echoing shell of *Fara-way Quest* with their clangor. A klaxon added its stridency to the uproar. From the nozzles of the spray system jetted a white foam that blanketed everything and everybody. Flandry cursed, but he could never hope to match Irene's picturesque obscenities and blasphemies.

The door sagged open.

Grimes, pistol in hand, shoved past Trafford, out into the brightly lit alleyway. Sonya, looking like a figure roughly hacked from white foam plastic, was behind him, then Trafford, then Irene. Metzenter staggered out supporting Clarisse, who looked as though she had just emerged from a bubble bath.

"You bloody fool," gasped Flandry, who was last to emerge. "You bloody fool! You should have known...."

"I did know," snapped Grimes. "Pipe down, damn you!"

The fire-extinguishing foam was pouring out into the alleyway. Grimes motioned to the others to follow suit, dropped to his knees, let the cool, not unpleasantly acrid froth almost cover him. How long would it be before the fire-fighting party was on the scene? When *Quest's* own crew had been running the ship scant seconds would have elapsed; but Druthen and his scientists and technicians were not spacemen, and at least one of the three officers put aboard from *Adler* would be remaining in the control room.

Somebody, somewhere, switched the alarms off. So they realized that there was a fire. And without that incessant noise it was possible to think, to give orders.

"Keep covered," said Grimes. "They'll not see us until it's too late." He added, in a disgruntled voice, "The bastards are certainly taking their time. Billy Williams and his crowd would have had the fire out half an hour ago!"

"Glumph," replied Sonya through a mouthful of foam.

They were here at last, rounding the curve in the alleyway: a tall figure in a space suit, the spiked helmet of which made it obvious that he was a member

of the Waldegren Navy, four men in civil-ian space armor, pushing a wheeled tank.

"Lasers only," whispered Grimes. "Fire!"

Lasers are silent—but they are dreadfully lethal. Grimes hated to have to do it—but the fire fighters must be given no chance to warn Druthen and von Donderberg in Control. Druthen's men were hijackers, and their lives were already for-feit. The universal penalty for this crime is death. The Waldegrenner was acting under orders, but he had no business aboard Grimes' ship. What hap-pened to him was just his bad luck.

Grimes stood up slowly in the waist-high foam. He looked at the five silent figures. They were dead all right, each of them with his armor neatly pierced in half a dozen places. There was no blood, luckily, and luckily nobody had employed the ef-fective slashing technique, so the suits were still reasonably intact.

*Five of them, he thought, trying hard to fight down his nausea. Seven of us. Flandry can wear the Waldegren space suit—it'll fit him. Then my-self. And Sonya. Irene? Metzenthler? Trafford? Claris se?*

He said, "Get the armor off them. It's a made-to-order disguise."

Trafford, Flandry and Sonya went to work. The smell of charred meat and burned blood was dis-tressingly evident. Suddenly, Sonya beckoned to Grimes. He went to look, down at the stripped figure. It was a woman. She was, she had been one of the junior technicians. Grimes remembered her. He had referred to her, in his thoughts, as a hard-faced little bitch. Feeling sorry for this would not help her now.

He walked slowly back to where Clarisse was standing, patches of foam slipping slowly down her smooth skin, others still clinging to the salient points of her body. He whispered, pointing, "You know her?"

"Yes."

"Wear her suit. Speak into the suit radio, using her voice.... You can do that?"

"Of course."

"Report that the fire is under control. Should Druthen or von Donderberg feel uneasy about anything you, as a telepath, will know the right things to say to put their minds at rest. Say that we are returning topside to report as soon as the fire is out. Get it?"

"Yes."

"Then get suited up."

She obeyed him, assisted by Sonya and Irene. She spurned their suggestion that she should wear the dead woman's long Johns. Grimes didn't blame her, although he winced at the thought of the un-lined inside of the suit chafing her unprotected skin.

Then Grimes, too, stripped to his skimpy underwear, could not bring himself to put on a dead man's next-to-the-skin union suit. Neither could Sonya. But the corpse robbing worried neither Irene nor Flandry.

The bodies were concealed in the congealing foam, which hid, too, the tools taken from the belt pouches of the fire party. Those same pouches served as holsters for the weapons of Grimes and his people. It was decided that Trafford and Met-zenthler, who had been unable to disguise them-selves, would stay in

the watch room. They would be safe enough there, especially since Metzenter should be able to give ample advance warning of the approach of any hostile persons.

Then, speaking in a voice that was not her own, Clarisse said into her helmet microphone, "Sadie Hawkes reporting to Dr. Druthen. The fire's out. Nothing serious. That stupid bitch was burning papers for some reason or other."

"Is she hurt?" Druthen's voice did not betray much, if any, concern.

"Naw, Doc. We just slapped her round a little, is all."

Von Donderberg's voice came through the speakers. "Lieutenant Muller."

"Sorry, Commander," Clarisse told him. "The Lieutenant slipped on the foam an' caught his hel-met a crack. His transceiver's on the blink."

"Where is the prisoner now?" inquired Druthen.

"We left her in her bubble batch to cool down. Ha, ha."

"Ha, ha," echoed Dr. Druthen.

*Ha, ha,* thought Grimes nastily.

## XXIV

Grimes led the way into the control room. (After all, this was his ship.) He was followed by Flandry, whose right hand hovered just over the butt of his energy pistol, then by Sonya, then by Irene. Clarisse caught up the rear.

Druthen and von Donderberg swiveled in their chairs to face the returning fire-fighting party. The scientist was fatly arrogant. The Waldegrener looked more than a little frayed around the edges. *It's your own fault,* thought Grimes. *If you aren't fussy about the company you keep....*

Grimes and the others stood there. Druthen and von Donderberg sat there. Grimes knew that he should act and act fast, but he was savoring this moment. Druthen, an expression of petulant impatience growing on his face, snarled, "Take your bloody helmets off! Anybody'd think there was a smell in here." His words, although distorted by the suit diaphragms, were distinct enough.

"There is," replied Grimes. "You."

The scientist's face turned a rich purple. He sputtered, "Mutinous swine! Von Donderberg, you heard! *Do something!*"

Von Donderberg shrugged. There was a flicker of amusement in his blue eyes.

