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

THE ROAD TO THE RIM

A. Bertram Chandler

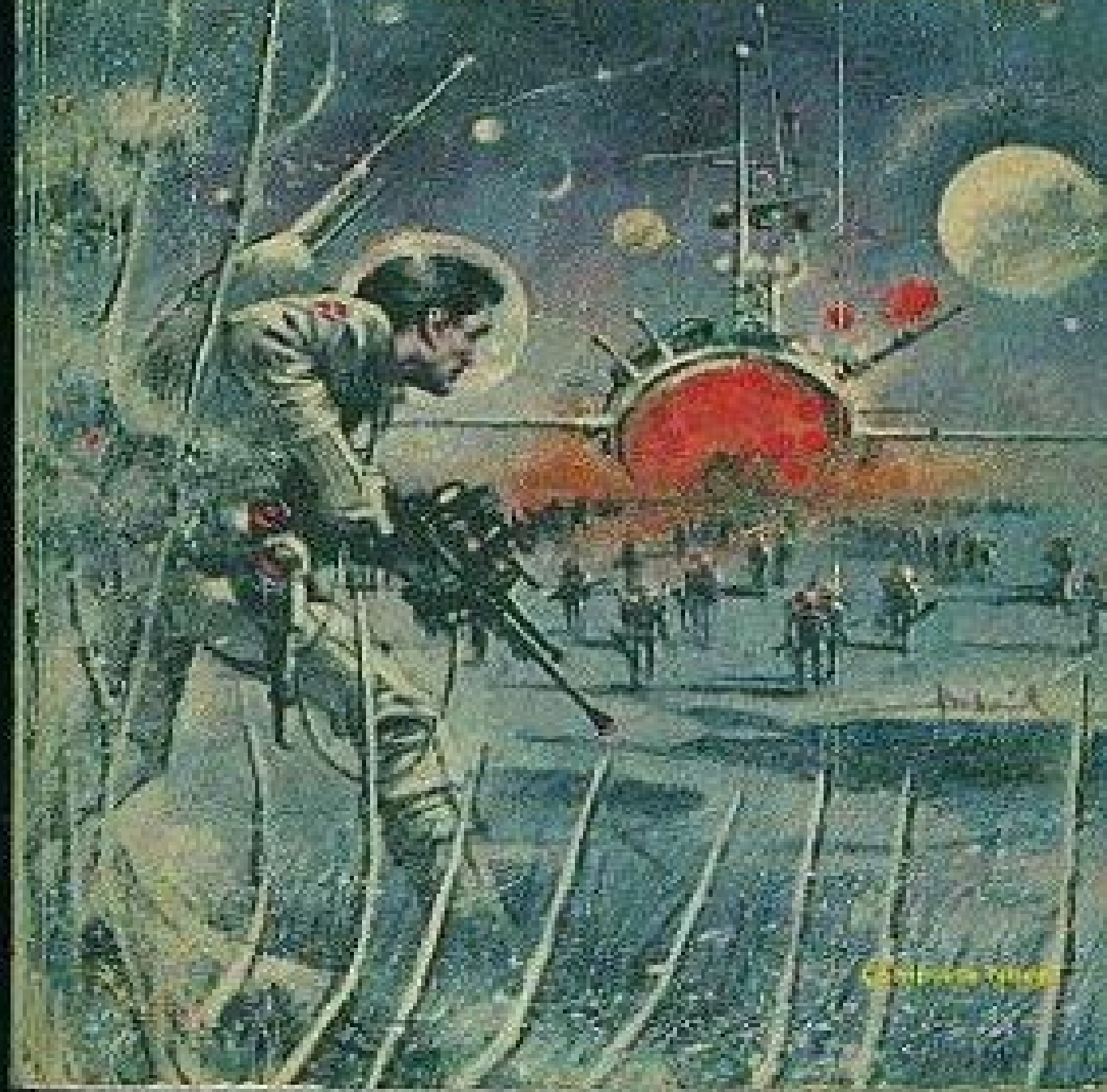


Illustration by [Name]

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Dedication:
For Admiral Lord Hornblower, R. N.

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

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

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

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

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

"Hold him, Grimes!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The big man with the four gold bars on each shoulder half turned his head as Grimes came up.

through the hatch. "Glad to have you aboard, Ensign," he said perfunctorily. "Grab yourself a seat—there's a spare one alongside the Mate's. Sorry there's no time for introductions right now. We're due to get upstairs."

"Here!" grunted one of the officers.

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

"No, sir."

"Then why the hell not?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sir?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ahead, the stars were pulsating spirals of opalescence, astern, Earth and Moon were frighteningly distorted, uncanny compromises between the sphere and the tesseract. But this was no more than the merest subliminal glimpse; in the twinkling of an eye the Home Planet and her daughter were no more than dust motes whirling down the dark dimensions.

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

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

III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And yours, sir."

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

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

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

"Thank you, sir."

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

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

"As you please, Mr. Grimes."

The Captain, his social duty discharged, had obviously lost interest in his guest. Grimes let himself out of the cabin and made his way, not without difficulty, to the door in the axial shaft. He was surprised at the extent to which one not very large drink had interfered with the control of his body in Free Fall. Emerging from the elevator cage on D Deck he stumbled, literally, into the purse. "Let go of me," she ordered, "or I shall holler rape!"

