

The Bird-Brained Navigator

Her inertial drive throbbing softly, all hands at landing stations, all passengers save one strapped in their acceleration couches (a sudden emergency requiring the use of the auxiliary reaction drive was unlikely, but possible), the starship Rim Dragon dropped slowly down to Port Grimes on Tharn. The privileged passenger—although in his case it was a right rather than a privilege—was riding in the control room instead of being incarcerated in his cabin. Commodore John Grimes, Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners, said nothing, did nothing that could be construed as interference on his part. Legally speaking, of course, he was no more than a guest in the liner's nerve center; but at the same time he could and did exercise considerable authority over the space-going employees of Rim Runners, made the ultimate decisions in such matters as promotions and appointments. However, Captain Wenderby, Rim Dragon's master, was a more than competent ship-handler and at no time did Grimes feel impelled to make any suggestions, at no time did his own hands start to reach out hungrily for the controls.

So Grimes sat there, stolid and solid in his acceleration chair, not even now keeping a watchful eye on the briskly efficient Wenderby and his briskly efficient officers. They needed no advice from him, would need none. But it was easier for them than it had been for him, when he made his own first landing on Tharn—how many years ago? Too many. There had been no spaceport then, with spaceport control keeping the master fully informed of meteorological conditions during his entire descent. There had been no body of assorted officials—port captain, customs, port health and all the rest of it—standing by awaiting the ship's arrival. Grimes, in fact, had not known what or whom to expect, although his robot probes had told him that the culture of the planet was roughly analogous to that of Earth's Middle Ages. Even so, he had been lucky in that he had set Faraway Quest down near a city controlled by the priesthood rather than in an area under the sway of one of the robber barons.

He looked out of one of the big viewports. From this altitude he could see no signs of change—but change there must have been, change there had been. On that long ago exploration voyage in the old Quest he had opened up the worlds of the Eastern Circuit to commerce—and the trader does more to destroy the old ways than either the gunboat or the missionary. In this case the trader would have been the only outside influence: the Rim Worlds had always, fortunately for them, been governed by cynical, tolerant agnostics to whom gunboat diplomacy was distasteful. The Rim Worlders had always valued their own freedom too highly to wish to interfere with that of any other race.

But even commerce, thought Grimes, is an interference. It makes people want the things that they cannot yet produce for themselves: the mass-produced entertainment, the labor-saving machines, the weapons. Grimes sighed. I suppose that we were right to arm the priesthood rather than the robber barons. In any case, they've been good customers.

Captain Wenderby, still intent on his controls, spoke. "It must seem strange, coming back after all these years, sir."

"It does, Captain."

"And to see the spaceport that they named after you, for the first time."

"A man could have worse monuments."

Grimes transferred his attention from the viewport to the screen that showed, highly magnified, what was directly astern of and below the ship. Yes, there it was. Port Grimes. A great circle of gray-gleaming concrete, ringed by warehouses and administration buildings, with cranes and gantries and conveyor belts casting long shadows the ruddy light of the westering sun. He had made the first landing on rough heathland, and for a long, heart-stopping moment had doubted that the tripedal landing gear would be able to adjust—to the irregularities of the surface.) And there was Rim Griffon, the reason for his voyage to Tharn. There was the ship whose officers refused to sail with each other and with the master. There was the mess that had to be sorted out with as few firings as possible—Rim Runners, as usual, was short of spacefaring personnel. There was the mess.

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It was some little time before John Grimes could get around to doing anything about it. As he should have foreseen, he was a personality, a historical personality at that. He was the first outsider to have visited Tharn. He was responsible for the breaking of the power of the barons, for the rise to power of the priesthood and the merchants. Too, the Rim Confederacy's ambassador on Tharn had made it plain that he, and the government that he represented, would appreciate it if the Commodore played along. The delay in the departure of a very unimportant merchant vessel was far less important than the preservation of interstellar good relations.

So Grimes was wined and dined, which was no hardship, and obliged to listen to long speeches, which was. He was taken on sight-seeing tours, and was pleased to note that progress, although inevitable, had been a controlled progress, not progress for its own sake. The picturesque had been sacrificed only when essential for motives of hygiene or real efficiency. Electricity had supplanted the flaring natural gas jets for house-and street-lighting—but the importation and evolution of new building techniques and materials had not produced a mushroom growth of steel and concrete matchboxes or plastic domes. Architecture still retained its essentially Tharnian character, even though the streets of the city were no longer rutted, even though the traffic on those same streets was now battery-powered cars and no longer animal-drawn vehicles. (Internal combustion engines were manufactured on the planet, but their use was prohibited within urban limits.)

And at sea change had come. At the time of Grimes's first landing the only oceangoing vessels had been the big schooners; now sail was on its way out, was being ousted by the steam turbine. Yet the ships, with their fiddle bows and their figureheads, with their raked masts and funnels, still displayed an archaic charm that was altogether lacking on Earth's seas and on the waters of most Man-colonized worlds. The Commodore, who was something of an authority on the history of marine transport, would dearly

have loved to have made a voyage in one of the steamers, but he knew that time would not permit this. Once he had sorted out Rim Griffon's troubles he would have to return to Port Forlorn, probably in that very ship.

At last he was able to get around to the real reason for his visit to Tharn. On the morning of his fifth day on the planet he strode purposefully across the clean, well-cared-for concrete of the apron, walked decisively up the ramp to Rim Griffon's after air lock door. There was a junior officer waiting there to receive him; Captain Dingwall had been warned that he would be coming on board. Grimes knew the young man, as he should have; after all, he had interviewed him for a berth in the Rim Runners' service.

"Good morning, Mr. Taylor."

"Good morning, sir." The Third Officer was painfully nervous, and his prominent Adam's apple bobbed as he spoke. His ears, almost as outstanding as Grimes's own, flushed a dull red. "The Old—" The flush spread to all of Taylor's features. "Captain Dingwall is waiting for you, sir. This way, sir."

Grimes did not need a guide. This Rim Griffon, like most of the older units in Rim Runners' fleet, had started her career as an Epsilon Class tramp in the employ of the Interstellar Transport Commission. The general layout of those tried and trusted Galactic workhorses was familiar to all spacemen. However, young Mr. Taylor had been instructed by his captain to receive the Commodore and to escort him to his, Dingwall's, quarters, and Grimes had no desire to interfere with the running of the ship.

Yet.

The two men rode up in the elevator in silence, each immersed in his own thoughts. Taylor, obviously, was apprehensive. A delay of a vessel is always a serious matter, especially when her own officers are involved. And Grimes was sorting out his own impressions to date. This Rim Griffon was obviously not a happy ship. He could feel it—just as he could see and hear the faint yet unmistakable signs of neglect, the hints of rust and dust, the not yet anguished pleading of a machine somewhere, a fan or a pump, for lubrication. And as the elevator cage passed through the "farm" level there was a whiff of decaying vegetation; either algae vats or hydroponic tanks, or both, were overdue for cleaning out.

The elevator stopped at the captain's deck. Young Mr. Taylor led the way out of the cage, knocked diffidently at the door facing the axial shaft. It slid open. A deep voice said, "That will be all, Mr. Taylor. I'll send for you, and the other officers when I want you. And come in, please, Commodore Grimes."

Grimes entered the day cabin. Dingwall rose to meet him—a short, stocky man, his features too large, too ruddy, his eyes too brilliantly blue under a cockatoo-crest of white hair. He extended a hand, saying, "Welcome aboard, Commodore." He did not manage to make the greeting sound convincing. "Sit down, sir. The sun's not yet over the yardarm, but I can offer you coffee."

