

## CATCH THE STAR WINDS

For the one-time service manager of a certain engineering concern

### I: THE CREW

#### Chapter 1

She was old and tired, the Rim Dragon-and after this, her final voyage, we were feeling just that way ourselves. It was as though she had known somehow that a drab and miserable end awaited her in the ungentle hands of the breakers, and she had been determined to forestall the inevitable and go out in a blaze of glory-or as much glory as would have been possible for a decrepit Epsilon Class tramp finishing her career after many changes of ownership at the very rim of the Galaxy, the edge of the dark.

Fortunately for us, she had overdone things.

Off Grollor, for example, a malfunctioning of the control room computer had coincided with a breakdown of the main propellant pump. If the second mate hadn't got his sums wrong we should have been trapped in a series of grazing ellipses, with no alternative but to take to the boats in a hurry before too deep a descent into the atmosphere rendered this impossible. As things worked out, however, the mistakes made by our navigator and his pet computer resulted in our falling into a nice, stable orbit, with ample time at our disposal in which to make repairs.

Then there had been pile trouble, and Mannschenn drive trouble-and for the benefit of those of you who have never experienced this latter, all I can say is that it is somewhat hard to carry out normal shipboard duties when you're not certain if it's high noon or last Thursday. It was during the Mannschenn drive trouble that Cassidy, our reaction drive chief engineer, briefly lost control of his temperamental fissioning furnace. By some miracle the resultant flood of radiation seemed to miss all human personnel. It was the algae tanks that caught it-and this was all to the good, as a mutated virus had been running riot among the algae, throwing our air conditioning and sewage disposal entirely out of kilter. The virus died, and most of the algae died-but enough of the organisms survived to be the parents of a new and flourishing population.

Then there had been the occasions when Rim Dragon had not overdone things, but her timing had been just a little out. There had been, for example, the tube lining that had cracked just a second or so too late (fortunately, really, from our viewpoint) but the mishap nonetheless had resulted in our sitting down on the concrete apron of Port Grimes, on Tharn, hard enough to buckle a vane.

There had been another propellant pump failure-this time on Mellise-that caused us to be grounded on that world for repairs at just the right time to be subjected to the full fury of a tropical hurricane. Luckily, the procedure for riding out such atmospheric disturbances is laid down in Rim Runners' Standing Orders and Regulations. It was a Captain Calver, I think, who had been similarly trapped on Mellise several years ago in some ancient rustbucket called Lorn Lady. He had coped with the situation by rigging stays to save his ship from being overturned by the wind. We did the same.

It worked-although the forward towing lugs, to which our stays were shackled, would have torn completely away from the shell plating with disastrous consequences had the blow lasted another five minutes.

Anyhow, the voyage was now over-or almost over.

We were dropping down to Port Forlorn, on Lorn, falling slowly down the column of incandescence that was our reaction drive, drifting cautiously down to the circle of drab gray concrete that was the spaceport apron, to the gray concrete that was hardly distinguishable from the gray landscape, from the dreary flatlands over which drifted the thin rain and the gray smoke and the dirty fumes streaming from the stacks of the refineries.

We were glad to be back-but, even so . . .

Ralph Listowel, the mate, put into words the feeling that was, I think, in the minds of all but one of us. He quoted sardonically:

"Lives there a man with soul so dead

Who never to himself hath said

When returning from some foreign strand

This is my own, my native land?"

Of all of us, the only genuine, native-born Rim Worlder descended from the first families was the old man. He looked up from his console now to scowl at his chief officer. And then I, of course, had to make matters worse by throwing in my own two bits' worth of archaic verse. I remarked, "The trouble with you, Ralph, is that you aren't romantic. Try to see things this way . . .

"Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies with magic sails,

Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales . . ."

"What the hell's the bloody purser doing in here?" roared the captain, turning his glare on me. "Mr. Malcolm, will you please get the hell out of my control room? And you, Mr. Listowel, please attend to your duties."

I unstrapped myself from my chair and left hastily. We carried no third mate, and I had been helping out at landings and blast-offs by looking after the RT. Besides, I liked to be on top to see everything that was happening. Sulkily, I made my way down to the officers' flat, staggering a little as the ship lurched, and let myself into the wardroom.

The other two "idlers" were there-Sandra and Doc Jenkins. They were sprawled at ease in their acceleration chairs, sipping drinks from tall glasses dewy with condensation.

"So this is how the poor live," I remarked sourly.

"The way that the old bitch has been carrying on," said Doc affably, "we have to assume that any given drink may be our last. But how come you're not in the greenhouse?"

"They gave me the bum's rush," I admitted, dropping into the nearest chair, strapping myself in. I was feeling extremely disgruntled. In well-manned, well-found ships pursers are brought up to regard the control room as forbidden ground, but over the past few months, I had become used to playing my part in blastings-off and landings and had come to appreciate the risks that we were running all the time. If anything catastrophic happened I'd be dead, no matter where I was. But when I die I'd like to know the reason.

"So they gave you the bum's rush," said Sandra, not at all sympathetically. (She had been heard to complain that if the purser was privileged to see all that was going on, a like privilege should be extended to the catering officer. "Might I inquire why?"

"You might," I told her absently, listening to the thunder of the rocket drive, muffled by the insulation but still loud in the confined space. It sounded healthy enough. They seemed to be getting along without me up there. But we weren't down yet.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"Give me a drink, and I'll tell you."

She did not unstrap herself but extended a long, shapely arm and managed to shove the heavy decanter and a glass across the table so that they were within my reach. I looked at the surface of the liquid within the container. It was rippled, but ever so slightly, by the vibration. The old girl was behaving herself. I might still have time for a drink before things started to happen. I poured myself a generous slug and raised the tumbler to my lips. It was, as I had suspected, the not at all bad gin manufactured by the doctor in his capacity of biochemist. The lime flavor made it palatable.

She said, "You've got your drink."

I said, "All right. If you must know, I was quoting poetry. Ralph started it. The master did not, repeat not, approve . . ."

"Down," quoted the doctor in his fruitiest voice.

"Down.

Fierce stabbing

Flame phallus

Rending

Membrane of atmosphere,

Tissues of cloud.

Down-bearing,

Thrusting

To stony womb of world.

Spacemen, I ask you

What monster

Or prodigy

Shall come of this rape?"

I looked at him with some distaste. His chubby face under the overly long, overly oily black hair was (as usual) smugly sensual. He had an extensive repertoire of modern verse, and practically all of it dealt with rape, both literal and figurative.

"If I'd quoted that trash," I told him, "the old man would have been justified in booting me out of his Holy of Holies. But I was quoting poetry. Poetry. Period."

"Oh, yes. Poetry. Meretricious jingles. You and dear Ralph share a passion for this revival of the ancient Terran slush, corn of the corniest. Our lord and master did well in arising in his wrath and hurling you into the outer darkness . . ."

"Poetry," said Sandra flatly, "and ship handling just don't mix. Especially at a time like this."

"She was riding down," I said, "sweetly and gently, on full automatic."

"And all of us," she pointed out, "at the mercy of a single fuse. I may be only chief cook and bottler aboard this wagon, but even I know that it is essential for the officers in the control room to be fully alert at all times."

"All right," I said. "All right."

I glared at her, and she glared at me. She was always handsome-but she was almost beautiful when she was in a bad temper. I wondered (as I had often wondered before) what she would be like when the rather harsh planes and angles of her face were softened by some gentler passion. But she did her job, Sandra did, and did it well, and kept to herself-as others, as well as I, had learned the hard way.

Meanwhile, we were still falling, still dropping, the muffled thunder of our reaction drive steady and unfaltering. In view of the past events and near disasters of the voyage it was almost too good to be true. It was, I decided, too good to be true-and then, as though in support of my pessimism, the sudden silence gripped the hearts of all of us. Sandra's face was white under her coppery hair and Jenkins's normally ruddy complexion was a sickly green. We waited speechless for the last, the final crash.

The ship tilted gently, ever so gently, tilted and righted herself, and the stuffy air inside the wardroom was alive with the whispered complaints of the springs and cylinders of her landing gear. The bulkhead speaker crackled and we heard the old man's voice: "The set-down has been accomplished. All personnel may proceed on their arrival duties."

Doc Jenkins laughed, unashamedly relieved. He unstrapped himself and

poured a generous drink from the decanter into each of our glasses. "To the end of the voyage," he said, raising his tumbler. He gulped his gin. Then, "Now that we can all relax, Peter, just what was the so-called poetry that led to your well-merited eviction from the greenhouse?"

" 'Saw the heavens fill with commerce,' " I quoted. " 'Argosies with magic sails, Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales . . . ' "

"We dropped down all right," he jested, "but not on any magic sails. A down-thrusting phallus of flame is a far better description of rocket drive."

"I prefer the magic sails," I said.

"You would," he said.

"Some people," said Sandra pointedly, getting to her feet, "have work to do. Even though the ship is finished, we aren't."

## Chapter 2

Yes, we all had work to do-but none of us, not even Sandra, was particularly keen on getting started on it. We were down, and still in one piece, and we were feeling that sense of utter relaxation that comes at the end of a voyage; there was something in it of homecoming (although the Rim Worlds were home only to the old man), something in it of the last day of school.

Sandra stood there for a moment or so, looking down at Doc and myself. Her regard shifted to the decanter. She said, "It's a shame to leave all that to you two pigs."

"Don't let it worry you, duckie," Jenkins admonished her.

"It does worry me."

She sat down again and refilled her glass. The doctor refilled his glass. I refilled mine.

"Journeys end," said Doc, making a toast of it.

"In lovers meeting," I added, finishing the quotation.

"I didn't know you had a popsy in Port Forlorn," said Sandra distantly.

"I haven't," I said. "Not now. Not anymore. But there should be lovers' meetings at the end of a voyage."

"Why?" she asked, feigning interest.

"Because some sentimental slob of a so-called poet said so," sneered Doc.

"Better than all your crap about down-thrusting phalluses," I retorted.

"Boys, boys . . ." admonished Sandra.

"Is there anything left in the bottle?" demanded Ralph Listowel.

We hadn't seen or heard him come into the wardroom. We looked up at him in mild amazement as he stood there, awkward, gangling, his considerable height diminished ever so slightly by his habitual slouch. There was a worried expression on his lined face. I wondered just what was wrong now.

"Here, Ralph," said Sandra, passing him a drink.

"Thanks." The mate gulped rather than sipped. "Hmm. Not bad." He gulped again. "Any more?"

"Building up your strength, Ralph?" asked Sandra sweetly.

"Could be," he admitted. "Or perhaps this is an infusion of Dutch courage."

"And what do you want it for?" I asked. "The hazards of the voyage are over and done with."

"Those hazards, yes," he said gloomily. "But there are worse hazards than those in space. When mere chief officers are bidden to report to the super's office, at once if not before, there's something cooking-and, I shouldn't mind betting you a month's pay, it'll be something that stinks."

"Just a routine bawling out," I comforted him. "After all, you can't expect to get away with everything all the time."