Grimes said, "Mutiny, Dr. Druthen? I am ar-resting *you* for mutiny and piracy." He fumbled for his Minetti, but the little pistol, unlike the heavier weapons carried by the others, was not suitable for use by a man wearing space armor with its clumsy gloves.

But Flandry's odd-looking weapon was out, as were Sonya's and Irene's pistols. Druthen stared at them helplessly, von Donderberg in a coldly calculating manner. "You will note, Herr Doktor," remarked the Waldegren officer, "that there are neat holes in those space suits, holes that could have been made by laser fire at short range." He seemed to be speaking rather louder than was really necessary. "It would seem that our prison-ers somehow have escaped and have murdered my Lieutenant Muller and four of your

people." He turned to face Grimes. "You will surrender."

"I admire your nerve," Grimes told him.

"That is not one of the prisoners!" exclaimed Druthen. "It's that bastard Grimes! But that's im-possible!"

"It's not, Doctor. It's not." The Commodore was really enjoying himself. "You sneered at me—remember—for carrying a practicing witch on my Articles of Agreement...."

The practicing witch screamed, "John! The Carlotti set! It's on! *Adler's* seeing and hearing every-thing!"

And *Adler's* temporal precession rate was syn-chronized with that of *Faraway Quest*. No doubt her cannon and projectors were already trained upon their target. No doubt boarding parties were already suited up and hurrying into the warship's airlocks.

Grimes swore. His gloating could easily have ruined everything. He dived for the Mannschenn Drive remote controls. He heard pistol fire as somebody, Irene probably, switched off the Car-lotti transceiver in an effective but destructive manner. Von Donderberg got in his way, grappled him. The Waldegrener was a strong man and agile, whereas Grimes was hampered by his armor. His body was a barrier between the Commodore and the Mannschenn Drive control console. Brutally, Grimes flailed at him with his mailed fists, but von Donderberg managed to get a firm grip on both his wrists. Grimes tried to bring his knee up, but he was too slow and the foul blow was easily avoided.

It was Irene who settled matters. (After all, this was not *her* ship.) Her heavy pistols barked deafeningly, the slugs just missing Grimes (inten-tionally, he hoped) and von Donderberg. The face of the control panel splintered; otherwise the im-mediate results were unspectacular.

But down in the Mannschenn Drive room the duty technician watched aghast as the great, gleaming rotors ran wild, precessing faster and faster yet, tumbling down and into the dark dimen-sions uncontrolled and uncontrollably. Beyond the control room viewports, the image of *Adler* glowed with impossible clarity against the black-ness, then flickered out like a snuffed candle flame. Throughout the ship, men and women stared at familiar surroundings and fittings that sagged and fluoresced, that wavered on the very brink of the absolute nothingness. Belatedly, alarm bells started to ring, but their sound was a thin, high shrilling, felt rather than heard.

Abruptly, shockingly, normalcy returned as the Drive shut itself off. Colors, forms and sounds were suddenly... drab. The irregular throbbing of the inertial drive was harsh and irritating.

Grimes, still straining against von Donderberg, snapped, "Shut that bloody thing off!" Apart from the Waldegren Commander and his surviving officer—wherever *he* was—there were no space-men among those who had hijacked the ship. Free fall would not worry Grimes and his boarding party overmuch, but it would be, at the very least, an inconvenience to the planet lubbers.

The annoying vibration ceased. *What next?* Grimes asked himself. It was hard to think clearly. That blasted von Donderberg was still putting up a fight, and Sonya and Clarisse, who had come to the Commodore's aid, were more of a



hindrance than a help. "Irene!" he called. "Check the indicator! Are all AT doors shut?" (The airtight doors should have automatically at the first signs of main drive malfunction.)

"Yes," she replied at last.

"There's a switch by itself in a glass-fronted box.... It's labeled LOCK...."

"Got it...."

"Then throw it!"

Grimes heard the little crash of shattering glass, heard Irene say, "Locked."

Sonya had a space suited arm across von Don-derberg's throat. The man was starting to choke; his face was turning blue, his eyes were protrud-ing. Suddenly he relinquished his hold on Grimes' wrists. The two women hustled him to an accelera-tion chair, forced him down into it. They held him there while Irene, using a length of flex that she had found somewhere, lashed him into the seat. Druthen had already been similarly dealt with by Irene and Flandry.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. The situation was, for the time being, under control. Slowly he re-moved his gloves, then took his pipe from one of the pouches at the belt of his space suit. He filled it and lit it, ignoring Sonya's "Not *now!*" He stared at Druthen, demanded, "Where are the prison-ers?"

"Find out!" came the snarled reply.

From the intercom speakers came a growing uproar. "Doctor Druthen, what's happened?"

"We're shut in, let us out of here!"

"Doctor, there's no gravity!"

"We can do without that," said Grimes. Sonya switched off the system. Then, "Where are the prisoners, Druthen?"

Again the scientist snarled, "Find out!"

"And that is just what we intend to do, Herr Doktor," remarked Flandry. He pulled that com-plexed looking weapon from a makeshift holster at his belt, looked at it thoughtfully, said regret-fully, "Not quite subtle enough..." From another pouch he took out a knife, drew it from its sheath. It was only small, but it gleamed evilly. "Perhaps a little judicious whittling..." He mur-mured. "Where shall I start?"

Von Donderberg, who had recovered his voice, croaked, "Remember that you an officer and gen-tleman are. A civilized man."

"Who says that I'm civilized, Commander? Come to that—who dares say that either you or the learned Herr Doktor are civilized? You, sir, are a pirate. He is either a mutineer or a hijacker or both—but this is no time to discuss legalities. H'm. Your hands are nicely secured to the arms of your chair. Doctor. Perhaps if I pry off your fin-gernails, one by one...."

"Flandry, you wouldn't!" expostulated Grimes.

"Wouldn't I, Commodore? You may watch."

"But I know where they are," said Clarisse. She added tartly, "What the hell's the good of having a professional telepath around if you don't make use of her?"

"Why must you spoil everything?" asked Flan-dry plaintively.

Von Donderberg laughed mirthlessly and Druthen fainted.