"No thank you, Captain. Later, perhaps. Mind if I smoke?" Grimes produced

his battered pipe, filled and lit it. He said through the initial acid cloud, "And now, sir, what is the trouble? Your ship has been held up for far too long."

"You should have asked me that five days ago, Commodore."

"Should I?" Grimes stared at Dingwall, his gray eyes bleak. "Perhaps I should. Unfortunately I was obliged to act almost in an ambassadorial capacity after I arrived here. But now I am free to attend to the real business."

"It's my officers," blurted Dingwall.

"Yes?"

"The second mate to begin with. A bird-brained navigator if ever there was one. Can you imagine anybody, with all the aids we have today, getting lost between Stree and Mellise? He did."

"Legally speaking," said Grimes, "the master is responsible for everything. Including the navigation of his ship,"

"I navigate myself. Now."

And I can imagine it, thought Grimes. "Do I have to do everybody's bloody job in this bloody ship? Of course, I'm only the Captain. . . ." He said, "You reprimanded him, of course?"

"Darn right I did." Dingwall's voice registered pleasant reminiscence. "I told him that he was incapable of navigating a plastic duck across a bathtub."

"Hmm. And your other officers?"

"There're the engineers, Commodore. The Interstellar Drive chief hates the Inertial Drive chief. Not that I've much time for either of 'em. In fact I told Willis—he's supposed to run the Inertial Drive—that he couldn't pull a soldier off his sister. That was after I almost had to use the auxiliary rockets to get clear of Grollor—"

"And the others?"

"Vacchini, Mate. He couldn't run a pie cart. And Sally Bowen, Catering Officer, can't boil water without burning it. And Pilchin, the so-called purser, can't add two and two and get the same answer twice running. And as for Sparks . . . I'd stand a better chance of getting an important message through if I just opened a control viewport and stood there and shouted."

The officer who is to blame for all this, thought Grimes, is the doctor. He should have seen this coming on. But perhaps I'm to blame as well. Dingwall's home port is Port Forlorn, on Lorn—and his ship's been running between the worlds of the Eastern Circuit and Port Farewell, on Faraway, for the past nine standard months. And Mrs. Dingwall (Grimes had met her) is too fond of her social life to travel with him. . . .

"Don't you like the ship, Captain?" he asked.

"The ship's all right," he was told.

"But the run, as far as you're concerned, could be better."

"And the officers."

"Couldn't we all, Captain Dingwall? Couldn't we all? And now, just between ourselves, who is it that refused to sail with you?"

"My bird-brained navigator. I hurt his feelings when I called him that. A very sensitive young man is our Mr. Missenden. And the Inertial Drive chief. He's a member of some fancy religion called the Neo-Calvinists. . . ."

"I've met them," said Grimes.

"What I said about his sister and the soldier really shocked him."

"And which of them refuse to sail with each other?"

"Almost everybody has it in for the second mate. He's a Latter Day Fascist and is always trying to make converts. And the two chiefs are at each other's throats. Kerholm the Interstellar Drive specialist, is a militant atheist—"

And I was on my annual leave, thought Grimes, when this prize bunch of square pegs was appointed to this round hole. Even so, I should have checked up. I would have checked up if I hadn't gotten involved in the fun and games on Kinsolving's Planet.

"Captain," he said, "I appreciate your problems. But there are two sides to every story. Mr. Vacchini, for example, is a very efficient officer. As far as he is concerned, there could well be a clash of personalities. . . ."

"Perhaps," admitted Dingwall grudgingly.

"As for the others. I don't know them personally. If you could tell them all to meet in the wardroom in—say—five minutes, we can go down to try to iron things out."

"You can try," said the Captain. "I've had them all in a big way. And, to save you the bother of saying it, Commodore Grimes, they've had me likewise."

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Grimes ironed things out. On his way from Lorn to Tharn he had studied the files of reports on the captain and his officers. Nonetheless, in other circumstances he would have been quite ruthless—but good spacemen do not grow on trees, especially out toward the Galactic Rim. And these were good spacemen, all of them, with the exception of Missenden, the second officer. He had been born on New Saxony, one of the worlds that had been part of the short-lived Duchy of Waldegren, and one of the worlds upon which the political perversions practiced upon Waldegren itself had lived on for years after the downfall of the Duchy. He had been an officer in the navy of New Saxony and had taken part in the action off Pelisande, the battle in which the heavy cruisers of the Survey Service had destroyed the

last of the self-styled commerce raiders who were, in fact, no better than pirates.

There had been survivors, and Missenden had been one of them. (He owed his survival mainly to the circumstance that the ship of which he had been Navigator had been late in arriving at her rendezvous with the other New Saxony war vessels and had, in fact, surrendered after no more than a token resistance.) He had stood trial with other war criminals, but had escaped with a very light sentence. (Most of the witnesses who could have testified against him were dead.) As he had held a lieutenant commander's commission in the navy of New Saxony he had been able to obtain a Master Astronaut's Certificate after no more than the merest apology for an examination. Then he had drifted out to the Rim, where his New Saxony qualifications were valid; where, in fact, qualifications issued by any human authority anywhere in the galaxy were valid.

Grimes looked at Missenden. He did not like what he saw. He had not liked it when he first met the man, a few years ago, when he had engaged him as a probationary third officer—but then, as now, he had not been able to afford to turn spacemen away from his office door. The Second Officer was tall, with a jutting, arrogant beak of a nose over a wide, thin-lipped mouth, with blue eyes that looked even madder than Captain Dingwall's, his pale, freckled face topped by close-cropped red hair. He was a fanatic, that was obvious from his physical appearance, and in a ship where he, like everybody else, was unhappy his fanaticism would be enhanced. A lean and hungry look, thought Grimes. He thinks too much; such men are dangerous. He added mentally, But only when they think about the wrong things. The late Duke Otto's Galactic Superman, for example, rather than Pilgren's Principles of Interstellar Navigation.

He said, "Mr. Missenden . . ."

"Sir?" The curtly snapped word was almost an insult. The way in which it was said implied, "I'm according respect to your rank, not to you."

"The other officers have agreed to continue the voyage. On arrival at Port Forlorn you will all be transferred to more suitable ships, and those of you who are due will be sent on leave or time off as soon as possible. Are you agreeable?"

"No."

"And why not, Mr. Missenden?"

"I'm not prepared to make an intercontinental hop under a captain who insulted me."

"Insulted you?"

"Yes." He turned on Dingwall. "Did you, or did you not, call me a bird-brained navigator?"

"I did, Mr. Missenden," snarled Captain Dingwall. "And I meant it."

"Captain," asked Grimes patiently, "are you prepared to withdraw that

remark?"

"I am not, Commodore. Furthermore, as master of this ship I have the legal right to discharge any member of my crew that I see fit."

"Very well," said Grimes, "As Captain Dingwall has pointed out I can only advise and mediate. But I do possess some authority; appointments and transfers are my responsibility. Will you arrange, Captain, for Mr. Missenden to be paid, on your books, up to and including midnight, local time? Then get him off your Articles of Agreement as soon as possible, so that the second officer of Rim Dragon can be signed on here. And you, Mr, Missenden, will join Rim Dragon."

"If you say so," said Missenden, "Sir."

"I do say so. And I say, too, Mr. Missenden, that I shall see you again in my office back in Port Forlorn."

"I can hardly wait, Sir."