A wintry grin did nothing to soften his harsh features. "But it's not only me he wants. He wants you, Sandra, and you, Doc, and you, Peter. And Smethwick, our commissioned clairvoyant. One of you had better go to shake him out of his habitual stupor."

"But what have we done?" asked Doc in a worried voice.

"My conscience is clear," I said. "At least, I think it is . . ."

"My conscience is clear," Sandra stated firmly.

"Mine never is," admitted Doc gloomily.

The mate put his glass down on the table. "All right," he told us brusquely. "Go and get washed behind the ears and brush your hair. One of you drag the crystal gazer away from his dog's brain in aspic and try to get him looking something like an officer and a gentleman."

"Relax, Ralph," said Jenkins, pouring what was left in the decanter into his own glass.

"I wish I could. But it's damned odd the way the commodore is yelling for all of us. I may not be a psionic radio officer, but I have my hunches."

Jenkins laughed. "One thing is certain, Ralph, he's not sending for us to fire us. Rim Runners are never that well off for officers. And once we've come out to the Rim, we've hit rock bottom." He began to warm up. "We've run away from ourselves as far as we can, to the very edge of the blackness, and we can't run any farther."

"Even so . . ." said the mate.

"Doc's right," said Sandra. "He'll just be handing out new appointments to all of us. With a bit of luck-or bad luck?-we might be shipping out together again."

"It'll be good luck for all of you if we are," said Doc. "My jungle juice is the best in the fleet, and you all know it."

"So you say," said Sandra.

"But what about the old man?" I asked. "And the engineers? Are they bidden to the presence?"

"No," said Ralph. "As far as I know, they'll just be going on leave." He added gloomily, "There's something in the wind as far as we're concerned. I wish I knew what it was."

"There's only one way to find out," said Sandra briskly, getting to her feet.

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We left the ship together-Ralph, Doc Jenkins, Sandra, Smethwick and myself. Ralph, who was inclined to take his naval reserve commission seriously, tried to make it a march across the dusty, scarred concrete to the low huddle of administration buildings. Both Sandra and I tried to play along with him, but Doc Jenkins and our tame telepath could turn any march into a straggle without even trying. For Smethwick there was, perhaps, some excuse; released from the discipline of watchkeeping he was renewing contact with his telepathic friends all over the planet. He wandered along like a man in a dream, always on the point of falling over his own feet. And Jenkins rolled happily beside him, a somewhat inane grin on his ruddy face. I guessed that in the privacy of his cabin he had depleted his stocks of jungle juice still further.

I wished that I'd imbibed another stiff slug myself. The wind was bitterly cold, driving the dust before it in whorls and eddies, filling our eyes with grit, redolent of old socks and burning sulphur. I was wondering how anybody could be fool enough to come out to the Rim Worlds. I was wondering, not for the first time, how I'd ever been fool enough to come out to the Rim Worlds.

It was a relief to get into the office building, out of that insistent, nagging wind. The air was pleasantly warm, but my eyes were still stinging. I used my handkerchief to try to clear the gritty particles from them, and saw through tears that the others were doing the same-all save Smethwick, who, lost in some private world of his own, was oblivious to discomfort. Ralph brushed the dust from his epaulettes and then used his handkerchief to restore a polish to his shoes, tossing the soiled fabric into a handy disposer. He started to ascend the stairs, and paused to throw a beckoning nod at us. Not without reluctance we followed.

There was the familiar door at the end of the passageway with Astronautical Superintendent inscribed on the translucent plastic. The door opened of itself as we approached. Through the doorway we could see the big, cluttered desk and, behind it, the slight, wiry figure of Commodore Grimes. He had risen to his feet, but he still looked small, dwarfed by the

furnishings that must have been designed for a much larger man. I was relieved to see that his creased and pitted face was illuminated by a genuinely friendly smile, his teeth startlingly white against the dark skin.

"Come in," he boomed. "Come in, all of you." He waved a hand to the chairs that had been set in a rough semicircle before his desk. "Be seated."

And then I didn't feel so relieved after all. Fussing in the background was Miss Hallows, his secretary, tending a bubbling coffee percolator. From past experience I knew that such hospitality meant that we were to be handed the dirty end of some very peculiar stick.

When the handshaking and the exchange of courtesies were over we sat down. There was a period of silence while Miss Hallows busied herself with the percolator and the cups. My attention was drawn by an odd-looking model on the commodore's desk, and I saw that the others, too, were looking at it curiously and that old Grimes was watching us with a certain degree of amusement. It was a ship, that was obvious, but it could not possibly be a spaceship. It was, I guessed, some sort of aircraft; there was a cigar-shaped hull and, protruding from it, a fantastically complicated array of spars and vanes. I know even less about aeronautics than I do about astronautics-after all, I'm just the spacefaring office boy-but even I doubted if such a contraption could ever fly. I turned my head to look at Ralph; he was staring at the thing with a sort of amused and amazed contempt.

"Admiring my new toy?" asked the commodore.

"It's rather . . . it's rather odd, sir," said Ralph.

"Go on," chuckled Grimes. "Why don't you ask?"

There was an embarrassed silence, broken by Sandra. "All right, commodore. What is it?"

"That, my dear," he told her, "is your new ship."

### Chapter 3

We looked at the commodore, and he looked back at us. I tried to read his expression and came to the reluctant conclusion that he wasn't joking. We looked at the weird contraption on his desk. Speaking for myself, the more I stared at it, the less like a ship it seemed. Have you ever seen those fantastic ornamental carp that are bred on Earth, their bodies surrounded by an ornate tracery of filmy fins, utility sacrificed to appearance? That's what the thing reminded me of. It was pretty, beautiful even in a baroque kind of way, but quite useless. And Grimes had told us quite seriously that it was a model of our new ship.

Ralph cleared his throat. He said, "Excuse me, sir, but I don't quite understand. That . . . that model doesn't seem to represent a conventional vessel. I can't see any signs of a venturi . . ." He was on his feet now, bending over the desk. "And are those propellers? Or should I say airscrews?" He straightened up. "And she's not a gaussjammer, one of the old Ehrenhaft drive jobs. That's certain."



Old Grimes was smiling again. "Sit down, Captain Listowel. There's no need to get excited."

"Captain Listowel?" asked Ralph.

"Yes." The smile vanished as though switched off. "But only if you agree to sail in command of . . ." he gestured towards the model . . . "the Flying Cloud."

"Flying Cloud? But that's a transgalactic clipper name!"

Grimes smiled again. "The first Flying Cloud was a clipper on Earth's seas in the days of wooden ships and iron men. This Flying Cloud is a clipper, too-but not a transgalactic clipper. She is the latest addition to Rim Runners' fleet, the first of her kind."

"But-" Ralph was looking really worried now. "But, sir, there are many senior masters in this employ. As for that, there are quite a few chief officers senior to me . . ."

"And all of them," said Grimes, "old and set in their ways, knowing only one way of getting from point A to point B, and not wanting to know any other. Lift on reaction drive. Aim for the target star. Accelerate. Cut reaction drive. Switch on Mannschenn drive. A child could do it. And while all this is going on you have the ship overmanned with a pack of engineers eating their heads off and pulling down high salaries, and getting to the stage where they regard the ship merely as a platform upon which to mount their precious machinery."

I couldn't help grinning. It was common knowledge that Grimes didn't like engineers and was hardly on speaking terms with the engineer superintendents.

But Ralph, once he had smelled a rat, was stubborn. And he was frank. He said, "I appreciate the promotion, sir. But there must be a catch to it."

"Of course there is, Captain Listowel. Life is just one long series of catches-in both senses of the word. Catches as in your usage of the word-and fumbled catches." He added, "I hope you don't fumble this catch."

Ralph was persistent. "I see your point, sir. But this ship is obviously something new, something highly experimental. As you know, I hold my master's certificate-but it's valid in respect of conventional drives only."

"But you, Captain Listowel, are the only officer we have with any qualifications at all in respect of the Erikson drive." He pulled a folder out of the top drawer of his desk and opened it. "Like most of our personnel, you made your way out to the Rim by easy stages. You were four years on Atlantia. You shipped in topsail schooners as navigator-it seems that the Atlantian Ministry of Transport recognizes astronomical certificates of competency insofar as navigation is concerned. You thought of settling permanently on the planet and becoming a professional seaman. You sat for, and obtained, your second mate's certificate in sail . . ."

"But what connection . . . ?"

"Let me finish. You were in Rim Leopard when she had that long spell for repairs on Tharn. You elected to take part of your leave on that world-and you shipped out as a supernumerary officer in one of their trading schooners."

"Even so . . ."

"Take it from me, Captain Listowel, that your fore-and-aft rig second mate's ticket, together with your experience, means more than your master astronaut's certificate. Too, you are qualified in one other, very important way." He looked at each of us in turn. "You're all so qualified."

"I know nothing about wooden ships, commodore," said Jenkins, "and I'm not an iron man."

"Too right, doctor," agreed the commodore cheerfully. "But you have no close ties on any of the Rim Worlds-neither chick nor child, as the saying goes. And that applies to all of you."

"And so this new ship is dangerous?" asked Ralph quietly.

"No, Captain Listowel. She's safer than the average spaceship-far safer than Rim Dragon. She'll be as easy as an old shoe. And economical to run. She is," he went on, "a prototype. It is our intention, insofar as some trades are concerned, to make her the standard carrier."

"And the catch?" insisted Ralph.

"All right. You're entitled to know." He leaned back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling as though in search of inspiration. "You are all of you, I take it, familiar with the principle of the conveyor belt?"

"Of course," Ralph told him.

"Good. You know, then, that as long as the belt is kept loaded, the speed at which it is run is of relatively minor importance. So it is with shipping. Express services are desirable for mails and passengers and perishables-but what does it matter if a slab of zinc is ten years on the way instead of ten weeks?"

"It will matter a lot to the crew of the ship," grumbled Doc.

"I agree. But when the ship is traveling almost at the speed of light, there will not be a lapse of ten years subjective time. To the crew it will be just a normal interstellar voyage."

"But," Ralph interjected, "where does the economy come in?"

"In manning, for a start. I have already discussed the matter with the Astronauts' Guild, and they agree that personnel should be paid on the basis of subjective elapsed time . . ."

"What!" exploded Ralph.

"Plus a bonus," Grimes added hastily. "Then there's fuel consumption. There'll be a pile, of course, but it will be a small one. It will be supply

power only for essential services and auxiliary machinery. As you all know, fissionable elements are in short supply and very expensive on the Rim Worlds, so that's a big saving. Then, there'll be no reaction drive and interstellar drive engineers to wax fat on their princely salaries. One donkey-man, on junior officer's pay, will be able to handle the job . . ."

"A donkeyman?" asked Sandra, her voice puzzled.

"Yes, my dear. In the last days of sail, on Earth, the windjammers used some auxiliary machinery, steam-driven. The mechanic who looked after and ran this was rated as donkeyman."

Then Ralph voiced the thoughts, the objections of all of us. He complained, "You've told us nothing, commodore. You want us to buy a pig in a poke. You've mentioned something called the Erikson drive, and you've given us a short lecture on the economics of ship management, but we're spacemen, not accountants. Oh, I know that we're supposed to get our starwagons from point A to point B as economically as possible-but getting them there at all is the prime consideration. And, frankly, I don't see how that contraption could get from one side of the spaceport to the other."