Yes, Clarisse knew where they were. It was an obvious enough place anyhow, the empty cargo compartment, right aft, in which Grimes had intended to stow whatever fantastic artifacts could be plundered from the Outsiders' Ship. Sonya, taking with her the electronic master key that would allow her passage through the locked air-tight doors, went to release them. She was accompanied by Irene and would pick up Trafford and Metzner on the way. She assured Grimes that if she encountered any of Druthen's people she would shoot if she had to. Irene growled that *she* would shoot, period. But there was not much risk. Metzner would be able to give them ample warning of what hostile action, if any, awaited them in any compartment that they were about to enter.

Grimes switched on the second Carlotti transceiver—luckily the ship was fitted with two of the sets—and raised *Faraway Quest II* without any difficulty. She was no longer ahead, relatively speaking. *Adler* had turned, and *Quest II* and *Wanderer* had turned with her, and all three ships were racing back toward The Outsider on a reciprocal of their original trajectory.

"So you've got your ship back, Commodore," commented the other Grimes, looking out from the little screen. "Your Commander Mayhew, and Trialanne aboard *Wanderer*, have been keeping us informed."

"There's a little mopping up yet, Commodore," said Grimes. "But it shouldn't take long. I suggest that you and *Wanderer* slow down to allow me to catch up."

"*Wanderer* can if she likes, Commodore, but I'm not going to. *Adler's* going like a bat out of hell, and has the heels of us. Mayhew tells me that she's using some experimental accelerator, for the first time. Unluckily he's a mechanical and mathematical moron, so he can't get anything but absolute gibberish from the mind of *Adler's* engineer officer. But I know that it's Blumenfeld's intention to race us to The Outsider and then to seize and to hold it against all comers, waiting for reinforcements."

"What about *Vindictive*? Captain Flandry's ship?"

"What, indeed?" echoed Flandry.

"We can't warn her," said Grimes II. "That stupid culture she comes from has never developed the Carlotti system, or used telepaths...."

"I resent that," snarled Flandry.

Grimes II seemed to notice him for the first time. "Sorry, Captain. I didn't realize that you were listening. But can *you* warn your ship?"

"No, I can't. But my men have very itchy trigger fingers."

"They'll need 'em. But switch on your other set, Commodore. Mr. Smith in *Wanderer* would like a word with you."

"I can't. Commodore. Will you tell Mr. Smith that his Mrs. Trafford switched off my other set rather permanently? The same applies to the remote control panel of my Mannschenn Drive."

"Then switch over to *Wanderer*. I'll just stick beak."

Grimes made the necessary adjustments, found himself looking at Smith. Tallentire was well in the background.

"Commodore," said Smith, "you realize that neither we nor the other Commodore Grimes can afford to wait until you have effected repairs and adjusted trajectory. *Adler* must be stopped. I, as the charterer, have assumed effective command of *Wanderer*. I do not see either Captain Trafford or Mrs. Trafford in your control room. Could you ask them to speak with me?"

"They're not available at the moment," said Grimes.

"They bloody well are!" Irene contradicted him.

Suddenly the control room had become crowded with people: Sonya, Irene, Trafford, Metzther, Billy Williams, Carnaby, Hendrikson, Major Dalzell and Daniels. Williams reported to Grimes, "Commander Davis and his juniors have gone straight to the engine room, Skipper. They'll let you know as soon as they can get her started up." He went to where Druthen and von Donderberg were lashed in their chairs. "An' what shall we do with these drongos?"

"Take 'em away and lock 'em up, as soon as we can get round to it."

"Captain Trafford; Mrs. Trafford," came Smith's insistent voice from the Carlotti speaker.

"Yes!" snapped Irene.

"You and Captain Trafford should be aboard this ship. But you're not. So I had no option but to order Mr. Tallentire to press the chase."

"You... *ordered?*"

"Yes. I ordered."

"He *is* the charterer," pointed out Trafford.

"All right. He's the bloody charterer. And so what?"

"Blumenfeld must be stopped," insisted the lit-tle captain. "Waldegren, in any continuum, cannot be allowed to get its hands on The Outsider's se-crets."

"You'll never stop us now!" bragged von Don-derberg.

"Shut up, you!" growled Billy Williams.

Irene turned back to the Carlotti transceiver, "All right, Smith. Press the chase. But, as owner, I appoint Mr. Tallentire master—until Captain Trafford's return. Mr. Tallentire will act as *he* sees fit. Get it?"

"As you wish." Smith managed to convey the impression of being supremely unconcerned.

"I will talk with Mr. Tallentire now."

Tallentire's face replaced that of Smith in the screen. He looked far from happy. "Yes, ma'am?"

"You are acting captain. Put the interests of the ship before those of Mr. Smith. Press the chase. Make use of your weaponry as requisite. You will revert to your normal rank as soon as we are back on board. That's all."

Somehow a junior engineer had managed to in-sert himself into the crowded control room. He elbowed his way toward Grimes. "Sir, Command-er Davis told me to tell you that you can start inertial and Mannschenn Drives as soon as you like. He's been trying to raise you on the intercom, but the line is dead."

"It's switched off," Grimes admitted. "But we'll get it working again to the engine room...." Daniels had anticipated him, handed Grimes a microphone. "Commodore here, Commander Davis. The remote control panel of the Mann-schenn Drive is... out of order. You'll just have to get your instructions by telephone. Good." He turned to Carnaby. "Get ready to put the ship on the

reciprocal heading—straight for The Outsider. We may be a little late for the start of the party, but we should be there before it's over..."

Flandry, Irene and Trafford looked at him with some animosity. "It's all right for *you*," growled the ex-Empress. "You've got a ship now, and we haven't."

"Can you get us back to where we belong?"

Flandry asked Clarisse, a little desperately.

"I... I don't know..." she admitted. "I've never tried *sending* anybody anywhere before."

"You'd better try now," Grimes told her. "Or as soon as we have things sorted out." He didn't want Sonya and Flandry in the same ship.

## XXVI

The commodore's quarters still retained the distasteful traces of Druthen's occupancy, but the cleaning up could wait. Grimes forced himself to ignore the untidiness—no less than his own, but *different*—the scars left by smoldering cigarette ends on table tops; the sticky rings that showed where slopping over glasses had been set down. Sonya had wanted to do something about it at once, if not before, but Grimes had restrained her. "It is essential," he said firmly, "that Sir Dominic, Irene, Captain Trafford and Mr. Metzenter be returned to their own ships as soon as possible...."