Captain Dingwall looked at his watch. He said, "The purser already has Mr. Missenden's payoff almost finalized. Have you made any arrangements with Captain Wenderby regarding his second officer?"

"I told him that there might be a transfer, Captain. Shall we meet at the Consul's office at 1500 hours? You probably know that he is empowered to act as shipping master insofar as our ships on Tharn are concerned."

"Yes, sir," stated Dingwall. "I know."

"You would," muttered Missenden.

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The transfer of officers was nice and easy in theory—but it did not work out in practice. The purser, Grimes afterward learned, was the only person aboard Rim Griffon with whom the second officer was not on terms of acute enmity. Missenden persuaded him to arrange his pay-off for 1400 hours, not 1500. At the appointed time the purser of the Griffon was waiting in the Consul's office, and shortly afterward the purser and the second officer of Rim Dragon put in their appearance. The Dragon's second mate was paid off his old ship and signed on the Articles of his new one. But Missenden had vanished. All that Griffon's purser knew was that he had taken the money due him and said that he had a make a business call and that he would be back.

He did not come back.

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Commodore Grimes was not in a happy mood. He had hoped to be a passenger aboard Rim Griffon when she lifted off from Port Grimes, but now it seemed that his departure from Tharn for the Rim Worlds would have to be indefinitely postponed. It was, of course, all Missenden's fault. Now that he had gone into smoke all sorts of unsavory facts were coming to light regarding that officer. During his ship's visits to Tharn he had made contact

with various subversive elements. The Consul had not known of this—but Rim Runners' local agent, a native to the planet, had. It was the police who had told him, and he had passed the information on to Captain Dingwall. Dingwall had shrugged and growled, "What the hell else do you expect from such a drongo?" adding, "As long as I get rid of the bastard he can consort with Aldebaranian necrophiles for all I care!"

Quite suddenly, with Grimes's baggage already loaded aboard Rim Griffon, the mess had blown up to the proportions of an interstellar incident. Port Grimes's Customs refused outward clearance to the ship. The Rim Confederacy's Ambassador sent an urgent message to Grimes requiring him to disembark at once—after which the ship would be permitted to leave—and to report forthwith to the Embassy. With all this happening, Grimes was in no fit state to listen to Captain Wenderby's complaints that he had lost a first class second officer and now would have to sail shorthanded on completion of discharge.

The Ambassador's own car took Grimes from the spaceport to the Embassy. It was a large building, ornately turreted, with metal-bound doors that could have withstood the charge of a medium tank. These opened as the Commodore dismounted from the vehicle, and within them stood saluting Marines. At least, thought Grimes, they aren't going to shoot me. Yet. An aide in civilian clothes escorted him to the Ambassador's office.

The Honorable Clifton Weeks was a short, fat man with all of a short, fat man's personality. "Sit down, Commodore," he huffed. Then, glowering over his wide, highly polished desk at the spaceman. "Now, sir. This Missenden character. What about him? Hey?"

"He seems to have flown the coop," said Grimes.

"You amaze me, sir." Week's glower became even more pronounced. "You amaze me, sir. Not by what you said, but by the way in which you said it. Surely you, even you, have some appreciation of the seriousness of the situation?"

"Spacemen have deserted before, in foreign ports. Just as seamen used to do—still do, probably. The local police have his description. They'll pick him up, and deport him when they get him. And we'll deport him, too, when he's delivered back to the Confederacy."

"And you still don't think it's serious? Hey?"

"Frankly, no, sir."

"Commodore, you made the first landing on this planet. But what do you know about it? Nothing, sir. Nothing. You haven't lived here. I have. I know that the Confederacy will have to fight to maintain the currently favorable trade relations that we still enjoy with Tharn. Already other astronomical powers are sniffing around the worlds of the Eastern Circuit."

"During the last six months, local time," said Grimes, "three of the Empire of Waverley's ships have called here. And two from the Shakespearean Sector. And one of Trans-Galactic Clippers' cargo liners. But, as far as the rulers of Tharn are concerned, the Confederacy is still the most favored

nation."

"Who are the rulers of Tharn?" barked the Ambassador.

"Why, the priesthood."

The Ambassador mumbled something about the political illiteracy of spacemen, then got to his feet. He waddled to the far wall of his office, on which was hung a huge map of the planet in Mercator projection, beckoned to Grimes to follow him. From a rack he took a long pointer. "The island continent of Ausiphal . . ." he said, "And here, on the eastern seaboard, Port Grimes, and University City. Where we are now."

"Yes. . . ."

The tip of the pointer described a rhumb line, almost due east. "The other island continent of the northern hemisphere, almost the twin to this one. Climatically, politically—you name it."

"Yes?"

The pointer backtracked, then stabbed viciously. "And here, well to the west of Braziperu, the island of Tangaroa. Not a continent, but still a sizable hunk of real estate."

"So?"

"So Tangaroa's the last stronghold of the robber barons, the ruffians who were struggling for power with the priests and merchants when you made your famous first landing. How many years ago was it? Hey?"

"But what's that to do with Mr. Missenden?" Grimes asked. "And me?" he added.

"Your Mr. Missenden," the Ambassador said, "served in the navy of New Saxony. The people with whom he's been mixing in University City are Tangaroan agents and sympathizers. The priesthood has allowed Tangaroa to continue to exist—in fact, there's even trade between it and Ausiphal—but has been reluctant to allow the Tangaroans access to any new knowledge, especially knowledge that could be perverted to the manufacture of weaponry. Your Mr. Missenden would be a veritable treasure house of such knowledge."

"He's not my Mr. Missenden!" snapped Grimes.

"But he is, sir. He is. You engaged him when he came out to the Rim. You appointed him to ships running the Eastern Circuit. You engineered his discharge on this world, even."

"So what am I supposed to do about him?"

"Find him, before he does any real damage. And if you, the man after whom the spaceport was named, are successful it will show the High Priest just how much we of the Confederacy have the welfare of Tharn at heart."

"But why me? These people have a very efficient police force. And a man

with a pale, freckled face and red hair will stand out like a sore thumb among the natives."

The Honorable Mr. Weeks laughed scornfully. "Green skin dye! Dark blue hair dye! Contact lenses! And, on top of all that, a physical appearance that's common on this planet!"

"Yes," admitted Grimes. "I might recognize him, in spite of a disguise. . . ."

"Good. My car is waiting to take you to the High Priest."

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The University stood on a rise to the east of the city, overlooking the broad river and, a few miles to the north, the sea. It looked more like a fortress than a seat of learning, and in Tharn's turbulent past it had, more than once, been castle rather than academy.

Grimes respected the Tharnian priesthood, and the religion that they preached and practiced made sense to him than most of the other faiths of Man. There was something of Buddhism about it, a recognition of the fact that nothing is, but that everything is flux, change, a continual process of becoming. There was the equation of God with Knowledge—but never that infuriating statement made by so many Terran religions, that smug. "There are things that we aren't meant to know." There was a very real wisdom—the wisdom that accepts and rejects, and that neither accepts nor rejects just because a concept is new. There was a reluctance to rush headlong into an industrial revolution with all its miseries; and, at the same time, no delay in the adoption of techniques that would make the life of the people longer, easier and happier.

Night had fallen when the Embassy car pulled up outside the great gates of the University. The guard turned out smartly—but in these days their function was merely ceremonial; no longer was there the need to keep either the students in or the townsfolk out. On all of Tharn—save for Tangarora—the robber barons were only an evil memory of the past.