And, I thought, you've got us all interested, you cunning old bastard. You've got us hooked.

Grimes looked down at the cold coffee in his cup with distaste. He got up, went to his filing cabinet and pulled out the "W" drawer, taking from it a bottle of whiskey and glasses. He said, "It's rather a long story, but you're entitled to hear it. I suggest that we all make ourselves comfortable."

We settled down with our drinks to listen.

#### Chapter 4

You will recall [he said] that some few years ago I commissioned Faraway Quest to carry out a survey of this sector of the Galaxy. To the Galactic East I made contact with Tharn and Grollor, Mellise and Stree, but you are all familiar with the planets of the Eastern Circuit. My first sweep, however, was to the West. Yes, there are worlds to the West, populous planets whose peoples have followed a course of evolution parallel to our own. They're more than merely humanoid, some of these people. They're human. But-and it's one helluva big "but"-their worlds are antimatter worlds. We didn't realize this until an attempt was made to establish contact with an alien ship. Luckily only two people were directly involved-our own psionic radio officer and a woman, who seemed to hold the same rank, from the other vessel. The idea was that they should meet and rub noses and so on in one of Faraway Quest's boats, midway between the two ships; both I and the other Captain were worried about the possibility of the exchange of viruses, bacteria and whatever, and this boat of mine was supposed to be a sort of quarantine station. But we needn't have worried. Our two pet guinea pigs went up and out in a flare of energy that would have made a fusion bomb look silly.

So that was it, I thought at the time. The psionic radio officers had had it, in a big way, so communications had broken down. And it was quite obvious that any contact between ourselves and the people of the antimatter

worlds was definitely impossible. I got the hell out and ran to the Galactic East. I made landings on Tharn and Grollor and Mellise and Stree and dickered with the aborigines and laid the foundation of our Eastern Circuit trade. But there was that nagging doubt at the back of my mind; there was that unfinished business to the West. Cutting a long story short, after things were nicely sewn up on the Eastern Circuit worlds I went back. I managed to establish contact-but not physical contact!-with the dominant race. I'd replaced my psionic radio officer, of course, but it was still a long job. I'm sure that Mr. Smethwick won't mind if I say that the average professional telepath just hasn't got the right kind of mind to cope with technicalities. But we worked out a code to use with buzzer and flashing lamp, and eventually we were even able to talk directly on the RT without too many misunderstandings.

We traded ideas. Oddly enough-or not so oddly-there wasn't much to trade. Their technology was about on the same level as our own. They had atomic power (but who hasn't?) and interstellar travel, and their ships used a version of the Mannschenn drive, precessing gyroscopes and all. It was all very interesting, academically speaking, but it got neither party anywhere. Anything we knew and used, they knew and used. Anything they knew and used, we knew and used. It was like having a heart to heart talk with one's reflection in a mirror.

Oh, there were a few minor differences. That new system of governor controls for the Mannschenn drive, for example-we got that from the antimatter people. And they'd never dreamed of keeping fish in their hydroponics tanks, but they're doing it now. But there was nothing really important.

But I had to bring something back. And I did. No doubt you've often wondered just what is going on inside Satellite XIV. It's been there for years, hanging in its equatorial orbit, plastered with KEEP OFF notices. It's still there-but the reason for its construction has been removed.

I brought something back. I brought back a large hunk of antimatter. It's iron-or should I say "anti-iron"? But iron or anti-iron, it still behaves as iron in a magnetic field. It's hanging in its casing, making no contact with the walls-and it had better not!-held in place by the powerful permanent magnets. It'd be safe in a hard vacuum, but it's safer still suspended in the neutronium that the University boys were able to cook up for me.

Well, I had this hunk of antimatter. I still have. The problem was, what was it good for? Power? Yes-but how could it be used? No doubt some genius will come up with the answer eventually, but so far nobody has. But in the laboratory built around it, Satellite XIV, techniques were developed for carving off small pieces of it, using laser beams, and these tiny portions were subjected to experiment. One of the experiments, bombardment with neutrinos, yielded useful results. After such a bombardment antimatter acquires the property of antigravity. It's analogous to permanent magnetism in many ways-but, as far as the scientists have been able to determine, really permanent.

But how to use it?

Oh, the answer is obvious, you'll say. Use it in spaceships. That's what I came up with myself. I passed the problem on to Dr. Kramer at the University. I don't profess to be able to make head or tail of his math, but it boils down to this: antimatter and the temporal precession field of the Mannschenn drive just don't mix. Or rather they do mix-too well. This is the way I understand it. You use antimatter, and antigravity, to get upstairs. Well and good. You use your gyroscopes to get lined up on the target star, then you accelerate. You build up velocity, and then you cut the reaction drive. Well and good. Then you switch on the Mannschenn drive . . .

You switch on the Mannschenn drive, and as your ship consists of both normal matter and antimatter she'll behave-abnormally. Oh, there'll be temporal precession all right. But . . . The ship herself will go astern in time, as she should-and that hunk of antimatter will precess in the opposite temporal direction. The result, of course, will be catastrophic.

Even so-if I may borrow one of your pet expressions, Captain Listowel-even so, I was sure that antimatter, with its property of induced antigravity, would be of great value in space travel. There was this lump of iron that I had dragged all the way back from the Galactic West, encased in aluminum and neutronium and alnico magnets, hanging there in its orbit, quite useless so far but potentially extremely useful. There must be a way to use it.

But what was the way?

[He looked at us, as though waiting for intelligent suggestions. None were forthcoming. He drained his glass. He refilled it. He waited until we had refilled ours.]

I've a son, as you know. Like most fathers, I wanted him to follow in my footsteps. As many sons do, he decided to do otherwise, and told me frankly that a spaceman's life was not for him. He's an academic type. Bachelor of arts-and what is more useless than a degree in arts? Master of arts. And now doctor of philosophy. And not the sort of Ph.D. that's really a degree in science, but just a jumble of history and the like. Damn it all, he wouldn't know what a neutron was if it up and bit him on the left buttock. But he can tell you what Julius Caesar said when he landed in England-whenever and whatever that was-and what Shakespeare made some character called Hamlet say when he was in some sort of complicated jam that some old Greek called Oedipus was in a couple of thousand or so years previously, and what some other character called Freud had to say about it all a few hundred years later.

But, to get back to Mr. J. Caesar, what he said was, Veni, vidi, vici. I came, I saw, I conquered.

And, insofar as the antimatter worlds were concerned, I came, I saw-and I didn't conquer. All I had to show for my trouble was this damned great hunk of anti-iron, and I just couldn't figure out a use for it. It irked me more than somewhat. So, after worrying about it all rather too much, I retired from the field and left it all to my subconscious.

Well, John-that's my son-littered up the house with all sorts of books when

he was studying for his latest degree. There was, as I have said, quite a pile of historical material. Not only Julius Caesar and Shakespeare and the learned Herr Doktor Freud, but books on, of all things, the history of transport. Those I read, and they were fascinating. Galleys with sweating slaves manning the sweeps. Galleons with wind power replacing muscle power. The clipper ships, with acres of canvas spread to the gales. The first steamships. The motor ships. The nuclear-powered ships. And, in the air, the airships-dirigible balloons. The airplanes. The jets. The rockets-and the first spaceships.

And with the spaceships sail came back, but briefly. There was the Erikson drive. There were the ships that spread their great plastic sails and drifted out from the orbit of Earth to that of Mars, but slowly, slowly. It was a good idea-but as long as those ships had mass it was impracticable. But if there had then been any means of nullifying gravity they would have superseded the rockets.

Then it all clicked. The old-timers didn't have antigravity. I do have antigravity. I can build a real sailing ship-a vessel to run before the photon gale, a ship that can be handled just as the old windjammers on Earth's seas were handled. A ship, come to that, Captain Listowel, that can be handled just as the topsail schooners on Atlantia's seas are handled . . .

[He waved a hand towards the model on his desk.]

There she is. There's Flying Cloud. The first of the real lightjammers. And she's yours.

## Chapter 5

"Even so . . ." murmured Ralph, breaking the silence.

"Even so, Captain Listowel," echoed Grimes, a sardonic edge to his voice.

"Even so, sir," went on Ralph, undeterred, "I don't think that I'm qualified. I doubt if any of us is qualified."

"You are qualified," stated Grimes flatly. "You've experience in sail, which is more than any other master or officer in this employ can boast. Oh, there was Calver. He was in sail, too, before he joined us, but he's no longer with us. So you're the only possible choice."

"But . . . I've no real qualifications."

Grimes laughed. "Who has? There was a certificate of competency, Erikson drive, issued on Earth a few centuries ago. But don't let that bother you. The Rim Confederacy will issue certificates of competency for the improved Erikson drive."

"And the examiner?" asked Ralph.

"For a start, you," stated Grimes.

"But, damn it all, sir, there aren't any textbooks, manuals . . ."

"You will write them when you get around to it."

"Even so, sir," protested Ralph, "this is rather much. Don't think that I'm not appreciative of the promotion, but . . ."

Grimes grinned happily. He said, "In my own bumbling way-after all, I'm a spaceman, neither a seaman nor an airman-I've worked out some rough and ready methods for handling this brute." His hand went out to the beautiful model on his desk with a possessive, caressing gesture. "If it were not for the fact that I have a wife and family I'd be sailing as her first master. As things are, I've had to waive that privilege, although not without reluctance. But I can give you a rough idea of what's required."

He took from the top drawer of his desk a little control panel and set it down before himself. He pressed a stud and we watched, fascinated, as the spars rotated on their long axes and then, when the sails were furled, folded back into slots in the shell plating.

"As you see," he told us, "there are now only the atmospheric control surfaces left exposed-including, of course, the airscrews. In appearance the ship is not unlike one of the dirigible airships of the early days of aviation. A lighter-than-air ship, in fact. But she's not lighter than air. Not yet.

"This model, as you've all probably guessed by this time, is a working model-insofar as her handling inside atmospheric limits is concerned. She has within her a tiny fragment of the anti-iron, a miniscule sphere of antimatter complete with induced antigravity." He looked at Ralph. "Now, I'd like you to get the feel of her, Captain Listowel. Go on, she won't bite you. Take hold of her. Lift her off the desk."

Ralph got slowly to his feet, extended two cautious hands, got his fingers around the cylindrical hull. He said, accusingly, "But she's heavy."

"Of course she's heavy. When the real ship is berthed on a planetary surface to discharge and load cargo we don't want her at the mercy of every puff of wind. All right, put her down again. And now stand back."

Ralph stood back, without reluctance. Grimes pressed another stud on his control panel. None of us was expecting what happened next-the stream of water that poured from vents on the underside of the model, flooding the desk top, dripping on to the carpet. Miss Hallows clucked annoyance, but we just watched fascinated. The commodore smiled happily, his hands busy at the miniature controls. There was the whine of a motor inside the model ship and the two air-screws at the after end started to turn. Before they had picked up speed, while the separate blades were still clearly visible, Flying Cloud began to move, sliding slowly over the smooth surface of the desk. (I noticed that she barely disturbed the film of moisture.) She reached the edge and she dropped-but slowly, slowly-and then the control surfaces, elevators and rudder, twitched nervously, and her screws were a translucent blur, and her fall was checked and she was rising, obedient to her helm, making a circuit of the desk and gaining altitude with every lap. There was still a dribble of water from her outlets that fell, shockingly cold, on our upturned faces.