"And it is equally essential—to me, anyhow—that Ken be brought back here as soon as possible," Clarisse told him.

"Mphm. I see your point. But first of all both Captain Flandry's *Vindictive* and Captain Trafford's *Wanderer* must be put in a state of full fighting efficiency, so as to be able to cope with *Adler*. I would suggest that you deal with Sir Dominic first."

"Thank you," said Flandry.

"It will be a pleasure, Captain. Well, Clarisse?"

"I don't know how it *can* be done..." muttered the girl. "I don't know *if* it can be done...."

"Rubbish!" snorted Irene. "If you can pull, you can push. It's as simple as that."

"Then why don't *you* try it?"

"It's just not my specialty, dearie. I'm just a rough and tough ex-mate out of the Dog Star Line."

"To say nothing of being a rough and tough ex-empress," commented Sonya acidly. "Shut up, unless you have something constructive to contribute."

"What I said *was* constructive."

"Like hell it was."

"Ladies, ladies...." murmured Flandry soothingly. Then, to Clarisse. "As I see it, your talent works this way. You're in the right, drug-induced frame of mind. You paint or draw a picture of whatever animal or person you wish to pull into the trap or ambush, concentrate—and the result is instant teleportation...."

"You've oversimplified a little, Dominic, but that's about it."

"All right. Now suppose you sketched, to the best of your ability, the inside of my control room aboard *Vindictive*...."

"I've never been aboard your ship, Dominic."

"But you've been inside my mind."

*Oh*, thought Grimes. *Have you, indeed? But I suppose that a telepath wants more than mere physical contact....*

"Yes."

"This is what I want you to do. You must order from the ship's doctor whatever hallucinogen it is you need. And then, when you are ready, I'll visualize the control room of my ship, in as exact detail as possible, and you put it down on paper...."

"And what," asked Grimes, "if *Vindictive's* control room is brought to Captain Flandry, instead of the other way round? I seem to recall a law of physics that I learned as a child: Two solid bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time."

"Let me finish, Commodore. After she has drawn the control room she will put me in it...."

"Yes, Dominic," whispered Clarisse. "I think it will work. I'm sure it will work."

"As long as somebody's sure about some-thing..." grumbled Grimes. "Now, I think that we have some neo-mescaline in our medical stores. It was you who insisted that we carry some...."

"That is correct. If you will have it sent up...?"

Grimes called the doctor on the intercom, and then Billy Williams in Control. "Commander Williams," he said, "unless it is a matter of utmost urgency we are not, repeat not, to be disturbed."

"You won't be, Skipper. We're the also-ran in this race—an' I'm afraid that *Adler's* the odds on favorite! Of course, *Vindictive* might pip her at the post."

"We're trying to insure that she does," said Grimes, breaking off the conversation.

Slowly, without embarrassment, Clarisse removed her clothing, ignoring Irene's, "Is that necessary?" and Sonya's, "You're only jealous." She took the small glass of opalescent fluid that Grimes handed her, drained it. In her nudity she was more witch than mere woman. She was... untouchable. (But that bastard Flandry hadn't found her so, thought Grimes.) Her face was solemn, her eyes looking at something very far away. And yet it was Sir Dominic at whom she was looking. At whom? Through whom? Beyond whom?

She was stooping slightly over the table upon which a sheet of paper had been spread, upon which the colored pens had been laid out. With her gaze still intent upon Flandry she commenced to draw with swift, sure strokes. The picture was taking shape: acceleration chairs, consoles, screens, the remote controls of machinery and weaponry, all subtly unlike anything that *Quest's* and *Wanderer's* people had ever seen before. *Different ships, different long splines*, thought Grimes, recalling an ancient Terran seafaring proverb. *Different universes, different interstellar drives....*

Tension was building up in the Commodore's day cabin as the naked Clarisse stared at Flandry in his glittering uniform; as Flandry stared at Clarisse. As far as he was concerned, as far as she was concerned they were alone. Under her weaving hands the sketch was becoming three-dimensional, real. Were the lights dimming? Was the irregular beat of the inertial drive, the

thin, high whining of the Mannschenn Drive becoming fainter? Was the deathly cold of interstellar space pervading the ship?

There is one law of nature that is never broken—magic notwithstanding: *You can't get something for nothing*. A transfer of a solid body across a vast distance was about to take place. Such a transfer, whether by wheels, wings or witchcraft, involves the use of energy. There was energy in many usable forms available within the hull of *Faraway Quest*. It was being drawn upon.

Grimes stared at the picture on the table. The lights—red, green, blue and amber—on the panels of the consoles were glowing, and some of them were blinking rapidly. The darkness beyond the viewports was the utter blackness of intergalactic space. Something swam slowly into sight beyond one of the big transparencies—the dome-shaped Shaara derelict.

And then....

And then there was a man there, standing in the middle of the hitherto deserted control room, the details of his face and figure growing under the witch artist's flying fingers. It was unmistakably Flandry, and he was stark naked save for his belt and his holstered pistol.

Grimes looked up from the sketch to stare at the emptiness where Flandry had been standing. He was... gone. But not entirely; his uniform, a small bundle of black and gold, of rainbow ribbons, was all that remained of him.

Irene said—was it to Sonya or to Clarisse?— "At least you've something to remember him by, dearie."

Clarisse, her face cold and hard, snatched the sheet with the sketch off the table, screwed it up into a ball, threw it toward the disposal chute. She did not miss. She moved swiftly around the table, picked up the empty uniform, then stuffed it down the chute after the crumpled paper. Grimes made as though to stop her—after all, an analysis of the cloth from which Flandry's clothing had been cut could have told a great deal about the technology of his culture—then decided against it. He would be able to swap information with Sir Dominic after *Adler* had been disposed of. Nonetheless, he was sorry that he had not said goodbye properly to the man, thanked him for all his help. (But Flandry had helped himself, in more ways than one....)

The witch girl was ready to resume operations. A fresh sheet of paper was on the table. She said nothing aloud to Metzenter, but the two telepaths must have been in communication. He came to stand beside her, was obviously feeding into her mind the details of *Wanderer's* control room. Again the detailed picture grew.

Irene asked. "Would you mind if I kept my clothes on. Clarisse? Public nudism never ap-pealed to me."