A black-uniformed officer led Grimes through long corridors, lit by bright electric bulbs, and up stairways to the office of the High Priest. He, an elderly, black-robed man, frail, his skin darkened by age to an opaque olive, had been a young student at the time of the first landing. He claimed to have met the Commodore on that occasion, but Grimes could not remember him. But he was almost the double of the old man who had held the high office then—a clear example of the job making the man.

"Commodore Grimes," he said. "Please be seated."

"Thank you, your Wisdom."

"I am sorry to have interfered with your plans, sir. But your Mr. Weeks insisted."

"He assured me that it was important."

"And he has . . . put you in the picture?"

"Yes."

The old man produced a decanter, two graceful glasses. He poured the wine. Grimes relaxed. He remembered that the Tharnian priesthood made a point of never drinking with anybody whom they considered an enemy, with nobody who was not a friend in the true sense of the word. There was no toast, only a ceremonial raising of goblets. The liquor was good, as it always had been.

"What can I do?" asked Grimes.

The priest shrugged. "Very little. I told Mr. Weeks that our own police were quite capable of handling the situation, but he said, 'It's his mess. He should have his nose rubbed in it.' " The old man's teeth were very white in his dark face as he smiled.

"Tales out of school, your Wisdom." Grimes grinned. "Now I'll tell one. Mr. Weeks doesn't like spacemen. A few years ago his wife made a cruise in one of the T-G clippers—and, when the divorce came though, married the chief officer of the liner she traveled in."

The High Priest laughed. "That accounts for it. But I shall enjoy your company for the few weeks that you will have to stay on Tharn. I shall tell my people to bring your baggage from the Embassy to the University."

"That is very good of you." Grimes took another sip of the strong wine. "But I think that since I'm here I shall help in the search for Mr. Missenden. After all, he is still officially one of our nationals."

"As you please, Commodore. Tell me, if you were in charge how would you set about it?"

Grimes lapsed into silence. He looked around the office. All of the walls were covered with books, save one, and on it hung another of those big maps. He said, "He'll have to get out by sea, of course."

"Of course. We have no commercial airship service to Tangaroa, and the Tangaroans have no commercial airship service at all."

"And you have no submarines yet, and your aerial coast guard patrol will keep you informed as to the movements of all surface vessels. So he will have to make his getaway in a merchant vessel. . . . Would you know if there are any Tangaroan merchantmen in port?"

"I would know. There is one—the Kawaroa. She is loading textiles and agricultural machinery."

"Could she be held?"

"On what excuse, Commodore? The Tangaroans are very touchy people, and if the ship is detained their consul will at once send off a radio message to his government."

"A very touchy people, you say . . . and arrogant. And quarrelsome. Now, just suppose that there's a good, old-fashioned tavern brawl, as a result of which the master and his officers are all arrested. . . ."

"It's the sort of thing that could easily happen. It has happened, more than once."

"Just prior to sailing, shall we say? And then, with the ship immobilized, with only rather dim-witted ratings to try to hinder us, we make a thorough search—accommodations, holds, machinery spaces, storerooms, the works."

"The suggestion has its merits."

"The only snag," admitted Grimes, "is that it's very unlikely that the master and all three of his mates will rush ashore for a quick one just before sailing."

"But they always do," said the High Priest.

* * *

As they always had done, they did.

Grimes watched proceedings from the innkeeper's cubbyhole, a little compartment just above the main barroom with cunning peepholes in its floor. He would have preferred to have been among the crowd of seamen, fishermen and watersiders, but his rugged face was too well known on Tharn, and no amount of hair and skin dye could have disguised him. He watched the four burly, blue- and brass-clad men breasting the bar, drinking by themselves, tossing down pot after pot of the strong ale. He saw the fat girl whose dyed yellow hair was in vivid contrast to her green skin nuzzle up to the man who was obviously the Tangaroan captain. He wanted none of her—and Grimes sympathized with him. Even from his elevated vantage point he could see that her exposed overblown breasts were sagging, that what little there was of her dress was stained and bedraggled. But the man need not have brushed her away so brutally. She squawked like an indignant parrot as she fell sprawling to the floor with a display of fat, unlovely legs.

One of the other drinkers—a fisherman by the looks of him—came to the aid of beauty in distress. Or perhaps it was only that he was annoyed because the woman, in her fall, had jostled him, spilling his drink. Or, even more likely, he was, like the woman, one of the High Priest's agents. If such was the case, he seemed to be enjoying his work. His huge left hand grasped the captain's shoulder, turning him and holding him, and then right fist and left knee worked in unison. It was dirty, but effective.

After that, as Grimes said later, telling about it, it was on for young and old. The three mates, swinging their heavy metal drinking pots, rallied to the defense of their master. The fisherman picked up a heavy stool to use as his weapon. The woman, who had scrambled to her feet with amazing agility for one of her bulk, sailed into the fray, fell to a crouching posture, straightening abruptly, and one of the Tangaroan officers went sailing over her head as though rocket-propelled, crashing down on to a table at which three watersiders had been enjoying a quiet, peaceful drink. They, roaring their displeasure, fell upon the hapless foreigner with fists and feet.

The police officer with Grimes—his English was not too good—said, "Pity break up good fight. But must arrest very soon."

"You'd better," the Commodore told him. "Some of your people down there are pulling knives."

Yes, knives were out, gleaming wickedly in the lamplight. Knives were out, but the Tangaroans—with the exception of the victim of the lady and her stevedoring friends—had managed to retreat to a corner and there were fighting off all comers, although the captain, propped against the wall, was playing no great part in the proceedings. Like the fisherman, the two officers had picked up stools, were using them as both shields and weapons, deflecting flung pots and bottles with them, smashing them down on the heads and arms of their assailants.

The captain was recovering slowly. His hand went up to fumble inside the front of his coat. It came out, holding something that gleamed evilly—a pistol. But he fired it only once, and harmlessly. The weapon went off as his finger tightened on the trigger quite involuntarily, as the knife thrown by the yellow-haired slattern pinned his wrist to the wall.

And then the place was full of University police, tough men in black tunics who used their clubs quite indiscriminately and herded all those present out into the waiting trucks.

Quietly, Grimes and the police officer left their observation post and went down the back stairs. Outside the inn they were joined by twelve men—six police and six customs officials, used to searching ships. Their heels ringing on the damp cobblestones, they made their way through the misty night to the riverside, to the quays.

* * *

Kawaroa was ready for sea, awaiting only the pilot and, of course, her master and officers. Her derricks were stowed, her moorings had been singled up, and a feather of smoke from her tall, raked funnel showed that steam had been raised. She was not a big ship, but she looked smart, well maintained, seaworthy.

As Grimes and his party approached the vessel they saw that somebody had got there ahead of them, a dark figure who clattered hastily up the gangway. But there was no cause for hurry. The ship, with all her navigating officers either in jail or in the hospital, would not be sailing, and the harbor master had already been told not to send a pilot down to take her out.

There was no cause for hurry. . . .

But what was that jangling of bells, loud and disturbing in the still night? The engine room telegraph? The routine testing of gear one hour before the time set for departure?

And what were those men doing, scurrying along to foc'sle head and poop?