"You see," said Grimes. "In an atmosphere you have no worries at all. Drive her down on negative dynamic lift, start the compressors if you have to

give her a little extra mass with compressed air." (A faint throb was audible above the whine of the motors.) "Open your valves if you think that she's getting too heavy." (We heard the thin, high whistle.) "I'm sorry that I can't give a real demonstration of how she'll handle in deep space, but I can give you some sort of an idea." (He jockeyed the model almost to ceiling level and manipulated the controls so that she was hanging stern on to the big overhead light globe.) "There's the sun," he said. "The sun, or any other source of photons. You spread your sails . . ." (The spars extended from the hull, the complexity of plastic vanes unfurled.) "And off you go. Mind you, I'm cheating. I'm using the air screws. And now, watch carefully. One surface of each sail is silvered, the other surface is black. By use of the reflecting and absorbing surfaces I can steer the ship, I can even exercise control over her speed . . . any questions, Captain Listowel?"

"Not yet," said Ralph cautiously.

"I've told you all I know," Grimes told him cheerfully, "and now you know just about everything there is to know. But I admit that this handling of her in deep space, under sail, is all theory and guesswork. You'll have to make up the rules as you go along. But the atmospheric handling is pretty well worked out. Landing, for example." He looked at his secretary. "Miss Hallows, is the spaceport open for traffic?"

She sighed, then said, "Yes, commodore."

"But it's not," he said.

She sighed again, got to her feet and went to a door, her manner displaying a certain embarrassment. Behind the door was Commodore Grimes' private lavatory. I was rather surprised to see that he had been able to commandeer a full-length tub for himself as well as the usual standard fittings. Oh, well, rank has its privileges.

"And that," said Grimes, "is a working model of the spaceport of the near future. A lake, natural or artificial. Or a wide river. Or a sheltered bay. Maintenance costs cut to a bare minimum."

I got to my feet and saw that the tub was full.

The model Flying Cloud droned slowly over our heads, her suit of sails once again withdrawn and steered through the open door of the bathroom, her airscrews and elevators driving her down in a long slant towards the surface of the water in the tub. While she was still all of three feet above it a tendril snaked from her underbelly, a long tube that extended itself until its end was submerged. Once again there was the throbbing of a tiny pump and the model settled, gradually at first, then faster, then dropping with a startlingly loud splash.

"A clumsy landing," admitted Grimes, "but I'm sure that you'll do better, Captain."

"I hope so," said Ralph gloomily.

II: THE SHIP



## Chapter 6

But I think Ralph thoroughly enjoyed himself in the few weeks that followed. I doubt if any of the rest of us did. I know that I didn't. Sailing as a sport is all very well on a planet like Caribbea, but it has little to recommend it on a bleak slag heap such as Lorn. Oh, there's always a wind-but that wind is always bitter and, as often as not, opaque with gritty dust.

I don't think that anybody had ever sailed on Lorn until we, the future personnel of Flying Cloud, cast off our sleek, smart (and that didn't last for long) catamaran from the rickety jetty on the shore of Lake Misere, under the derisive stares of the local fishermen in their shabby, power-driven craft, to put in hour after hour, day after day of tacking and wearing, running free, sailing close-hauled and all the rest of it.

But Ralph was good. I have to admit that. I was amazed to learn that so much control of the flimsy, complicated, wind-driven contraption was possible. In my innocence I had always assumed that a sailing vessel could proceed only in a direction exactly opposite to that from which the wind was blowing. I learned better. We all learned better. But I still think that there are easier ways of proceeding from point A to point B, either in deep space or on the water, than under sail.

Yes, all of us had to get a grounding in sail seamanship, Sandra, Doc Jenkins and Smethwick as well as myself. We gathered that Commodore Grimes wasn't finding it easy to find officers for his fine, new ship-after all, even Rim Worlders weren't keen on voyages that would extend over years, even though those years would be objective rather than subjective time. There just weren't that many completely unattached people around. So he'd been dickering with the Astronauts' Guild and got them to agree that anybody, but anybody, could be issued a certificate of competency with respect to the improved Erikson drive.

So we all-and how we hated it!-had to become more or less competent sailors. As I've said, on a sunny world with balmy breezes, blue seas, golden beaches and palm trees it would have been fun. On Lake Misere it wasn't. On Lake Misere it was hard work in miserable conditions-and I still think that it's utterly incredible that in this day and age no heavy weather clothing has yet been devised that will stop the ingress of freezing water between neck and collar, between boot-top and leg.

And when we had all become more or less competent sailors-Ralph called it Part A of our certificates-we thought that the worst was over. How wrong we were! The next stage of our training was to bumble around in yet another archaic contraption, a clumsy, lighter-than-air monstrosity called a blimp. (Like the catamaran, it had been built merely for instructional purposes.) I don't profess to know the origin of the name, but it looked like a blimp. One just couldn't imagine its being called anything else. There was a flaccid bag of gas-helium-shaped like a fat cigar, and from this depended a streamlined cabin that was control room, living quarters and engine room. There was a propeller driven by a small diesel motor, that moved us through the air at a maximum speed of fifty knots. (Our speed over the ground was, of course, governed by wind direction and velocity.) There was

a lot of complicated juggling with gas and ballast. There was the occasion when we were blown off course and drifted helplessly over Port Forlorn just as Rim Hound was coming in. Ralph told us afterwards that had the blimp been hydrogen-filled that would have been our finish; as it was, with our gasbag all but burst by the searing heat of Rim Hound's exhaust, leaking from every seam, we made an ignominious crash landing in Lake Misere, from which dismal puddle we were rescued by the fishermen-who were, of course, highly amused to see us again, and in even more ludicrous circumstances than before.

But the blimp was patched up and again made airworthy-as airworthy as she ever would be, ever could be-and we carried on with our training. And we got the feel of the brute. We neither respected nor loved her, but we came to understand what she could and could not do and, when Ralph had decided that we all (including himself) had passed for Part B of our certificates we proceeded, in the little airship, to Port Erikson on the southern shore of Coldharbor Bay.

There's one thing you can say in favor of the Survey Service boys who first made landings on the Rim Worlds, and you can say the same thing in favor of the first colonists. When it came to dishing out names they were realistic. Lorn . . . Port Forlorn . . . Lake Misere . . . the Great Barrens . . . Mount Desolation . . . Coldharbor Bay . . .

The trip was not a happy one. In spite of the heat from the single diesel the cabin was bitterly cold as we threaded our way over and through the Great Barrens, skirting the jagged, snow-covered peaks, fighting for altitude in the higher passes, jettisoning ballast when dynamic lift proved insufficient and then perforce being obliged to valve gas for the long slant down over the dreary tundra that somebody in the First Expedition had named the Nullarbor Plain.

And there was Coldharbor Bay ahead, a sliver of dull lead inset in the dun rim of the horizon. There was Coldharbor Bay, leaden water under a leaden sky, and a huddle of rawly new buildings along its southern shore, and something else, something big and silvery, somehow graceful, that looked out of place in these drab surroundings.

"The ship," I said unnecessarily. "Flying Cloud"

"Flying Crud!" sneered Doc Jenkins. He was not in a good mood. His normally ruddy face was blue with cold, and a violent pitch and yaw of the ship a few minutes since had upset a cup of scalding coffee (prepared, somehow, by Sandra in her cramped apology for a galley) in his lap. "And what ruddy genius was it," he demanded, "who decided to establish a spaceport in these godforsaken latitudes? Damn it all, it isn't as though we had the Ehrenhaft drive to contend with and lines of magnetic force to worry about. And both old Grimes and you, Ralph, have been harping on the fact-or is it only a theory?-that these fancy lightjammers will be far easier to handle in an atmosphere than a conventional spaceship."

"True," admitted Ralph. "True. But, even so . . . just remember that on Lorn every major center of population is on or near the equator. And there's a certain amount of risk in having conventional spaceports near cities-and the

conventional spaceship isn't one per cent as potentially dangerous as a lightjammer."

"I don't see it," insisted Doc. "To begin with, there's a much smaller pile. A lightjammer is far less dangerous."

"Don't forget what's in the heart of her," said Ralph quietly. "That core of anti-iron. Should the casing be breached, should the antimatter come into contact with normal matter . . ."

He lifted his gloved hands from the wheel in an expressive, explosive gesture. The ship swung off course, dipped and rolled. It was my turn to get a lapful of hot coffee. I decided that there was a lot to be said in favor of the despised drinking bulbs used in deep space.

"Any more questions," asked Ralph, "before we make it landing stations?"

"If you insist on answering with your hands," I said, "no."

He grinned ever so slightly. "All right, then. Now remember, all of you, that this won't be the real thing-but it'll be as near to real as we can make it. To begin with-an upwind approach . . ."

"I can see the windsock," said Sandra, who was using binoculars.

"Where away?"

"A degree or so to starboard of the stern of the ship. On that tower."

"And wind direction?"

"As near south as makes no difference. A following wind."

"Good. Now, Peter, you're in charge of the gas valves, and you, Doc, can handle the ballast . . ."

"The tank's dry," grumbled Jenkins.

"Anything with mass is ballast. Anything. Open a port and have a pile of odds and ends ready to dump. And you, Mr. Smethwick, stand by the hose and pump . . ."

We were over the spaceport now. We could see the administration buildings and the warehouses, the long wharf alongside which lay Flying Cloud. We could see the little waving figures of people. And we could hear, from our telephone, the voice of Commodore Grimes speaking from spaceport control: "What are your intentions, Captain Listowel? The ground crew is standing by for your lines."

"I intend to land on the Bay, sir, to make this a rehearsal of landing the big ship."

"A good idea, captain. Berth ahead of Flying Cloud. Berth ahead of Flying Cloud."

Ralph brought the blimp round in a long curve and lined her up for the beacon at the end of the wharf. He said sharply, "Don't valve any gas

unless I tell you, Peter. That's one thing we shan't be able to do in the real ship." I saw that he was using the control surfaces to drive us down, and I heard the complaining of structural members. But the surface of the water was close now, closer with every second.

"Mr. Smethwick, the hose!"

I couldn't see what was happening, but I could visualize that long tube of plastic snaking down towards the sea. I felt the blimp jump and lift as contact was made and, at Ralph's barked order, valved a cubic centimeter or so of helium. I heard the throbbing whine as the ballast pump started.

We were down then, the boat bottom of the cabin slapping (or being slapped by) the crests of the little waves, and then, a little heavier, we were properly waterborne and taxiing in towards the raw concrete of the new wharf.

It was a good landing-and if good landings could be made in a misshapen little brute like the blimp, then equally good ones should be made in the proud, shining ship that we were approaching.

I thought, with a strong feeling of relief, There's nothing to worry about after all.