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

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

"B.B.?"

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

"Thank you for telling me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. P. Kennedy, Chief Officer.

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

Miss Jane Pentecost, Purser.

He repeated the name to himself, thinking that, despite the old play on words, this Jane was n

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

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Plenty!" answered Grimes hotly.

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

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

"And Mr. Baxter."

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

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

Grimes, taking a tentative sip from his bulb of consommé, did not think that the self-styled poor did at all badly, and said as much. The girl grinned and told him that the first night out was too early to draw conclusions. "We're still on shoreside meat and vegetables," she told him, "and you'll not be getting your first taste of our instant table wine until tomorrow. Tonight we wallow in the unwonted luxury of a quite presentable Montrachet. When we start living on the produce of our own so-called farm, washing it down with our own reconstituted plonk, you'll see the difference."

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

"Wide experience, Admiral?" she asked sweetly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Even the notorious Black Bart," persisted Grimes.

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

"Such as?" asked Grimes frigidly.

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

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

"Pretty words, ain't they? Suppose we analyze them. Suppose we analyze by analogy. D'yer know

much about animals, Mr. Ensign Grimes?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't they teach you nothin' in your bleedin' Academy? Well, I'll tell you. In *our* neck o' the woods, the mice are the Rim Worlds, an' the tom cat, as I've already made clear, is the Duchy of Waldegren. The Duchy gets away with murder—murder an' piracy. But accordin' to the Duchy, an' accordin' to your big, stupid elephant of a Federation, it's not piracy. It's—now, lemme see, what fancy words have been used o' late? Contraband Control. Suppression of Espionage. Violation of the Three Million Mile Limit. Every time that there's an act of piracy there's some quote legal unquote excuse for it, an' it's upheld by the Federation's tame legal eagles, an' you Survey Service sissies just sit there on your big, fat backsides an' don't lift a pinkie against your dear, murderous pals, the Waldegrenes. If you did, they send you screaming back to Base, where some dear old daddy of an Admiral'd spank your little plump bottoms for you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But they are. Oh, there are one or two in the Survey Service, but I've never run across them. No, I don't particularly want to."

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

"The Captain?"

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

"Then who?"

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

He stared at her incredulously. "Not you?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Anyhow, we finally berthed at Woomera. The Old Man must have put in a good report about me because I was called before the Local Superintending Purser and offered a berth, as a junior, in one of the *Alpha* class liners. *Alpha Centauri*, if you must know. She was on the Sol-Sirius service. Nothing

very glamorous in the way of ports of call, but she was a fine ship, beautifully kept, efficiently run. A couple of years there knocked most of the sharp corners off me. After that—a spell as Assistant Purser of *Beta Geminorum*. Atlanta, Caribbea Carinthia and the Cluster Worlds. And then my first ship as Chief Purser. This one."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not ever," said Grimes.

VI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But for a woman, or for a purser, or for a mere merchant officer I know too much," she finished for him. "But I can read, you know. And when I was in the Sundowner Line, I, as well as all the other

officers, was supposed to keep up with all the latest Survey Service publications."

"But why?" he asked.

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

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

"Once again—why not?"

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

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

"Federation policy . . ." he began.

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

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

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

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

"And you feel homesick for *that*?"

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

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

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

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

"And in yours."

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

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

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

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

He said, "Perhaps you're right."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thank you, sir."

"You may smoke if you wish."

"Thank you, sir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VII

THEY WERE DANCING.

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

They were dancing.

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

They were dancing.

Ensign Grimes was trying to dance.

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You know what I mean."

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

"And is it true?" demanded Grimes.

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

~~"More or less."~~

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

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

"What *i s* this? Is it a hangover from some half-baked and half-understood course counterespionage?"

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

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

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

She didn't seem to be listening to him, but was giving her attention instead to the music that drifted from the saloon. It was one of the old, Twentieth Century melodies that were enjoying a revival. She began to sing in time to it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Captain Craven warned me," said Grimes.

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

"Thank you."

She put her elbows on the bar counter, propping her face between her hands, somehow conveying the illusion of gravitational pull, looking up at him. "I'll be frank with you, John. I admit that we do take the no-hopers, the drunks and the drifters into our merchant fleet. I know far better than you what a helluva difference there is between those rustbuckets and the well-found, well-run ships of the Commission and, come to that, Trans-Galactic Clippers and Waverley Royal Mail. But when we c

start some kind of a Navy we shall want better material. Much better. We shall want highly competent officers who yet, somehow, will have the Rim World outlook. The first batch, of course, will have to be outsiders, to tide us over until our own training program is well under way."

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

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

"Go on."

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

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

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

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

VIII

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

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

"Yes, Mr. Letourneau?"

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

"The Master"—Jane emphasized the title—"is in the saloon." Then, a little maliciously, "Could you have used your crystal ball?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What have I done now?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So what's all the flap about?"

"Promise not to tell anybody?"

"Of course."

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

"He would be. But go on."

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

"Piracy? Impossible."

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

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

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

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

But piracy

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

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

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

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

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

"Not in one piece?" echoed Grimes stupidly.

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

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

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

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

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