Grimes broke into a run, and as he did so he heard somebody shouting from Kawaroa's bridge. The language was unfamiliar, but the voice was not. It was Missenden's. From forward there was a thunk! and then a splash as the end of the severed headline fell into the still water. The last of the flood

caught the ship's bows and she fell away from the wharf. With the police and customs officers, who had belatedly realized what was happening, well behind him, Grimes reached the edge of the quay. It was all of five feet to the end of the still-dangling gangway and the gap was rapidly widening. Without thinking, Grimes jumped. Had he known that nobody would follow him he would never have done so. But he jumped, and his desperate fingers closed around the outboard man-ropes of the accommodation ladder and somehow, paying a heavy toll of abrasions and lacerations, he was able to squirm upward until he was kneeling on the bottom platform. Dimly he was aware of shouts from the fast receding dock. Again he heard the engine room telegraph bells, and felt the vibration as the screw began to turn. So the after lines had been cut, too, and the ship was under way. And it was—he remembered the charts that he had looked at—a straight run down river with absolutely no need for local knowledge. From above sounded a single, derisory blast from Kawaroa's steam whistle.

Grimes was tempted to drop from his perch, to swim back ashore. But he knew too much; he had always been a student of maritime history in all its aspects. He knew that a man going overboard from a ship making way through the water stands a very good chance of being pulled under and then cut to pieces by the screw. In any case, he had said that he would find Missenden, and he had done just that.

Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself erect, then walked up the clattering treads to deck level.

* * *

There was nobody on deck to receive him. This was not surprising; Missenden and the crew must have been too engrossed in getting away from the wharf to notice his pierhead jump. So . . . He was standing in an alleyway, open on the port side. Looking out, he saw the harbor lights sliding past, and ahead and to port there was the white-flashing fairway buoy, already dim, but from mist rather than distance. Inboard there was a varnished wooden door set in the white-painted plating of the 'midships house, obviously the entrance to the accommodation. Grimes opened it without difficulty—door handles will be invented and used by any being approximating to human structure. Inside there was a cross alleyway, brightly illuminated by electric light bulbs in well fittings. On the after bulkhead of this there was a steel door, and the mechanical hum and whine that came from behind it told Grimes that it led to the engine room. On the forward bulkhead there was another wooden door.

Grimes went through it. Another alleyway, cabins, and a companionway leading upward. At the top of this there were more cabins, and another companionway. And at the top of this . . . the captain's accommodation, obviously, even though the word on the tally over the door was no more than a meaningless squiggle to Grimes.

One more companionway—this one with a functional handrail instead of a relatively ornate balustrade. At the head of it was a curtained doorway. Grimes pushed through the heavy drape, found himself in what could only be the chart room, looked briefly at the wide chart table upon which was a plan of the harbor, together with a pair of dividers and a set of parallel

rulers. The Confederacy, he remembered, had at one time exported quite large consignments of these instruments to Tharn.

On the forward bulkhead of the chart room, and to port, was the doorway leading out to the wheelhouse and bridge. Softly, Grimes stepped through it, out into the near-darkness. The only light was that showing from the compass periscope, the device that enabled the helmsman to steer by the standard magnetic compass, the binnacle of which was sited up yet one more deck, on what had been called on Earth's surface ships the "monkey island." There was the man at the wheel, intent upon his job. And there, at the fore end of the wheelhouse, were two dark figures, looking out through the wide windows. One of them, the taller one, turned suddenly, said something in Tangaroan. As before, the voice was familiar but the language was not.

The question—intonation made that plain—was repeated, and then Missenden said in English, "It's you! How the hell did you get aboard? Hold it, Commodore, hold it!" There was just enough light for Grimes to see the pistol that was pointing at his midriff.

"Turn this ship around," ordered Grimes, "and take her back into port."

"Not a chance." Missenden laughed. "Especially when I've gone to all the trouble to taking her out of port. Pity old Dingwall wasn't here to see it. Not bad, was it, for a bird-brained navigator? And keep your hands up where I can see them."

"I'm unarmed," said Grimes.

"I've only your word for it," Missenden told him. Then he said something to his companion, who replied in what, in happier circumstances, would have been a very pleasant contralto. The girl produced a mouth whistle, blew a piercing blast. In seconds two burly seamen appeared on the bridge. They grabbed Grimes and held him tightly while she ran practiced hands over his clothing. It was not the first time that she had searched a man for weapons. Then they dragged him below, unlocked a steel door and threw him into the tiny compartment beyond it. The heavily barred port made it obvious that it was the ship's brig.

* * *

They locked him in and left him there.

Grimes examined his surroundings by the light of the single dim bulb. Deck, deckhead and bulkheads were all of steel—but had they been of plyboard it would have made no difference: that blasted girl had taken from him the only possession that could possibly have been used as a weapon, his pocketknife. There was a steel-framed bunk, with a thin mattress and one sleazy blanket. There was a stained washbasin, and a single faucet which, when persuaded, emitted a trickle of rusty water. There was a bucket—plastic, not metal. Still, it could have been worse. He could sleep, perhaps, and he would not die of thirst. Fully clothed, he lay down on the bunk. He realized that he was physically tired; his desperate leap for the gangway had taken something out of him. And the ship was moving gently now, a slight, soporific roll, and the steady hum and vibration of the

turbines helped further to induce slumber. There was nothing he could do, absolutely nothing, and to lose valuable sleep by useless worry would have been foolish. He slept.

It was the girl who awakened him.

She stood there, bending over him, shaking his shoulder. When he stirred she stepped sharply back. She was holding a pistol, a revolver of Terran design if not manufacture, and she looked as though she knew how to use it; and she was one of those women whose beauty is somehow accentuated by juxtaposition to lethal ironmongery. Yes, she was an attractive wench, with her greenish, translucent skin that did not look at all odd, with her fine, strong features, with her sleek, short-cut blue hair, and her slim yet rounded figure that even the rough uniform could not hide. She was an officer of some sort, although what the silver braid on the sleeves of her tunic signified Grimes could not guess. Not that he felt in the mood for guessing games; he was too conscious of his own unshaven scruffiness, of the aches and pains resulting from his athletics of the previous night and from the hardness of the mattress.

She said, in fair enough English, "Your Mr. Missenden would see you."

"He's not my Mr. Missenden," replied Grimes testily. Why did everybody ascribe to him the ownership of the late second officer of Rim Dragon?

"Come," she said, making an upward jerking motion of the pistol barrel.

"All right," grumbled Grimes. "All right."

He rolled off the narrow bunk, staggered slightly as he made his way to the washbasin. He splashed water over his face, drank some from his cupped hands. There was no towel. He made do with his handkerchief. As he was drying himself he saw that the door was open and that a seaman was standing beyond it. Any thoughts that he had entertained of jumping the girl and seizing her gun—if he could—evaporated.

"Follow that man," she ordered. "I will follow you."

Grimes followed the man, through alleyways and up companionways. They came at last to the bridge. Missenden was there, striding briskly back and forth as though he had been at sea all his life. In the wheelhouse the helmsman was intent on his own task. Grimes noted that the standard compass periscope had been withdrawn and that the man was concentrating upon the binnacle housing the ocean passage compass. So they still used that system. But why shouldn't they? It was a good one. He looked out to the sea, up to the sky. The morning was calm, but the sun was hidden by a thick, anti-cyclonic overcast. The surface of the sea was only slightly ruffled and there was a low, confused swell.

"Missenden," called the girl.

Missenden stopped his pacing, walked slowly to the wheelhouse. With his dyed hair and skin he looked like a Tharnian, a Tangaroan, and in his borrowed uniform he looked like a seaman. He also looked very pleased with himself.

"Ah, Commodore," he said, "welcome aboard. You've met Miss Ellevie, I think. Our radio officer."

"You'd better tell Miss Ellevie to send a message to the High Priest for me, Mr. Missenden."