I don't know if that sentence is included in any collection of famous last words. If it's not, it should be.

## Chapter 7

We made fast to a couple of bollards at the foot of the steps at the end of the wharf. The blimp lay there quietly enough, her wrinkled hide twitching in the light, eddying breeze; the high warehouse inshore from the quay gave us a good lee. The linesmen ran out a light gangway and we maneuvered the end of it through the cabin door. Smethwick, who had suffered from airsickness during our northward flight, started to hurry ashore. Ralph halted him with a sharp order. Then he said, in a gentler voice, "We all of us have still a lot to learn about the handling of lighter-than-air ships. One thing always to bear in mind is that any weight discharged has to be compensated for." He turned to me, saying, "Peter, stand by the ballast valve. We shouldn't require the pump."

I opened the valve, allowing the water to run into the tank below the cabin deck. I shut it when the water outside was lapping the sill of the open door. Smethwick scrambled out and the ship lurched and lifted. I opened the valve again, and it was Sandra's turn to disembark. Doc Jenkins followed her. Ralph took my place at the valve and I followed the doctor. Finally Ralph, having satisfied himself with the blimp wasn't liable to take off unmanned, joined us on the wharf.

Commodore Grimes was there, muffled in a heavy synthefur coat. With him were two women similarly clad. The super greeted us and then said to Ralph, "A nice landing, Captain Listowel. I hope you do as well with Flying Cloud."

"So do I, sir."

Grimes laughed. "You'd better." He gestured towards the slender, gleaming length of the big ship. "She cost a little more than your little gasbag."

We all stared at her. Yes, she did look expensive. I suppose that it was because she was new. The ships to which we had become used out on the Rim were all second- and even third-hand tonnage, obsolescent Epsilon Class tramps auctioned off by the Interstellar Transport Commission.

Yes, she looked expensive, and she looked new, and she looked odd. She didn't look like a spaceship-or, if she did look like a spaceship she looked like one that, toppling on its vaned landing gear, had crashed on to its side. And yet we felt that this was the way that she should be lying. She reminded me, I decided, of the big commercial submarines used by the Llarsii on their stormy, watery world.

Grimes was still talking. "Captain, I'd like you to meet your new shipmates for the maiden voyage. This is Miss Wayne, of the Port Forlorn Chronicle. And Miss Simmons, your donkey-man . . ."

I looked at the girls curiously and, I must confess, hopefully. Perhaps the voyage would be even more interesting than anticipated. Oh, I know that most planetlubbers have wildly romantic ideas about the function of a catering officer in a starship-but let me assure you that there's precious little romance. Bear in mind that the catering officer is the ship's dietician-and as such she can determine what the behavior of her male shipmates will be. And in most of the ships that I've sailed in the men have conducted themselves like well-behaved geldings. The exceptions have been vessels in which the catering officers, all too conscious of the passage of years and the fading of charms, have taken steps to insure that they, as women, will not be unappreciated. You may not recall the Duchess of Atholl scandal, but I do. Several innocent people took the blame for that unsavory affair and I was one of them. And that was the reason I left the employ of the Waverly Royal Mail and came out to the Rim.

Anyhow, I looked at the two women, thinking (and hoping) that with a little competition in the ship Sandra might ginger up our diet a bit. Martha Wayne was a tall, slim, sleek brunette-and how she managed to look sleek and slim in her shaggy and bulky furs was something of a mystery. But sleek and slim she was. I had read some of her articles in the Chronicle, usually towards the end of a voyage, during that period when any and every scrap of hitherto unread printed matter is seized upon avidly. They'd been just the usual woman's page slush-Home Beautiful, Kitchen Functional, Menu Exotic and all the rest of it. Anyhow, she extended her hand to Ralph as though she expected him to make a low bow and kiss it. He shook it, however, although without much warmth.

Then there was Miss Simmons. ("Call me Peggy," she said at once.) She was short, dumpy in her cold weather clothing. She had thrown back the hood of her parka, revealing a head of tousled, sandy hair. Her face was pretty enough, in an obvious sort of way, and the smudge of dark grease on her right cheek somehow enhanced the prettiness.

"Commodore," said Ralph slowly, "did I understand you to say that Miss Simmons is to be our donkeyman?"

"Yes, captain." Grimes looked slightly embarrassed. "A little trouble with the Institute," he added vaguely.

I could guess right then what the trouble was, and I found later that my guess was right. The Institute of Spatial Engineers would be taking a dim view of the improved Erikson drive, the system of propulsion that would rob its members of their hard-won status. They would refuse to allow even a junior member to sign as donkey-man-and, no doubt, they had been able to bring pressure to bear on other engineering guilds and unions, making sure that no qualified engineer would be available.

But a woman . . .

"It's quite all right, captain," the girl assured him brightly. "I'm it. I had an oil can for a feeding bottle, and when other kids were playing with dolls I was amusing myself with nuts and bolts and wrenches."

"Miss Simmons," explained Grimes, "is the daughter of an old friend of mine. Simmons, of Simmons's Air Car Repair Shop in Port Forlorn. Her father assures me that Peggy is the best mechanic he has working for him."

"Even so . . ." said Ralph. Then-"How is it that Mr. Simmons can bear to part with such a treasure? Objectively speaking, this will be a long voyage."

"The usual trouble, captain," Grimes told him. "A new stepmother . . ."

"I hate the bitch," declared Peggy Simmons. She added quietly, "She's young. No older than me. But when this ship comes back to Lorn I'll still be young, and she-"

"Peggy!" snapped Grimes.

"But it's true, Uncle Andy."

"That will do. I don't think that Captain Listowel is interested in your personal problems. All that he wants is a competent mechanic."

Her face lost its ugly hardness. "And I'm just that, skipper," she grinned.

"All right," said the super briskly. "That's that. Now, if you feel up to it after your flight in that makeshift contraption, I suggest that we make an inspection of the ship."

"Even so . . ." began Ralph.

"Even so," flared Grimes, "I've got you a donkeyman, and a damn good one. And Miss Wayne has been commissioned to write the journal of the maiden voyage, but she's willing to make herself useful. She'll be signing as assistant purser."

"All right, commodore," said Ralph coldly. "You can hand over the ship."

## Chapter 8

Normally, handing over a spaceship is a lengthy business.

But these, we learned, were not normal circumstances. Lloyd's of London

had issued a provisional certificate of spaceworthiness-but this, Grimes told us, was liable to be canceled at the drop of a hat. The great majority of Lloyd's surveyors are engineers, and Flying Cloud was an affront to those arrogant mechanics. She, as far as they were concerned, was an impudent putting back of the clock, an insolent attempt to return to those good old days when the master, in Lloyd's own words, was "master under God" and, in effect, did as he damn well pleased. The speed of a windjammer was in direct ratio to the skill of her master. The speed of a lightjammer would be in direct ratio to the skill of her master. The donkeyman of a windjammer held petty officer's rank only, messing with the boatswain, carpenter and sailmaker. The donkeyman of a lightjammer would be a junior officer only because the merchant navy doesn't run to petty officers. So the Institute of Spatial Engineers didn't like lightjammers. So they had run, squealing piteously, to Lloyd's. So the heirs and successors to that prosperous little coffee house proprietor, acting on the advice of their prejudiced surveyors, would sooner or later-and, quite probably, sooner-get around to revoking that provisional spaceworthiness certificate.

Flying Cloud was Grimes's baby. He had brought back the antimatter from the antimatter systems. He had worked out a way in which it might be used. He had succeeded in convincing his employers that a lightjammer would be the most economical form of interstellar transport. Now it was up to us to prove him right. Once the maiden voyage was completed successfully, Lloyd's would have no excuse for not granting a full certificate.

So we joined a ship already spaceworthy in all respects. While we had been playing around in the catamaran and the blimp, Grimes had achieved wonders. Flying Cloud was fully stored and provisioned. Algae, yeast and tissue cultures were flourishing. The hydroponic tanks would have been a credit to an Empress Class liner. The last of the cargo-an unromantic consignment of zinc ingots for Grollor-was streaming into the ship by way of the main conveyor belt.

We had to take Grimes's word for it that everything was working as it should. Grimes's word, and the word of the Simmons girl, who assured us that she, personally, had checked every piece of machinery. We hoped that they were right, especially since there was some equipment, notably the spars and sails, that could not be actually tested inside an atmosphere in a heavy gravitational field.

Anyhow, that was the way of it. Ralph affixed his autograph to the handing-over form and I, as mate (acting, probably temporary, but not unpaid) witnessed it. And Martha Wayne, as representative of the Port Forlorn Chronicle, made a sound and vision recording of the historic moment. And Doc Jenkins suggested that the occasion called for a drink. Ralph frowned at this and said stiffly that we, who would shortly be taking an untested ship into space, would be well advised to stay sober. Grimes told him not to be so bloody silly, adding that takeoff wasn't due for all of twelve hours. So Sandra went to the little bar at one side of the wardroom and opened the refrigerator and brought out two bottles of champagne. Grimes opened them himself, laughing wryly as the violently expanding carbon dioxide shot the corks up to the deckhead. "And this," he chuckled, "will be the only reaction drive as far as the ship's concerned!" And then, when the glasses were filled, he raised his in a toast. "To Flying Cloud," he

said solemnly, "and to all who sail in her." He emphasized the word sail. "To Flying Cloud," we repeated.

The commodore drained his glass and set it down on the table. There was a sudden sadness in his manner. He said quietly, "Captain Listowel, I'm an outsider here. This is your ship. I'll leave you with your officers to get the hang of her. If you want to know anything, I shall be in my office ashore . . ."

He got slowly to his feet.

"Even so, sir . . ." began Ralph.

"Even so be damned. This is your ship, Listowel. Your donkeyman knows as much about the auxiliary machinery as I do, probably more. And as far as the handling of the sails is concerned, you'll have to make up the rules as you go along." He paused, then said, "But I shall be aboard in the morning to see you off."

He left us then.

"He should have sailed as her first master," said Ralph.

"And returning, still a relatively young man, to find his wife an old woman and his son his senior," said Jenkins. "I can see why we were the mugs. We have no ties."

"Even so . . ." said Ralph doubtfully.

"Come off it, skipper. There's nobody to miss us if this scow comes a gutser. We're expendable, even more so than the average Rim Runner officer. And that's saying plenty."

Ralph grinned reluctantly and gestured to Sandra to refill the glasses. He admitted, "I do believe you're right, Doc. I really do . . ." But the moment of relaxation didn't last long. His manner stiffened again. "All right, all of you. Finish your drinks, and then we'll get busy. I'd like you and Doc, Sandra, to make sure that all's well as far as the farm's concerned. I could be wrong, but I didn't think that the yeasts looked too healthy. And you're the mate, Peter; ballast and cargo are your worry. Just make sure that everything's going as it should."

"Aye, aye, sir," I replied in what I hoped was a seaman-like manner.

He scowled at me, then turned to the donkeyman. "And you, Miss Simmons, can give me another run-through on the various auxiliaries."

"And what can I do, captain?" asked the journalist.

"Just keep out of the way, Miss Wayne," he told her, not unkindly.