Sonya said, cattily, "I don't think female nakedness interests her."

Nor did it. When Irene vanished she left nothing behind—and neither did Trafford nor Metzenter.

And now, at last, Clarisse was working for her-self. For the last time the lights dimmed, the tem-perature dropped, the shipboard sounds were muffled. Grimes looked at the flattering portrait of Mayhew that had appeared, then at Sonya. He said, "I think we'll see what's happening topside, my dear." And, as Mayhew materialized, just as they were leaving, "It's good to have our ship to ourselves again."

## XXVII

They had their ship to themselves again, but she was a ship alone. Far ahead of them now were their allies—allies only as long as it was expedient for them to be so—and their enemies. There was communication still with *Faraway Quest II* and with *Wanderer*, by Carlotti radio and through the telepaths. There was no word from *Vindictive*; but as Irene, Trafford and Metzenter were safely back aboard their own vessel, it could be assumed that Flandry was safely back in his.

Grimes, pacing his control room (three steps one way, three steps the other unless he wished to make complicated detours around chairs and banked instruments) was becoming more and more impatient. For many years he had thought of himself as a man of peace—but in his younger days, in the Federation's Survey Service, he had specialized in gunnery. If there was to be a fight he wanted to be in it. Apart from anything else, should he not be present at the moment of victory over *Adler* his prior claim to *The Outsider* would be laughed at by Irene, by Smith, by Flandry and even by his other self. And his engines were not developing their full capacity.

The emergency shutdown of the Mannschenn Drive had affected the smooth running of that delicate, complex mechanism. It was nothing serious, but recalibration was necessary. Recalibration can be carried out only on the surface of a planet. And even if there had been any planets in the vicinity—which, of course, there were not—Grimes could not afford the time.

So *Faraway Quest* limped on, while, at last, the reports started coming in from ahead of her. *Wanderer* thought the *Vindictive* was engaging *Adler*. One of the officers aboard *Faraway Quest II* had broken the code that *Adler* was using in her Carlotti transmissions to base, and Grimes II reported that Blumenfeld was screaming for reinforcements.

*Wanderer* and *Faraway Quest II* were now within extreme missile range of the engagement but had not yet opened fire. To do so they would have to revert to normal space time. Metzenter, aboard *Wanderer*, reported through Clarisse that he and Trialanne were monitoring the involuntary psionic transmissions of the personnel of both ships presently engaged in the fighting, and that

Flandry was emanating confidence, and Blumenfeld a growing doubt as to the outcome of the battle. Each ship, however, was finding it difficult to counter the unfamiliar weapons being used by the other, and each ship was making maximum use of the cover of the derelicts in orbit about *The Outsider*.

*Wanderer* had emerged into the normal continuum and had launched missiles.

*Faraway Quest II* was engaging *Adler* with long range laser.  
Somebody had scored a direct hit on the Outsiders' Ship itself.  
And that was all.

## XXVIII

The Carlotti transceiver was dead insofar as *Wanderer*, *Faraway Quest II* and *Adler* were concerned. There were no psionic transmissions from *Wanderer*, no unintentional emanations from the crews of the other ships.

What had happened? Had the allies launched their Sunday punch against *Adler*, and had *Adler's* retaliatory Sunday punch connected on all three of them? It was possible, Grimes supposed, just barely possible—but wildly improbable.

"Are you sure you can pick up absolutely nothing?" he demanded of Mayhew and Clarisse. (There are usually some survivors, even when a ship is totally destroyed, even though they may not survive for long.)

"Nothing," she replied flatly. And then—"But I'm picking up an emanation.... It's more an emotion than actual thought...."

"I get it too," agreed Mayhew. "It's... it's a sense of strong disapproval."

"Mphm. I think that I'd disapprove strongly if *my* ship were shot from under me," said Grimes.

"But... but it's not *human*..." insisted the girl.

"Mr. Carnaby," Grimes barked at his navigator. "What do you get in the MPI? Is the Outsiders' Ship still there?"

"Still there, sir. And, as far as I can make out, only four vessels in orbit about her.... There could be a cloud of wreckage."

*Possibly a couple of the derelicts*, thought Grimes. *Possibly Adler, or Wanderer, or the other Quest, or Vindictive. Possibly a large hunk blown off the Outsiders' Ship herself. Possibly anything.*

He said, "We will stand in cautiously, proceeding under Mannschenn Drive until we are reasonably sure that it is safe to reenter normal space time. Meanwhile, Mr. Hendrikson, have all weaponry in a state of instant readiness. And you, Major Dalzell, have your men standing by for boarding operations. Commander Williams, see that the boats are all cleared away."

"What is a killer ape?" asked Clarisse suddenly.

"This is hardly the time or place to speculate about our probable ancestry!" snapped Grimes.

"I am not speculating, Commodore. It is just that I picked up a scrap of coherent thought. It was as though a voice—not a human voice—said, 'Nothing but killer apes.'"

"It's a pity we haven't an ethologist along," remarked Grimes. And where was Maggie Lazenby, the Survey Service ethologist whom he had known, years ago, whom he knew, now—but when *was* now?—as the other Grimes, captain of the other *Faraway Quest*? Where was Grimes? Where was Irene? Where was Flandry? He didn't worry about Blumenfeld.

He went to look at the MPI screen. It was a pity that it showed no details. But that large, rapidly expanding blob of luminescence must be The Outsider; those small sparks the derelicts. Carnaby said, in that tone of voice used by junior officers who doubt the wisdom of the procedures of their superiors, "We're *close*, sir."

"Yes, Mr. Carnaby. Mphm." He took his time filling and lighting his pipe. "All right, you may stand by the intercom to the engine room. Stop inertia! drive. Half-astern. Stop her. Mannschenn Drive—stop! Mr. Hendrikson—stand by all weapons!"



And there, plain beyond the viewports, was The Outsider coldly luminescent, unscarred, not so much a ship as a castle out of some fairy tale told when Man was very young: with towers and tur-rets, cupolas and minarets and gables and but-tresses, awe-inspiring rather than grotesque. And drifting by, tumbling over and over, came one of the derelicts, the Shaara vessel aboard which the conference had been held. It had been neatly bisected, so that each of its halves looked like one of those models of passenger liners in booking agents' display windows, cut down the midship line to show every deck, every compartment.