Missenden laughed harshly. "I'll say this for you, Commodore, you do keep on trying. Why not accept the inevitable? You're in Tangaroan hands; in fact you put yourself in their—our—hands. The Council of Barons has already been informed, and they have told me that they want you alive. If possible."

"Why?" asked Grimes bluntly.

"Use your loaf, Commodore. First, it's possible that we may be able to persuade you to press for the establishment of trade relations between the Confederacy and Tangaroa. You do pile on quite a few G's in this sector of the galaxy, you know. Or should I say that you do draw a lot of water? And if you play, it could be well worth your while."

"And if I don't play?"

"Then we shall be willing to sell you back to your lords and masters. At a fair price of course. A squadron of armed atmosphere fliers? Laser weapons? Missiles with nuclear warheads?"

"That's for your lords and masters to decide."

Missenden flushed and the effect, with his green-dyed skin, was an odd one. He said to the girl, "That will do, Ellevie. I'll let you know when I want you again." He walked out to the wing of the bridge, beckoning Grimes to follow. When he turned to face the Commodore he was holding a pistol in his right hand.

He said, "Don't try anything. When I was in the navy of New Saxony I was expert in the use of hand guns of all descriptions. But I'd like a private talk. Ellevie knows English, so I sent her below. The man at the wheel may have a smattering, but he won't overhear from where we are now."

"Well?" asked Grimes coldly.

"We're both Earthmen."

"I am, Mr. Missenden."

"And I am, by ancestry. These Tharnians are an inferior breed, but if they see that you can be humiliated—"

"—they'll realize that you aren't the Galactic Superman you set yourself up to be."

Missenden ignored this, but with an effort. He said, "My position in this ship is rather . . . precarious. The crew doesn't trust me. I'm captain, yes—but only because I'm the only man on board who can navigate."

"But can you?"

"Yes, damn you! I've read the textbooks—it was all the bastards gave me to read when I was holed up down in the secret compartment. And anybody who can navigate a starship can navigate one of these hookers! Anyhow . . . anyhow, Commodore, it will be better for both of us if we maintain the pretense that you are a guest rather than a prisoner. But I must have your parole."

"My parole? What can I do?"

"I've heard stories about you."

"Have you? Very well, then, what about this? I give you my word not to attempt to seize the ship."

"Good. But not good enough. Will you also give your word not to signal, by any means, to aircraft or surface vessels?"

"Yes," agreed Grimes after a short hesitation.

"And your word not to interfere, in any way, with the ship's signaling equipment?"

"Yes."

"Then, Commodore, I feel that we may enjoy quite a pleasant cruise. I can't take you down yet; I relieved the lookout for his breakfast. You'll appreciate that we're rather shorthanded—as well as the Old Man and the three mates half the deck crew was left ashore, and two of the engineers. I can't be up here all the time, but I do have to be here a lot. And the lookouts have orders to call me at once if they sight another ship or an aircraft."

"And, as you say, you're the only navigator." The only human navigator, Grimes amended mentally.

The lookout came back to the bridge then, and Missenden took Grimes down to what was to be his cabin. It was a spare room, with its own attached toilet facilities, on the same deck as the captain's suite, which, of course, was now occupied by Missenden. It was comfortable, and the shower worked, and there was even a tube of imported depilatory cream for Grimes to use. After he had cleaned up he accompanied Missenden down to the saloon, a rather gloomy place paneled in dark, unpolished timber. Ellevie was already seated at one end of the long table, and halfway along it was an officer who had to be an engineer. Missenden took his seat at the head of the board, motioned to Grimes to sit at the right. A steward brought in cups and a pot of some steaming, aromatic brew, returning with what looked like two deep plates of fish stew.

But it wasn't bad and, in any case, it was all that there was.

* * *

After the meal Missenden returned to the bridge. Grimes accompanied him, followed him into the chart room, where he started to potter with the things on the chart table. Grimes looked at the chart—a small-scale oceanic one. He noted that the Great Circle track was penciled on it, that neat

crosses marked the plotting of dead reckoning positions at four hourly intervals. He looked from it to the ticking log clock on the forward bulkhead. He asked, "This submerged log of yours—does it run fast or slow?"

"I . . . I don't know, Commodore. But if the sky clears and I get some sights I'll soon find out."

"You think you'll be able to?"

"Yes. I've always been good with languages, and I've picked up enough Tangaroan to be able to find my way through the ephemeris and reduction tables."

"Hmm." Grimes looked at the aneroid barometer—another import. It was still high. With any luck at all the anti-cyclonic gloom would persist for the entire passage. In any case, he doubted if Missenden's first attempt to obtain a fix with sextant and chronometer would be successful.

He asked, "Do you mind if I have a look around the ship? As you know, I'm something of an authority on the history of marine transport."

"I do mind!" snapped Missenden. Then he laughed abruptly. "But what could you do? Even if you hadn't given your parole, what could you do? All the same, I'll send Ellevie with you. And I warn you, that girl is liable to be trigger happy."

"Have you known her long?"

Missenden scowled. "Too long. She's the main reason why I'm here."

Yes, thought Grimes, the radio officer of a merchant vessel is well qualified for secret service work, and when the radio officer is also an attractive woman . . . He felt sorry for Missenden, but only briefly. He'd had his fun; now he was paying for it.

Missenden went down with Grimes to the officers' quarters, found Ellevie in her room. She got up from her chair without any great enthusiasm, took a revolver from a drawer in her desk, thrust it into the side pocket of her tunic.

"I'll go now," said Missenden.

"All right," she answered in a flat voice. Then, to Grimes, "What you want to see?"

"I was on this world years ago," he told her.

"I know."

"And I was particularly impressed by the . . . the ocean passage compasses you had, even then, in your ships. Of course, it was all sail in those days."

"Were you?"

Grimes started pouring on the charm. "No other race in the galaxy has invented such ingenious instruments."

"No?" She was beginning to show a flicker of interest. "And did you know, Commodore Grimes, that it was not a wonderful priest who made the first one? No. It was not. It was a Baron Lennardi, one of my ancestors. He was—how do you put it? A man who hunts with birds?"

"A falconer."

"A falconer?" she repeated dubiously. "No matter. He had never been to the University, but he had clever artisans in his castle. His brother, whom he loved, was a—how do you say sea raider?"

"A pirate."

She took a key from a hook by the side of her desk. "Second Mate looks after compass," she said. "But Second Mate not here. So I do everything."

She led the way out into the alleyway, then to a locked door at the forward end of the officers' accommodation, to a room exactly on the center line of the ship, directly below the wheelhouse. She unlocked and opened the door, hooked it back. From inside came an ammonia-like odor. In the center of the deck was a cage, and in the cage was a bird—a big, ugly creature, dull gray in color, with ruffled plumage. It was obvious that its wings had been brutally amputated rather than merely clipped. Its almost globular body was imprisoned in a metallic harness, and from this cage within a cage a thin yet rigid shaft ran directly upward, through the deckhead and, Grimes knew, through a casing in the master's day cabin and, finally, to the card of the ocean passage compass. As Grimes watched, Ellevie took a bottle of water from a rack, poured some into the little trough that formed part of the harness. Then from a box she took a spoonful of some stinking brown powder, added it to the water. The bird ignored her. It seemed to be looking at something, for something, something beyond the steel bulkhead that was its only horizon, something beyond the real horizon that lay forward and outside of the metal wall. Its scaly feet scabbled on the deck as it made a minor adjustment of course.