\* \* \*

She attached herself to me. Not that I minded-I don't suppose that any ship's officer, in any class of ship in any period, has really objected to having an attractive woman getting in his hair. She followed me as I made



my way to the supercargo's office. It was already occupied; Trantor, one of the company's wharf superintendents, was there, sitting well back in the swivel chair, his feet on the desk, watching a blonde disrobing on the tiny screen of the portable TV set that he had hung on the bulkhead.

He started to take his feet off the desk slowly when he saw me-and with more haste when he saw Martha Wayne. He reached out to switch off his TV.

"Don't bother," said Martha Wayne. "I've often wondered just who does watch that program. Nobody will admit it."

Nevertheless, he switched off. He saved face by sneering at the new braid on my epaulettes. "Ah," he said, "the chief officer. In person. From office boy to mate in one easy lesson."

"There was more than one lesson, Trantor," I told him. "And they weren't all that easy."

They hadn't been easy at all, I remembered. There had been all the messing around in that cranky catamaran, and the messing around in that crankier blimp, and the long nights of study, and the training that we had undergone in mock-ups of the various control compartments of the ship. The model of the supercargo's office, I realized, had been extremely accurate. Ignoring Trantor, I inspected the gauges. Numbers 1 and 7 ballast tanks were out; 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 were still in. There was no way of ascertaining the deadweight tonnage of cargo loaded save by tally and draft-and the columns of mercury in the draft indicator told me that if steps were not taken, and soon, Flying Cloud would shortly look even more like a submarine than she already did.

I went to the control panel, opened the exhaust valves to Numbers 2 and 6 tanks, and pressed the button that started the pump. I heard the throbbing whine of it as it went into action, saw the mercury columns begin to fall in their graduated tubes.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" demanded Trantor.

"I'm the mate," I told him. "You said so. Remember?"

"If you're taking over," he said huffily, "I might as well get ashore."

"You might as well," I agreed. "But, first of all, I want you to come with me to make sure that the cargo is properly stowed and secured."

"Fussy, aren't you?" he growled.

"That's what I'm paid for," I said.

"But what is all this about stowage?" asked Martha Wayne.

"We have to watch it here," I told her. "Even more so than in a conventional ship. In the normal spaceship, down is always towards the stern, always-no matter if you're sitting on your backside on a planetary surface or accelerating in deep space. But here, when you're on the surface or navigating in a planetary atmosphere, down is vertically at right angles

to the long axis. Once we're up and out, however, accelerating, down will be towards the stern."

"I see," she said, in that tone of voice that conveys the impression that the speaker doesn't.

"I suppose you know that your pump is still running," said Trantor.

"Yes. I know. It should be. It'll run till the tanks are out, and then it'll shut itself off."

"All right. It's your worry," he said.

"It's my worry," I agreed. "And now we'll look at the stowage."

With Trantor in the lead, we made our way along the alleyway to the hold. We went through the airtight door, and along the tunnel through the cargo bins. There was nothing to worry about-but that was due more to Grimes's foresight than to Trantor's efficiency. As each bin had been filled, the locking bars-stout metal rods padded with resilient plastic-had slid into place.

As we walked between the bins, the words of that ancient poem chased through my mind. Argosies with magic sails, pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales . . . But there weren't any costly bales here. There were drab, prosaic ingots of lead and zinc and cadmium, cargo for which there was a steady demand but no mad rush. Oh, well, we still had the magic sails.

The stevedore foreman, who had been juggling another set of locking bars into position, looked up from his work. He said cheerfully, "She'll be all right, mister."

"I hope so," I said.

"Just another twenty tons of zinc," he said, "an' that's it. You can have her then. An' welcome to her. I've loaded some odd ships in my time, but this'n's the oddest . . ."

"She'll be all right." I repeated his words.

"That's your worry, mister," he said. "Can't say that I'd like to be away on a voyage for all of twenty years." He gave Martha Wayne an appraising stare. "Although I allow that it might have its compensations."

"Or complications," I said.

Martha Wayne had her portable recorder out. She said to the foreman, "I take it that you've loaded this ship, Mr. . . .?"

"Kilmer's the name, miss."

"Mr. Kilmer. I wonder if I might ask you for your impressions of the vessel?"

"After the loading is finished, Miss Wayne," I told her.

"From spacefaring office boy to mate in one easy lesson," said Trantor,

grinning nastily.

## Chapter 9

We finally got to our bunks that night, staggering to our cabins after a scratch meal of coffee and sandwiches in the wardroom. Ralph had driven us hard, and he had driven himself hard. He had insisted on testing everything that could be tested, had made his personal inspection of everything capable of being inspected. Ballast tanks had been flooded and then pumped out. The ingenious machinery that swiveled furniture and fittings through an arc of ninety degrees when transition was made from atmospheric to spatial flight was operated. The motors driving the airscrews were given a thorough trial.

At the finish of it all, Doc and Smethwick were on the verge of mutiny, Sandra was finding it imperative to do things in her galley by herself, and Martha Wayne was looking as though she were already regretting having accepted this assignment. Only Peggy Simmons seemed to be enjoying herself. As well as being obviously in love with her machinery, she appeared to have gotten a crush on Ralph. I overheard Doc mutter to Smethwick, "Following him round like a bitch in heat . . ." Oh, well, I thought to myself, Sandra will soon fix all that once she starts turning out the balanced diet.

Anyhow, with Ralph at last more or less happy about everything, we bolted our sandwiches, gulped our coffee and then retired. I was just about to switch off the light at the head of my bunk when there was a gentle tapping at my door. My first thought was that it was Ralph, that the master had thought of something else that might go wrong and had come to worry his mate about it. But Ralph would have knocked in a firm, authoritative manner.

Sandra? I wondered hopefully.

"Come in," I called softly.

It was Peggy Simmons. She was dressed in a bulky, unglamorous robe. She looked like a little girl-and not one of the nymphette variety either. She looked like a fat little girl, although I was prepared to admit that it could have been the shapeless thing that she was wearing that conveyed this impression.

She said, "I hope you weren't asleep, Peter."

"I wasn't," I admitted grudgingly. "Not quite."

She said, "I just had to talk to somebody." She sat on the chair by my bunk, and helped herself to a cigarette from the box on the table. She went on, "This is all so strange. And tomorrow, after we get away, it will be even stranger."

"What isn't strange?" I countered. "Come to think of it, it's the normal that's really strange."

"You're too deep for me," she laughed ruefully. "But I came to talk to you

because you're not clever . . ."

"Thank you," I said coldly.

"No. That wasn't quite what I meant, Peter. You are clever-you must be, to be chief officer of a ship like this. And I'm clever too-but with machinery. But the others-Sandra and Martha Wayne and Doc-are so . . . so . . ."

"Sophisticated," I supplied.

"Yes. That's the word. Sophisticated. And poor Claude Smethwick is the reverse. So unworldly. So weird, even . . ."

"And Ralph?" I prodded.

Her face seemed to light up and to cloud simultaneously, although there must have been a slight lag. "Oh, he's . . . exceptional? Yes. Exceptional. But I could hardly expect a man like him to want to talk to a girl like me. Could I?"

And why the hell not? I thought. Put on some makeup, and throw something seductively translucent over the body beautiful instead of that padded tent, and you might get somewhere. But not with me, and not tonight, Josephine . . .

"I haven't known many spacemen," she went on. "Only the commodore, really, and he's so much one of the family that he hardly counts. But there's always been something about you all, those few of you whom I have met. I think I know what it is. You all have pasts . . ."

And how! I thought.

"Like Ralph. Like the captain, I mean. You and he have been shipmates for a long time, Peter, haven't you? But I can't help wondering why such a capable man should come out to the Rim . . ."

And him old enough to be your father, I thought. And then I remembered what we had learned of Peggy Simmons' own story. It all added up. Ralph, by virtue of personality as well as rank, was the ideal Father Image. Sticky, I thought. Definitely sticky.

"Women," I said.

"Women?"

"Yeah. That's the usual reason why we all come out to the Rim."

"Men," she said, "even the most brilliant men, are such fools where women of a certain class are concerned."

Like your father, I thought.

"With the right woman," she went on, "they could go a long way . . ."

Too right, I thought. Too damn right. All the way to the next galaxy but three, under full sail, and with the right woman manning the pumps or whatever it is that the donkeyman does . . .

She said wistfully, "I wish . . ."

"You wish what, Peggy?"

"Oh, I . . . I don't know, Peter . . ."

I wish that you'd get the hell out of here, I thought. I wish that I could get some sleep.

"Have you a drink?" she asked. "A nightcap, to make me sleep . . ."

"In that locker," I told her, "there's a bottle of brandy. Medicinal. Get out two glasses and I'll have a drink with you. I could use some sleep myself."

She splashed brandy generously into the glasses and handed one to me.

"Down the hatch," I said.

"Down the hatch," she repeated. Then she demanded suddenly, "What haven't I got, Peter?"

I knew what she meant. "As far as I can see," I told her, "you have all the standard equipment. As far as I can see."

She said abruptly, "She's with him. In his cabin."

I felt a stab of jealousy. "Who?" I asked.

"Sandra."

So they managed to keep it a secret in Rim Dragon, I thought. Not that there was any need to. There's nothing in the regulations that says that officers shall not sleep with each other, provided that it doesn't get in the way of their duties . . .

I said, "But they've known each other for years."

"And I'm just the small girl around the ship. The newcomer. The outsider."

"Miss Simmons," I said severely, "people who affix their autographs to the articles of agreement are engaged for one reason only: to take the ship from point A to point B as required by the lawful commands of the master. Who sleeps with whom-or who doesn't sleep with whom-is entirely outside the scope of the Merchant Shipping Act."

Her robe had somehow become unfastened, and I could see that she did, in fact, possess the usual equipment and that it was in no way substandard. She knew that I was looking at her, but she made no attempt to cover herself. Instead she got to her feet and stood there for a moment or so, posing rather self-consciously and awkwardly, before going to the locker for the brandy bottle. She refilled our glasses, the rosy nipple of her right breast almost brushing my face as she stooped. I restrained myself from pulling her down to me.

"One for the road," I said firmly.

"For the road?" she echoed.

"For the road, Peggy. We're both of us tired, and we have another heavy day ahead of us tomorrow."

"But . . ." She might just as well not have been wearing the robe.

"Damn it all, girl," I exploded, "I may be only the mate, and an ex-purser at that, but I have my pride. You've been making it bloody obvious all day that you were just dying to serve yourself up to Ralph on a silver tray and trimmed with parsley. Sandra beat you to Ralph's bed, so I'm second choice. Or do you think that you're hurting him in some obscure way by giving me what he didn't take? Either way, I'm not playing. So finish your drink like a good girl and go and turn in. By yourself."

"If that's the way you want it," she said coldly.

"That's the way that I want it," I said coldly.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight," I said.

She set her empty glass down gently on the table. Her face was pale and a tiny muscle was twitching in her left cheek. With her robe again belted securely around her she looked once more like a small girl-like a small girl who is convinced she has been unjustly spanked.

She said, "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

I said, "And I'm sorry that . . . oh, never mind."