"We will continue to orbit The Outsider," said Grimes. "We will search for survivors."

"Commodore," said Mayhew. "There are no survivors. They are all.... gone."

"Dead, you mean?"

"No, sir. Just... gone."

## **XXIX**

They were... gone: *Wanderer* and *Adler*, *Faraway Quest II* and *Vindictive*. They were gone, without a trace, as though they had never been. (But had they ever been?) There was wreckage in orbit about The Outsider—the shattered and fused remains of the Dring cruiser: a whirling cloud of fragments that could have come only from that weird, archaic and alien ship that had never been investigated, that would never now be investi-gated. And Grimes' flag, the banner of the Rim Worlds Confederacy that he had planted on the Outsiders' Ship, was gone too. This was a small matter and was not noticed until, at last, Grimes decided to send away his boarding party. Until then the search for survivors had occupied all his attention.

*Faraway Quest* had the field to herself.

"We will carry on," said Grimes heavily, "with what we came out here to do." And his conscience was nagging him. Surely there was *something* that he could have done for Flandry, for Irene, for the other Grimes. All of them had helped him. What had he done to help them? What had he done to help Maggie? But space was so vast, and space time, with its infinitude of dimensions, vast-er still; and the lost ships and their people were no more than microscopic needles in a macrocosmic haystack. Too, he told himself, some clue to their fates might be found within that enormous, utterly alien hull.

So it was that Grimes, suited up, stood in the airlock of the *Quest* with Sonya and Williams and Major Dalzell. The Outsider had... permitted the ship to approach much closer than she had before; there would be no need to use the boats for the boarding party. The door slowly opened, revealing beyond itself that huge, gleaming construction. It looked neither friendly nor menacing. It was... neutral.

Grimes made the little jump required to break magnetic contact between boot soles and deck plating, at the same time actuating his suit propul-sion unit. He knew, without turning to watch, that the others were following him. Swiftly he crossed the narrow moat of nothingness, turning himself about his short axis at just the right time, coming in to a landing on an area of The

Outsider's hull that was clear of turrets and antennae. He felt rather than heard the muffled clang as his feet hit the flat metal surface. Sonya came down beside him, then Williams, then Dalzell.

The commodore looked up at his ship, hanging there in the absolute blackness, faint light showing from her control room viewports, a circle of brighter light marking the reopened airlock door. He could see four figures jumping from it—the sergeant of marines and three privates. Next would be Mayhew, with Engineer Commander Davis, Brenda Coles, the assistant biochemist and Ruth Macoby, assistant radio officer. It was a pity, thought Grimes, that he had not crewed his ship with more specialist officers; but it had been assumed, of course, that Dr. Druthen and his scientists and technicians would fill this need. But Druthen and his people, together with von Donderberg and his surviving junior officer, were prisoners in the empty cargo hold in which *Faraway Quest's* crew had been confined.

"We're being watched," whispered Sonya, her voice faint from the helmet transceiver.

They were being watched. Two of the antennae on the border of the clear area were turning, twisting. They looked unpleasantly like cobras poised to strike.

"Not to worry," Grimes assured her. "Calver mentioned the very same thing in *his* report."

The sergeant and his men were down now. The eight humans were tending to huddle. "Break it up!" Dalzell was barking. "Break it up! We're too good a target like this!"

"So is the ship, Major." Grimes told him.

"Sorry, sir." The young marine did not sound very penitent. "But I think we should take all precautions."

"All right," said Grimes. "Scatter—within reason." But he and Sonya stayed very close together.

Mayhew, Davis, Coles and Macoby came in. The telepath identified Grimes by the badges of rank on his space suit, came to stand with him and Sonya.

"Well, Ken?" asked the Commodore.

"It... it knows we're here. It... it is deciding..."

"If it doesn't make its mind up soon," said Grimes, "I'll burn my way in."

"*Sir!*" Mayhew sounded horrified.

"Don't worry," Sonya told him. "It's opening up for us."

Smoothly, with no vibrations, a circular door was sliding to one side. Those standing on it had ample time to get clear of the opening, to group themselves about its rim. They looked down into a chamber, lit from no discernible source, that was obviously an airlock. From one of its walls, rungs spaced for the convenience of human beings extruded themselves. (And would those rungs have been differently spaced for other, intelligent, space-faring beings? Almost certainly.)

Grimes reported briefly by his suit radio to Hendrikson who had been left in charge. He knew without asking that Mayhew would be making a similar report to Clarisse. Then he said, "All right. We'll accept the invitation." He lowered himself over the rim, a foot on the first rung of the ladder.

The Outsider's artificial gravity field was functioning, and *down* was down.

There was ample room in the chamber for all twelve of them. They stood there silently, watching the door slide back into place over their heads. Dalzell and his marines kept their hands just over the butts of their handguns. Grimes realized that he was doing the same. He was wearing at his belt a pair of laser pistols. He spoke again into his helmet microphone. His companions could hear him, but it became obvious that they were now cut off from communication with the ship. Captain Calver, he remembered, had reported the same phenomenon. It didn't really matter. Mayhew said that he could still reach Clarisse and that she could reach him.

"Atmosphere, Commodore," said the biochemist, looking at the gauge among the other gauges on her wrist. "Oxygen helium mixture. It would be safe to remove our helmets."

"We keep them on," said Grimes.

Another door in the curving wall was opening. Beyond it was an alleyway, a tunnel that seemed to run for miles and flooded with light. As was the case in the chamber there were no globes or tubes visible. There was nothing but that shadowless illumination and that long, long metallic tube, like the smooth bore of some fantastically huge cannon.

Grimes hesitated only briefly, then began to stride along the alleyway. Sonya stayed at his side. The others followed. Consciously or unconsciously they fell into step. The regular crash of their boots on the metal floor was echoed, reechoed, amplified. They could have been a regiment of the Brigade of Guards, or of Roman legionaries. They marched on and on, along that tunnel with no end. And as they marched the ghosts of those who had been there before them kept pace with them—the spirits of men and of not-men, from only yesterday and from ages before the Terran killer ape realized that an antelope humerus made an effective tool for murder.