And it—or its forebears—had been the only compasses when Grimes had first come to this planet. Even though the Earthmen had introduced the magnetic compass and the gyro compass, this was still the most efficient for an ocean passage.

Cruelty to animals is penalized only when commercial interests are not involved.

"And your spares?" asked Grimes.

"Homeward spare—right forward," she told him. "Ausiphal compass and one spare—right aft."

"So you don't get them mixed?" he suggested. She smiled contemptuously. "No danger of that." "Can I see them?"

"Why not? May as well feed them now."

She almost pushed Grimes out of the master compass room, followed him and locked the door. She led the way to the poop, but Grimes noticed that

a couple of unpleasant looking seamen tailed after him. Even though the word had been passed that he had given his parole he was not trusted.

The Ausiphal birds were in a cage in the poop house. As was the case with the Tangaroa birds, their wings had been amputated. Both of them were staring dejectedly directly astern. And both of them (even though dull and ruffled their plumage glowed with gold and scarlet) were females.

Grimes followed Ellevie into the cage, the door to which was at the forward end of the structure. He made a pretense of watching interestedly as she doled out the water and the odoriferous powder—and picked up two golden tail feathers from the filthy deck. She straightened and turned abruptly. "What you want those for?"

"Flies," he lied inspiredly, "Dry flies."

"Flies?"

"They're artificial lures, actually. Bait. Used for fishing."

"Nets," she stated. "Or explosives."

"Not for sport. We use a rod, and a line on the end of it, and the hook and the bait on the end of that. Fishermen are always experimenting with different baits. . . ."

The suspicion faded from her face. "Yes, I remember. Missenden gave me a book—a magazine? It was all about outdoor sports. But this fishing . . . Crazy!"

"Other people have said it, too. But I'd just like to see what sort of flies I can tie with these feathers when I get home."

"If you get home," she said nastily.

* * *

Back in his cabin, Grimes went over mentally what he had learned about the homers, which was as good a translation as any of their native name, during his visit to Tharn. They were land birds, but fared far out to sea in search of their food, which was fish. They always found their way back to their nests, even when blown thousands of miles away by severe storms, their powers of endurance being phenomenal. Also, whenever hurt or frightened, they headed unerringly for home—by the shortest possible route, which was a Great Circle course.

Used as master compasses, they kept the arrowhead on the card of the steering compass pointed directly toward wherever it was that they had been born—even when that was a breeding pen in one of the seaport towns. On a Mercator chart the track would be a curve, and according to a magnetic or a gyrocompass the ship would be continually changing course; but on a globe a Great Circle is the shortest distance between two points.

Only one instinct did they possess that was more powerful, more overriding than the homing instinct.

The sex instinct.

* * *

Grimes had given his word. Grimes had promised not to do certain things—and those things, he knew, were beyond his present capabilities in any case. But Grimes, as one disgruntled Rim Runners' captain had once remarked, was a stubborn old bastard. And Grimes, as the Admiral commanding the navy of the Rim Worlds Confederacy had once remarked, was a cunning old bastard. Sonya, his wife, had laughed when told of these two descriptions of her husband, and had laughed still louder when he had said plaintively that he didn't like to be called old.

Nonetheless, he was getting past the age for cloak and dagger work, mutiny on the high seas and all the rest of it. But he could still use his brains.

Kawaroa's shorthandedness was a help. If the ship had been normally manned he would have found it hard, if not impossible, to carry out his plan. But, insofar as the officers were concerned, the two engineers were on alternate watches, and off-duty hours would be spent catching up on lost sleep. That left Ellevie—but she had watches to keep, and one of these two hour stretches of duty coincided with and overlapped evening twilight. Missenden was not a watchkeeper, but he was, as he was always saying, the only navigator, and on this evening there seemed to be the possibility of breaks appearing in the overcast. There had been one or two during the day, but never where the sun happened to be. And insofar as evening stars were concerned out here on the Rim, there were very, very few. On a clear evening there would have been three, and three only, suitably placed for obtaining a fix. On this night the odds were against even one of the three appearing in a rift in the clouds before the horizon was gone.

Anyhow, there was Missenden, on the bridge, sextant in hand, the lid of the chronometer box in the chart room open, making an occasional gallop from one wing to the other when it seemed that a star might make a fleeting appearance. Grimes asked if he might help, if he could take the navigator's times for him. Missenden said no, adding that the wrong times would be no help at all. Grimes looked hurt, went down to the boat deck, strolled aft. The radio shack was abaft the funnel. He looked in, just to make sure that Ellevie was there. She was, and she was tapping out a message to somebody. Grimes tried to read it—then realized that even if the code was Morse the text would be in Tangaroan.

He went down to the officers' deck. All lights, with the exception of the dim police bulbs in the alleyways, were out. From one of the cabins came the sound of snoring. He found Ellevie's room without any trouble; he had been careful to memorize the squiggle over her door that meant Radio Officer. He walked to the desk, put his hand along the side of it. Yes, the key was there. Or a key. But it was the only one. He lifted it from its hook, stepped back into the alleyway, made his way forward.

Yes, it was the right key. He opened the door, shut it behind him, then groped for the light switch. The maimed, ugly bird ignored him; it was still straining at its harness, still scrabbling now and again at the deck as it

made some infinitesimal adjustment of course. It ignored him—until he pulled one of the female's tail features from his pocket. It squawked loudly then, its head turning on its neck to point at the potent new attraction, its clumsy body straining to follow. But Grimes was quick. His arm, his hand holding the feather shot out, steadied over the brass strip let into the deck that marked the ship's center line. But it had been close, and he had been stupid. The man at the wheel would have noticed if the compass card had suddenly swung a full ninety degrees to starboard—and even Missenden would have noticed if the ship had followed suit. (And would he notice the discrepancies between magnetic compass and ocean passage compass? Did he ever compare compasses? Probably not. According to Captain Dingwall he was the sort of navigator who takes far too much for granted.)

Grimes, before Missenden had ordered him off the bridge, had been able to study the chart. He assumed—he had to assume—that the dead reckoning position was reasonably accurate. In that case, if the ship flew off at a tangent, as it were, from her Great Circle, if she followed a rhumb line, she would miss the north coast of Tangaroa by all of a hundred miles. And if she missed that coast, another day's steaming would bring her into the territorial waters of Braziperu. There was probably some sort of coastal patrol, and even though surface and airships would not be looking for Kawaroa her description would have been sent out.

The rack containing water and food containers was on the forward bulkhead of the master compass room. It was secured to the plating with screws, and between wood and metal there was a gap. Grimes pushed the quill of the feather into this crack, being careful to keep it exactly over the brass lubber's line. He remembered that the male homer had paid no attention to the not-so-artificial lure until he pulled it out of his pocket. Had his own body odor masked the smell of it? Was there a smell, or was it some more subtle emanation? He had learned once that the male birds must be kept beyond a certain distance from the females, no matter what intervened in the way of decks or bulkheads. So . . . ? His own masculine aura . . . ? The fact that he had put the feathers in the pocket that he usually kept his pipe in . . . ?

He decided to leave the merest tip of the feather showing, nonetheless. He had noted that Ellevie went through her master compass tending routine with a certain lack of enthusiasm; probably she would think that the tiny touch of gold was just another rust speck on the paintwork.

He waited in the foul-smelling compartment for what seemed like far too long a time. But he had to be sure. He decided, at last, that his scheme was working. Before the planting of the feather the maimed bird had been shifting to starboard, the merest fraction of a degree at a time, continually. Now it was motionless, just straining at its harness.