"Goodnight," she said again.

"Goodnight," I replied again.

She left then, closing the door quietly behind her. I finished my drink and switched out the light. But I didn't get to sleep for a long time. And I should have slept well, I knew, had I taken the opportunity for the loosening of nervous tension in the most effective way there is. My absurdly puritanical attitude (a hangover from that sordid affair on Duchess of Atholl?) had done no good to anybody at all, including myself.

And it was-although this was unforeseeable-to have far-reaching consequences.

## Chapter 10

The next morning Sandra was in one of her house-wifely moods; these had been the occasion for jocular comment now and again in Rim Dragon. She called each of us individually, with tea and toast. Now that I knew the reasons for these spasms of domesticity I wasn't any happier. "Good morning, Peter," she said brightly (too brightly) as she switched on my light. "Rise and shine for the Cluster Line." (She had served in that outfit before joining Rim Runners.) "I hope you slept well."

"I didn't," I growled. I glowered at her from eyes that probably looked as bleary as they felt. "I hope that you slept well."

"But of course," she said sweetly, and left me to my tea.

By the time the breakfast gong sounded, I had showered and shaved and dressed in the rig of the day and was feeling a little better. This was our first real meal aboard the ship and something of a ceremonious occasion. Ralph was at the head of the table and rather conscious, I could see, of the gleaming new braid on his epaulettes. I sat down at his right, with Sandra, when she wasn't bustling to and from the pantry, opposite me. The others took their places, with Peggy Simmons, as the most junior member of the ship's company, sitting at the foot of the table. She blushed when I said good morning to her. I hoped that none of the others noticed, although Doc Jenkins, who never missed much of what was going on, leered in my direction.

"This," said Ralph rather stuffily before we could make a start on the eggs and bacon, "is a momentous occasion."

"We still have to get this bitch off the ground," Jenkins told him.

"Off the water, you mean," I amended.

"Even so . . ." began Ralph severely.

"Good morning to you all," said a familiar voice. We turned to see that Grimes had just entered the wardroom.

We got to our feet.

"Carry on," he said. "Don't mind me."

"Some breakfast, sir?" asked Ralph.

"No thank you. But some coffee, if I may, captain."

He pulled up a chair and Sandra attended to his needs.

He said, "You'll forgive me for talking shop, but I take it that you're secured for space?"

"We are, sir," Ralph told him.

"Good. Well, I have no wish to interfere with your arrangements, but there must be no delay."

"We can take off now, sir, if you wish," said Ralph, pushing away his plate with the half-eaten food.

"For the love of all the odd gods of the Galaxy," pleaded Grimes, "finish your breakfast. I intend to enjoy at least one more cup of this excellent coffee. But, while you're eating, I'll put you in the picture." He patted his lips with the napkin Sandra had given him. "Throughout my career I've never been overly fussy about treading on corns, but I seem to have been trampling on some very tender ones of late. This is the way of it. My spies inform me that this very morning, Metropolitan Standard Time, the Flying Cloud issue is going to be raised in the Senate. The Honorable Member for Spelerville will demand an inquiry into the squandering of public money on

the construction of an utterly impracticable spaceship. And his crony, the Honorable Member for Ironhill East, will back him up and demand that the ship be held pending the inquiry . . ."

"Amalgamated Rockets," said Martha Wayne. "And Interstellar Drives, Incorporated."

"Precisely," agreed Grimes. "Well, I don't think that they'll be able to get things moving prior to your takeoff, captain-but if you should have to return to surface for any reason, or even if you hang in orbit, there's a grave risk that you'll be held. I want there to be no hitches."

"There will be none," said Ralph stiffly.

"Good. And when do you intend getting upstairs?"

"At the advertised time, sir, 0900 hrs."

"And you're quite happy about everything?"

"Yes, sir. Even so . . ."

"Every spaceman always feels that 'even so'-otherwise he wouldn't be worth a damn as a spaceman. (Some more coffee, please, if you'll be so good. Excellent.) I suppose that I'll still be around when you return. I hope so. But I shall be getting your voyage reports by way of the psionic radio . . ."

"I'm surprised, commodore," said Martha Wayne, "that the ship hasn't been fitted with the Carlotti equipment."

"It wouldn't work," Grimes told her. "It will run only in conjunction with the Mannschenn drive." He turned to the telepath. "So you're the key man, Mr. Smethwick."

Claude grinned feebly and said, "As long as you don't expect me to bash a key, sir."

We all laughed. His ineptitude with anything mechanical was notorious.

Grimes got to his feet reluctantly. "I'll not get in your hair any longer. You all have jobs to do." He said, as he shook hands with Ralph, "You've a good ship, Listowel. And a good crew. Look after them both."

"I'll do that," promised Ralph.

"I won't say goodbye," said Grimes. "Au revoir is better."

He swung away abruptly and walked quickly out of the wardroom. I hurried after him to escort him to the gangway.

At the airlock he shook hands with me again. He said quietly, "I envy you, Mr. Malcolm. I envy you. If things had been different I'd have been sailing in her. But . . ."

"There are times," I said, "when I envy those who have family ties."

He allowed himself to grin. "You have something there, young man. After



all, one can't have everything. I've a wife and a son, and you have the first of the interstellar lightjammers. I guess that we shall each of us have to make the best of what we've got. Anyhow, look after yourself."

I assured him that I would, and, as soon as he was ashore, I went back inside the ship.

\* \* \*

The takeoff was a remarkably painless procedure.

When the ship was buttoned up and we were at our stations, the linesmen let go our moorings fore and aft. The little winches, obedient to the pressing of buttons in the control room, functioned perfectly. On the screen of the closed-circuit TV I watched the lines snaking in through the fair-leads, saw the cover plates slide into place as the eyes vanished inside our hull. There was no need for any fancy maneuvers; the wind pushed us gently away from the wharf.

"Ballast," ordered Ralph. "Pump 3 and 5."

"Pump 3 and 5," I repeated, opening valves and pressing the starter buttons.

I heard the throbbing of the pumps, watched the mercury fall in the graduated columns of the draft indicator, a twin to the one in the supercargo's office. But we still had negative lift, although we were now floating on the surface like a huge bubble. There was a new feel to the ship, an uneasiness, an expectancy as she stirred and rolled to the low swell. And still the mercury dropped in the transparent tubes until, abruptly, the pulsation of the pumps cut out.

"Number 4, sir?" I asked.

"No, Peter. Not yet. Extrude atmospheric control surfaces."

"Extrude atmospheric control surfaces, sir."

On the screen I saw the stubby wings extend telescopically from the shining hull.

"I thought that you just pumped all ballast and went straight up," said Martha Wayne, who was seated at the radio telephone.

"We could," said Ralph, "we could; but, as I see it, the secret of handling these ships is always to keep some weight up your sleeve. After all, we shall have to make a landing on Grollor. I intend to see if I can get her upstairs on aerodynamic lift." He turned to me. "I don't think that it's really necessary to keep Sandra and Doc on stations in the storeroom and the farm. After all, this isn't a rocket blast-off, and they're supposed to be learning how to handle this scow. Get them up here, will you?"

"And Claude and Peggy?" I asked.

"No. Claude is hopeless at anything but his job, and Miss Simmons had better keep her eye on her mechanical toys."

I gave the necessary orders on the intercom, and while I was doing so the speaker of the RT crackled into life. "Spaceport control to Flying Cloud," we heard. "Spaceport control to Flying Cloud. What is the delay? I repeat: what is the delay?"

The voice was familiar; it belonged to Commodore Grimes. And it was anxious.

"Pass me the mike," said Ralph. He reported quietly, "Flying Cloud to spaceport control. There is no delay. Request permission to take off."

"Take off then, before the barnacles start growing on your bottom!" blustered Grimes.

Ralph grinned and handed the microphone back to Martha. He waited until Sandra and Doc, who had just come into the control room, had belted themselves into their chairs; then he put both hands on the large wheel. "Full ahead port," he ordered. I pressed the starting button, moved the handle hard over, and Ralph turned his wheel to starboard. "Full ahead starboard," he ordered.

The ship came round easily, heading out for the open sea. From the transparent bubble that was the control room we could now see nothing but gray water and gray sky, and the dark line of the horizon towards which we were steering; but on the screen of the closed circuit TV we could watch the huddle of spaceport buildings and the wharf, to which the little blimp was still moored, receding.

With his left hand Ralph held Flying Cloud steady on course; his right moved over the controls on the steering column. And the motion was different now. The ship was no longer rolling or pitching, but, from under us, came the rhythmic slap, slap of the small waves striking our bottom as we lifted clear of the surface. And then that was gone and there was only the clicking of our compass and the muffled, almost inaudible throbbing of our screws.

From the RT came Grimes' voice, "Good sailing, Flying Cloud. Good sailing!"

"Tell him thank you," said Ralph to Martha. Then, characteristically, "Even so, we haven't started to sail yet."

## Chapter 11

We should have spent more time in the atmosphere than we did, getting the feel of the ship. But there was the broadcast that Martha picked up on the RT, the daily transmission of proceedings in the Senate. The Honorable Member for Spelterville was in good form. We heard Flying Cloud described in one sentence as a futuristic fictioneer's nightmare, and in the next as an anachronistic reversion to the dark ages of ocean transport. And then, just to make his listeners' blood run cold, he described in great detail what would happen should she chance to crash in a densely populated area. The casing around the sphere of anti-iron would be ruptured and, the antimatter coming into contact with normal matter, there would be one hell of a big bang. Furthermore, he went on, there was the strong possibility of a chain reaction that would destroy the entire planet.

It would all have been very amusing, but there were far too many cries of approval and support from both Government and Opposition benches-especially when the Honorable Member, after having divulged the information that Flying Cloud was already airborne, demanded that the Government act now.

Ralph, as he listened, looked worried. He said, "Miss Wayne, I think that our receiver has broken down, hasn't it?"

She grinned back at him. "It has. Shall I pull a fuse?"

"Don't bother," he said. "If we get a direct order from the commodore to return to port we shall do so, I suppose. Otherwise . . ."

He had handed over the controls to Doc Jenkins and myself; I was steering and Doc was functioning, not too inefficiently, as altitude coxswain. We were rising in a tight spiral, and below us was a snowy, almost featureless field of altocumulus. Above us was the sky, clear and dark, with the great lens of the Galaxy already visible although the sun had yet to set. So far all had gone well and smoothly, although it was obvious that in order to break free of the atmosphere we should have to valve more ballast.

Suddenly Sandra cried out, pointing downwards.

We all looked through the transparent deck of the control room and saw that something small and black had broken through the overcast. A tiny triangle it was, a dart, rather, and at its base was a streak of blue fire bright even against the gleaming whiteness of the cloud. Ralph managed to bring the big, mounted binoculars to bear.

"Air force markings," he muttered. "One of the rocket fighters."

Somebody muttered something about "bloody flyboys."

"Better have the transceiver working," ordered Ralph.

Hard on his words came a voice from the RT. "Officer commanding Defense Wing 7 to master of Flying Cloud. Return at once to your berth. Return at once to your berth."