It was wrong to march, Grimes dimly realized. It was wrong to tramp into this... this temple in military formation, keeping military step. But millennia of martial tradition were too strong for him, were too strong for the others to resist (even if they wanted to do so). They were Men, uniformed men, members of a crew, proud of their uniforms, their weapons and their ability to use them. Before them—unseen, unheard, but almost tangible—marched the phalanxes of Alexander, Napoleon's infantry, Rommel's Afrika Korps. Behind them marched the armies yet to come.

*Damn it all!* thought Grimes desperately, *we're spacemen, not soldiers. Even Dalzell and his Pongoes are more spacemen than soldiers.*

But a gun doesn't worry about the color of the uniform of the man who fires it.

"Stop!" Mayhew was shouting urgently. "Stop!" He caught Grimes' swinging right arm, dragged on it.

Grimes stopped. Those behind him stopped, in a milling huddle—but the hypnotic spell of marching feet, of phantom drum and fife and bugle, was broken.

"Yes, Commander Mayhew?" asked Grimes.

"It's... Clarisse. A message... Important. I couldn't receive until we stopped marching...."

"What is it?" demanded Grimes.

"The... ship... and Clarisse and Hendrikson and the others.... They're prisoners again!"

"Druthen? Von Donderberg?"

"Yes."

Grimes turned to his second-in-command. "You heard that, Commander Williams?"

"Yair. But it ain't possible, Skipper. Nary a tool or a weapon among Druthen an' his mob. We stripped 'em all to their skivvies before we locked 'em up, just to make sure."

"How did it happen?" Grimes asked Mayhew sharply.

"The... the details aren't very clear. But Clarisse thinks that it was a swarm of fragments, from one of the blown up derelicts, on an unpredictable orbit. The *Quest* was holed badly, in several places... including the cargo hold. Mr. Hendrikson opened up so the prisoners could escape to an unholed compartment."

"Any of us would have done the same," said Grimes slowly. He seemed to hear Sir Dominic Flandry's mocking laughter. "But what's happen-ing now?"

"Von Donderberg has all the *Quest's* weapons trained on The Outsider, on the airlock door. If we try to get out we shall be like sitting ducks."

"Stalemate..." said the Commodore. "Well, we've a breathable atmosphere in here—I hope. So that's no worry. There may even be water and food suitable for our kind of life...."

"But they're coining after us. The airlock door has opened for them! They're here now!"

"Down!" barked Dalzell, falling prone with a clatter. The others followed suit. There were dim figures visible at the end of the tunnel, dim and very distant. There was the faraway chatter of some automatic projectile weapon. The Major and his men were firing back, but without apparent success.

And at the back of Grimes' mind a voice—an inhuman voice, mechanical but with a hint of emotion—was saying. *No, no. Not again. They must learn. They must learn.*

Then there was nothingness.

### **XXX**

Grimes sat on the hilltop, watching Clarisse work.

She, clad in the rough, more-or-less cured pelt of a wolflike beast, looked like a cavewoman, looked as her ancestors on this very world must have looked. Grimes looked like what he was—a castaway. He was wearing the ragged remnants of his long Johns. His space suit, together with the suits of the others who had been so armored, was stowed neatly in a cave against the day when it would be required again—if ever. Other members of the party wore what was left of their uniforms. They were all here, all on what Grimes had decided must be Kinsolving's Planet, twenty men and thirteen women.

And, some miles away, were Druthen and von Donderberg and their people. They were still hostile—and in their tribe were only five women, two of them past childbearing age. They had their weapons still—but, like *Faraway*

*Quest's* crew, were conserving cartridges and power packs. Nonetheless, three nights ago they had approached Grimes' encampment closely enough to bring it within range of their trebuchet and had lobbed a couple of boulders into the mouth of the main cave before they were driven off by Dalzell and his marines.

All of them were on Kinsolving's Planet.

It was Kinsolving's Planet ages before it had been discovered by Commodore Kinsolving, ages before those mysterious cavemen had painted their pictures on the walls of the caves. (Perhaps the ancestors of those cavemen were here now....) The topography was all wrong. But by the time that Man pushed out to the rim of the galaxy, old mountain ranges would have been eroded would have sunk, seas would roll where now there were plains, wrinklings of the world's crust would bring new, towering peaks into being.

But that feeling of *oddness* that Grimes had known on his previous visit (previous, but in the far distant future) to this planet still persisted. On Kinsolving *anything* could happen, and most probably would.

Was it some sort of psionic field induced by the Outsiders' Ship? Or had The Outsider been drawn to that one position in space by the field? Come to that—who (or what) were *the Outsiders*? Do-gooders? Missionaries? Beings whose evolution had taken a different course from that of Man, of the other intelligent races of the galaxy?

*And we, thought Grimes, are descendants of the killer ape, children of Cain... What would we have been like if our forebears had been herbi-vores, if we had not needed to kill for food—and to protect ourselves from other predators? What if our first tools had been tools, peaceful tools, and not weapons? But conflict is essential to the evolu-tion of a species. But it could have been conflict with the harsh forces of Nature herself rather than with other creatures, related and unrelated. Didn't some ethologist once refer to Man as the Bad Weather Animal?*

*But They, he thought, as he watched Clarisse, squatting on her hunkers, scratching industriously away with a piece of chalky stone on the flat, slate surface of the rock, but They have certainly thrown us back to our first beginnings. We didn't pass the test. First of all there was the naval battle—and I wonder what happened to Wan-derer, Vindictive, the other Quest and Adler.... First of all there was the naval battle, and then the brawl actually within the sacred precincts. Calver and his crew must have been very well behaved to have been accepted, nonetheless. Perhaps, by this time, the stupid pugnacity is being bred out of Man, perhaps Calver was one of the new breed....*

"Stop brooding!" admonished Sonya sharply.

"I'm not brooding. I'm thinking. I'm still trying to work things out."

"You'd be better employed trying to recall every possible, smallest detail of your beloved *Quest*. Clarisse knows damn' all about engineering, and if she's to succeed she must have all the help we can give her."

"If she succeeds...."