Grimes put out the light, let himself out, locked up, then returned the key to Ellevie's cabin. He went back up to the bridge, looked into the chart room. It seemed that Missenden had been able to take one star, but that his sums were refusing to come out right.

* * *

The voyage wore on. It was not a happy one, especially for Grimes. There was nothing to read, and nobody to talk to except Missenden and Ellevie—and the former was all too prone to propagandize on behalf of the Galactic Superman, while the latter treated Grimes with contempt. He was pleased to note, however, that they seemed to be getting on each other's nerves. The honeymoon, such as it had been, was almost over.

The voyage wore on. No other ships were sighted, and the heavily clouded weather persisted. Once or twice the sun showed through, and once Missenden was able to obtain a sight, to work out a position line. It was very useful as a check of distance run, being almost at right angles to the course line.

"We shall," announced Missenden proudly, "make our landfall tomorrow forenoon."

"Are you sure?" asked Grimes mildly.

"Of course I'm sure." He prodded with the points of his dividers at the chart. "Look! Within five miles of the D.R."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes.

"Cheer up, Commodore! As long as you play ball with the barons they won't boil you in oil. All you have to do is be reasonable."

"I'm always reasonable," said Grimes. "The trouble is that too many other people aren't."

The other man laughed. "We'll see what the Council of Barons has to say about that. I don't bear you any malice—well, not much—but I hope I'm allowed to watch when they bring you around to their way of thinking."

"I hope you never have the pleasure," snapped Grimes, going below to his cabin.

The trouble was that he was not sure. Tomorrow might be arrival day at Port Paraparam on Tangaroa. It might be. It might not. If he started taking too much interest in the navigation of the ship—if, for example, he took it upon himself to compare compasses—his captors would at once smell a rat. He recalled twentieth century sea stories he had read, yarns in which people, either goodies or baddies, had thrown ships off course by hiding an extra magnet in the vicinity of the steering compass binnacle. Those old bastards had it easy, he thought. Magnetism is straightforward; it's not like playing around with the tail feathers of a stupid bird.

He did not sleep well that night, and was up on bridge before breakfast, with Missenden. Through a pair of binoculars he scanned the horizon, but there was nothing there, no distant peaks in silhouette against the pale morning sky.

The two men were up on the bridge again after breakfast. Still there was nothing ahead but sea and sky. Missenden was beginning to look worried—and Grimes's spirits had started to rise. Neither of them went down for the midday meal, and it was significant that the steward did not

come up to ask if they wanted anything. There was something in the atmosphere of the ship that was ugly, threatening. The watches—helmsmen and lookouts—were becoming increasingly surly.

"I shall stand on," announced Missenden that evening. "I shall stand on. The coast is well lit, and this ship has a good echometer."

"But no radar," said Grimes.

"And whose fault is that?" flared the other. "Your blasted pet priests'. They say that they won't introduce radar until it can be manufactured locally!"

"There are such things as balance of trade to consider," Grimes told him.

"Balance of trade!" He made it sound like an obscenity. Then: "But I can't understand what went wrong . . . the dead reckoning . . . my observed position . . ."

"The log could be running fast. And what about set? Come to that, did you allow for accumulated chronometer error?"

"Of course. In any case, we've been getting radio time signals."

"Are you sure that you used the right date in the ephemeris?"

"Commodore Grimes, as I told you before, I'm a good linguist. I can read Tangaroan almost as well as I can read English."

"What about index error on that sextant you were using?"

"We stand on," said Missenden stubbornly.

Grimes went down to his cabin. He shut the door and shot the securing bolt. He didn't like the way the crew was looking at the two Earthmen.

* * *

Morning came, and still no land.

The next morning came, and the next. The crew was becoming mutinous. To Missenden's troubles—and he was, by now, ragged from lack of sleep—were added a shortage of fresh water, the impending exhaustion of oil fuel. But he stood on stubbornly. He wore two holstered revolvers all the time, and the ship's other firearms were locked in the strong room. And what about the one that Ellevie had been waving around? wondered Grimes.

He stood on—and then, late in the afternoon, the first dark peak was faintly visible against the dark, clouded sky. Missenden rushed into the chart room, came back out. "Mount Rangararo!" he declared.

"Doesn't look like it," said Ellevie, who had come on to the bridge.

"It must be." A great weight seemed to have fallen from his shoulders. "What do you make of it, Commodore?"

"It's land," admitted Grimes.

"Of course it's land! And look! There on the starboard bow! A ship. A cruiser. Come to escort us in."

He snapped orders, and Kawaroa's ensign was run up to the gaff, the black mailed fist on the scarlet ground. The warship, passing on their starboard beam, was too far distant for them to see her colors. She turned, reduced speed, steered a converging course.

The dull boom of her cannon came a long while after the flash of orange flame from her forward turret. Ahead of Kawaroa the exploding shell threw up a great fountain of spray. It was Grimes who ran to the engine room telegraph and rang Stop. It was Ellevie who, dropping her binoculars to the deck, cried, "A Braziperuan ship!" Then she pulled her revolver from her pocket and aimed it at Missenden, yelling, "Terry traitor!" Unluckily for her she was standing just in front of Grimes, who felled her with a rabbit punch to the back of the neck. He crouched, scooped up the weapon and straightened. He said, "You'd better get ready to fight your faithful crew away from the bridge, Missenden. We should be able to hold them off until the boarding party arrives." He snapped a shot at the helmsman, who, relinquishing his now useless wheel, was advancing on them threateningly. The man turned tail and ran.

"You're behind this!" raved Missenden. "What did you do? You gave your word . . ."

"I didn't do anything that I promised not to."

"But . . . what went wrong?"

Grimes answered with insufferable smugness. "It was just a case of one bird-brained navigator trusting another."

* * *

The tidying up did not take long. Missenden's crew did not put up even a token resistance to be the boarding party sent from the warship. Kawaroa was taken into the nearest Braziperuan port, where her crew was interned pending decisions as to its eventual fate. Grimes and Missenden—the latter under close arrest—made the voyage back to University City by air. The Commodore did not enjoy the trip; the big blimp seemed to him to be a fantastically flimsy contraption and, as it was one of the hydrogen-filled craft, smoking was strictly forbidden.

He began to enjoy himself again when he was back in University City, although the task of having to arrange for the deportation of the sullen Missenden back to New Saxony was a distasteful one. When this had been attended to Grimes was finally able to relax and enjoy the hospitality and company of the High Priest and his acolytes, none of whom subscribed to the fallacy that scholarship goes hand and hand with asceticism. He would always remember the banquet at which he was made an Honorary Admiral of the Ausiphalian Navy.

Meanwhile, his passage had been arranged on the Lornbound Rim Cayman, aboard which Missenden would also be traveling on the first leg of his long and miserable voyage home. It came as a surprise, therefore, when he

received a personal telephone call from the Honorable Clifton Weeks, the Rim Worlds' ambassador to Tharn. "I hope that you're in no hurry to be getting home, Commodore," said the fat man. Grimes could tell from the Ambassador's expression that he hoped the reverse.

"Not exactly," admitted Grimes, enjoying the poorly concealed play of expressions over the other's pudgy features.

"Hrrmph! Well, sir, it seems that our masters want you on Mellise."

"What for, sir?" asked Grimes.

"Don't ask me. I'm not a spaceman. I didn't open the bloody world up to commerce. All that I've been told is that you're to arrange for passage to that planet on the first available ship. You're the expert."

On what? wondered Grimes. He said sweetly, "I'm looking forward to the trip, Mr. Ambassador."