"John!" Her voice betrayed the strain under which she was living. "I'm not cut out to be an ancestral cavewoman, or any other sort of cavewoman. I was brought up to wear clean clothes, not filthy rags, to bathe in hot water, not a stream straight off the ice, to eat well-cooked food, not greasy meat charred on the outside and raw inside.... Perhaps I'm too civilized—but this is no world for me." She paused. "And here we are, all of us, relying on the wild talent of a

witch, a teleporteuse, who's been at least half poisoning herself by chewing various wild fungi which might—or might not—have the proper hal-lucinogenic effect..." She laughed bitterly. "All right—the artists in her ancestry did have the power to pull food animals to them. She has it too, as well we know. But will it work with a complex construction such as a spaceship?"

"It worked," Grimes told her, "with complex constructions such as human beings. And Clarisse is no more an anatomist or a physiologist than she is an engineer."

"Commodore," Mayhew was calling. "Clarisse needs your help again!"

Grimes got to his feet. Before he walked to where the artist was at work he slowly looked from his vantage point around his little kingdom. To the north were the jagged, snowcapped peaks, with their darkly forested foothills. To the south was the sea. To east and west were the rolling plains, with their fur of coarse, yellowish grass, their outcroppings of stony hillocks and boulders. From behind one of the distant hills drifted the blue smoke of Druthen's fires.

"Commodore!" called Mayhew again.

"Oh, all right."

He walked over the rocky hilltop to that slab of slate, to where Davis, Williams, Hendrikson and Carnaby were clustered around Clarisse. The sketch of *Faraway Quest* was taking shape, but it was vague, uncertain in outline. How many at-tempts had there been to date? Grimes had lost count. Earlier drawings had been obliterated by sudden vicious rain showers, had been rubbed out in fits of tearful anger by the artist herself. Once, and once only, it had seemed that a shimmering ship shape, almost invisible, had hung in the air for a microsecond.

Grimes looked at the faces of his officers, his departmental heads. All showed signs of strain, of overmuch concentration. Williams, who was re-sponsible for maintenance, must have been mak-ing a mental tally of every rivet, every welded seam in the shell plating. Davis would have been visualizing machinery; Hendrikson, his weapons; Carnaby, his navigational instruments.

But....

But, Grimes suddenly realized, none of them had seen, had *felt* the ship as a smoothly function-ing whole.

"Ready?" he asked Clarisse.

"Ready," she replied in a tired, distant voice.

And Grimes remembered. He remembered the first commissioning of *Faraway Quest* and all the work that had gone into her, the maintenance and the modifications. He relived his voyage of explo-ration to the Galactic East: his landings on Tharn, Grollor, Mellise and Stree. He recalled, vividly, his discovery of the antimatter systems to the Galactic West, and that most peculiar voyage, dur-ing which he and Sonya had come together, which was made as part of the research into the Rim Ghost phenomena.

All this he remembered, and more, and his mind was wide open to Clarisse as she scratched busily away with her rough piece of chalk—and hers was open to him. It was all so vivid, too vivid for mere imagination, for memory. He could actually have been standing in his familiar control room....

He was standing in his familiar control room.

But that was impossible.

He opened his eyes, looked around in a slow circle.

He saw the jagged, snowcapped peaks to the north, with their darkly forested foothills. He saw the glimmering sea to the south. To east and west were the rolling plains, with their fur of coarse, yellowish grass, their outcroppings of stony hill-ocks and boulders. From behind one of the distant hills drifted the blue smoke of Druthen's fires.

But....

But he was seeing all this through the wide view-ports of *Faraway Quest*.

He walked, fast, to the screen of the periscope, adjusted the controls of the instrument so that he had an all-round view around the ship. Yes—his people, his crew were there, all of them staring upward. He did not need to increase the magnification to see the wonder on their faces.

"Mphm," he grunted. He went to the panel on which were the controls for the airlock doors. He punched the necessary buttons. The illuminated indicators came on. OUTER DOOR OPEN. INNER DOOR OPEN. RAMP EXTRUDING— to be replaced by RAMP DOWN.

Meanwhile....

He put his eyes to the huge binoculars on their universal mounting. Druthen and von Donderberg must have seen the sudden appearance of the ship. She would mean a chance of escape for *them*. Yes, there they were, two dozen of them, running. The sun glinted from the weapons they carried—the guns with their hoarded ammunition, their carefully conserved power packs.

It was a hopeless sortie; but desperate men, more than once have achieved miracles.

Grimes sighed, went to the gunner's seat of the bow 40 millimeter cannon. He put the gun on manual control. It would be the best one for the job; a noisy projectile weapon has far greater psychological effect than something silent and much more deadly. He flipped the selector switches for automatic and H.E. He traversed until he had the leaders of the attackers in the telescopic sights. Druthen was one of them, his bulk and his waddling run unmistakable. Von Donderberg was the other.

Grimes sighed again. He was genuinely sorry for the Waldegrener. In many ways he and Grimes were the same breed of cat. Only Druthen then....

He shifted his sights slightly. But the explosion of a high explosive shell might kill, would probably injure von Donderberg. Solid shot? Yes. One round should be ample, if Grimes' old skill with firearms still persisted. And it would be a spectacular enough deterrent for the survivors of Druthen's party.

Still Grimes hesitated. The hijackers would be marooned on Kinsolving; nothing would make him change his mind about that. But even if they didn't deserve a chance their children, their descendants did.

And, on a primitive world such as this, the more outstandingly bad bastards contributing to the gene pool the better.

Again he flipped the ammunition selector switch, then lowered his sights. He stitched a neat seam of bursting incendiary shells across the savannah, well ahead of Druthen and von Donderberg. The long grass was highly and satisfactorily flammable. The raiding party retreated in panic. By the time that those of them who possessed space armor got back to their camp to put it on, no matter how they hurried, *Faraway Quest* would be gone.

"All aboard, Skipper," reported Williams from behind Grimes. "Take her up?"  
"Take her up, Commander Williams," ordered the Commodore.

**XXXI**

"Set trajectory sir?" asked Carnaby.

Grimes looked out through the viewports, to-ward the opalescent sphere that was Kinsolving, toward the distant luminosity of the Galactic Lens.

"We have to go *somewhere*, John," said Sonya sharply.

"Or somewhen," murmured Grimes. He said, in a louder voice, "We'd better head for where The Outsider was, or will be, or is. We have unfinished business."

But it didn't really matter. For the time being, nothing really mattered. He had his ship again.

**EOF**