"Master of Flying Cloud to unidentified aircraft," replied Ralph coldly. "Your message received."

The plane was closer now, gaining on us rapidly. I watched it until a sharp reprimand from Ralph caused me to return my attention to the steering. But I could still listen, and I heard the airman say, "Return at once to your berth. That is an order."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I shall be obliged to shoot you down." This was followed by a rather unpleasant chuckle. "After all, captain, you're a big target and a slow one."

"And if you do shoot us down," said Ralph reasonably, "what then? We are liable to fall anywhere. And you know that the anti-iron that we carry makes us an atomic bomb far more powerful than any fission or fusion

device ever exploded by man to date." He covered the microphone with his hand, remarking, "That's given him something to think about. But he can't shoot us down, anyhow. If he punctures the ballast tanks or knocks a few pieces off the hull we lose our negative lift . . . and if he should rupture the casing around the anti-iron . . ."

"What then?" asked Martha Wayne.

"It'll be the last thing he'll ever do-and the last thing that we shall ever experience."

"He's getting bloody close," grumbled Doc. "I can see the rockets mounted on his wings, and what look like a couple of cannon-"

"Comply with my orders!" barked the voice from the RT.

"Sandra," said Ralph quietly, "stand by the ballast controls."

"I give you ten seconds," we heard. "I have all the latest reports and forecasts. If I shoot you down here you will fall somewhere inside the ice cap. There's no risk of your dropping where you'll do any damage. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

"Jettison," ordered Ralph quietly.

"Valves open," reported Sandra.

Looking down, I could see the water gushing from our exhausts-a steady stream that thinned to a fine spray as it fell. I could see, too, the deadly black shape, the spearhead on its shaft of fire that was driving straight for our belly. And I saw the twinkle of flame at the gun muzzles as the automatic cannon opened up, the tracer that arched towards us with deceptive laziness. So he wasn't using his air-to-air missiles, that was something to be thankful for. He wasn't using his air-to-air missiles-yet.

The ship shuddered-and I realized, dimly, that we had been hit. There was an alarm bell shrilling somewhere, there was the thin, high scream of escaping atmosphere. There was the thudding of airtight doors slamming shut and, before the fans stopped, there was the acrid reek of high explosive drifting through the ducts. Then, with incredible swiftness, the aircraft was falling away from us, diminishing to the merest speck against the gleaming expanse of cloud. She belatedly fired her rockets, but they couldn't reach us now. We were up and clear, hurled into the interstellar emptiness by our antigravity. We were up and clear, and already Lorn was no more than a great ball beneath us, a pearly sphere glowing against the blackness of space. We were up and clear and outward bound-but until we could do something about getting the ship under control we were no more than a derelict.

\* \* \*

Things could have been worse.

Nobody was injured, although Peggy had been obliged to scramble fast into a spacesuit. There were several bad punctures in the pressure hull, but these could be patched. There was a consignment of steel plates in our

cargo, and our use of them in this emergency would be covered. The loss of atmosphere could be made good from our reserve bottles. It was unfortunate that we were now in a condition of positive buoyancy rather than the neutral buoyancy that Ralph had planned for the voyage-but, he assured us, he had already worked out a landing technique for use in such circumstances. (Whether or not it would prove practicable we still had to find out.)

So, clad in space armor and armed with welding torches, Peggy and I turned to render the ship airtight once more. As mate I was in official charge of repairs, but I soon realized that my actual status was that of welder's helper. It was Peggy Simmons who did most of the work. A tool in her hands was an extension of her body-or, even, an extension of her personality. She stitched metal to metal with the delicate precision that an ancestor of hers might have displayed with needle, thread and fine fabric.

I watched her with something akin to envy-and it was more than her manual dexterity that I envied. She had something that occupied all her attention. I had not. Although it was foolish, every now and again I had to throw back the welder's mask and look about me. I was far from happy. This was not the first time that I had been outside in deep space, but it was the first time that I had been outside on the Rim. It was the emptiness that was so frightening. There was our sun, and there was Lorn (and it seemed to me that they were diminishing visibly as I watched) and there was the distant, dim-glowing Galactic lens-and there was nothing. We were drifting towards the edge of the dark in a crippled ship, and we should never (I thought) make it back to warmth and comfort and security.

I heard Peggy's satisfied grunt in my helmet phones and wrenched my eyes away from the horrid fascination of the ultimate emptiness. She had finished the last piece of welding, I saw, and she straightened up with a loud sigh. She stood there, anchored by the magnetic soles of her boots to the hull, a most unfeminine figure in her bulky suit. She reached out to me, and the metallic fingers of her glove grated on my shoulder plate. She pulled me to her, touched her helmet to mine. I heard her whisper, "Switch off."

I didn't understand what she wanted at first-and then, after the third repetition, nudged the switch of my suit radio with my chin. She said, her voice faint and barely audible, "Do you think that this will make any difference?"

"Of course," I assured her. "We can bring pressure up to normal throughout the ship now."

"I didn't mean that!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Then what the hell did you mean?" I demanded.

"Do you think that this will make any difference to Ralph's-the captain's-attitude towards me? After all, the other two women weren't much use, were they?"

"Neither was I," I admitted sourly.

"But you're a man." She paused. "Seriously, Peter, do you think that this repair job will help? With Ralph, I mean . . ."

"Seriously, Peggy," I told her, "it's time that we were getting back inside. The others are probably watching us and wondering what the hell we're playing at." I added, "There's never been a case of seduction in hard vacuum yet-but there's always a first time for everything."

"Don't be funny!" she flared. Then, her voice softening, "There's an old saying: The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. It could be that the way to a space captain's heart is through his ship."

"Could be," I admitted. "Could be. But Ralph won't love either of us for dawdling out here when he's itching to clap on sail. Come on, let's report that the job's finished and get back in." I switched on my suit radio again.

Before I could speak I heard Ralph's voice. Even the tinny quality of the helmet phones couldn't disguise his bad temper. "What the hell do you two think you're doing? Standing there hand in hand, admiring the scenery . . . Mr. Malcom, are the repairs finished? If so, report at once and then return inboard."

"Repairs completed, sir," I said.

"Then let's not waste any more time," suggested Ralph coldly.

We didn't waste any more time. Carefully, sliding our feet over the metal skin, we inched towards the open airlock valve. Peggy went in first and I handed the tools and the unused materials to her. I followed her into the little compartment, and I was pleased when the door slid shut, cutting out the sight of the black emptiness.

The needle on the illuminated dial quivered and then jerked abruptly to the ship's working pressure.

\* \* \*

We were all of us in the control room-all save Peggy, who had been ordered, somewhat brusquely, to look after her motors. From our sharp prow the long, telescopic mast had already been protruded, the metal spar on the end of which was mounted the TV camera. On the big screen we could see the image of Flying Cloud as she appeared from ahead. I thought that it was a pity that we did not have other cameras that would allow us to see her in profile, to appreciate the gleaming slenderness of her.

"The first problem," said Ralph, in his best lecture-room manner, "is to swing the ship. As you are all, no doubt, aware, we possess no gyroscopes. Even so, such devices are not essential. The master of a windjammer had no gyroscopes to aid him in setting and steering a course . . ."

"He had a rudder," I said, "acting upon and acted upon by the fluid medium through which his hull progressed."

Ralph glared at me. "A resourceful windjammer master," he stated flatly, "was not utterly dependent upon his rudder. Bear in mind the fact that his ship was not, repeat not, a submarine and, therefore, moved through no

less than two fluid mediums, air and water. His rudder, as you have been so good to tell us, acted upon and was acted upon by the water in which it was immersed. But his sails acted upon and were acted upon by the air." He paused for breath. "We, in this vessel, may consider light a fluid medium. Now, if you will observe carefully . . ."

We observed. We watched Ralph's capable hands playing over the control panel. We watched the TV screen. We saw the spars extend from the hull so that the ship, briefly, had the appearance of some spherical, spiny monster. And then the roller reefing gear came into play and the sails were unfurled-on one side a dazzling white, on the other jet black. We could feel the gentle centrifugal force as the ship turned about her short axis, bringing the Lorn sun dead astern.

Then spars rotated and, as far as that camera mounted at the end of its telescopic mast was concerned, the sails were invisible. Their white surfaces were all presented to the Lorn sun, to the steady photon gale. We were running free, racing before the interstellar wind.

I realized that Ralph was singing softly:

"Way, hey, and up she rises,

Way, hey, and up she rises,

Way, hey, and up she rises . . .

Early in the morning!"

## Chapter 12

So there we were, bowling along under full sail, running the easting down. In some ways the Erikson drive was a vast improvement over the Mannschenn drive. There was not that continuous high whine of the ever-precessing gyroscopes, there was not that uneasy feeling of d,j... vu that is a side effect of the Mannschenn drive's temporal precession field. Too, we could look out of the control room and see a reasonable picture of the Universe as it is and not, in the case of the Galactic lens, something like a Klein bottle fabricated by a drunken glass blower.

Flying Cloud was an easy ship, once the course had been set, once she was running free before the photon gale. She was an easy ship-as a ship, as an assemblage of steel and plastic and fissioning uranium. But a ship is more than the metals and chemicals that have gone into her construction. In the final analysis it is the crew that make the ship-and Flying Cloud was not happy.

It was the strong element of sexual jealousy that was the trouble. I did my best to keep my own yardarm clear, but I could observe-and feel jealous myself. It was obvious that Sandra was captain's lady. It was obvious, too, that both Martha Wayne and Peggy Simmons had aspired to that position and that both were jealous. And Doc Jenkins couldn't hide the fact, for all his cynicism, that he would have welcomed a roll in the hay with Martha. The only one who was really amused by it all was Smethwick. He drifted into the Control Room during my watch and said, "Ours is a happy ship,

ours is."

"Are you snooping?" I demanded sharply. "If you are, Claude, I'll see to it, personally, that you're booted out of the service."

He looked hurt. "No, I'm not snooping. Apart from the regulations, it's a thing I wouldn't dream of doing. But even you must be sensitive to the atmosphere, and you're not a telepath."

"Yes," I agreed. "I am sensitive." I offered him a cigarette, took and lit one myself. "But what's new? Anything?"

"The flap seems to have died down on Lorn," he told me. "We're a fait accompli. Old Grimes got Livitski-he's the new Port Forlorn Psionic Radio Officer-to push a message through to wish us well and to tell us that he has everything under control at his end."

"Have you informed the master?" I asked.

"He's in his quarters," he said. "I don't think that he wants to be disturbed."

"Like that," I said.

"Like that," he said.

"Oh," I said.

We sat in silence-there was still enough acceleration to enable us to do so without using seat belts-smoking. I looked out of the transparency at the blackness, towards the faint, far spark that was the Grollor sun. Claude looked at nothing. I heard the sound of feet on the control room deck, turned and saw that the faint noise had been made by Peggy Simmons. She said, "I'm sorry. I . . . I thought that you were alone, Peter . . ."

"Don't let me interfere with love's young dream," grinned Smethwick, getting to his feet.

"You've a dirty mind!" flared the girl.

"If it is dirty," he told her nastily, "it's from the overflow from other people's minds. But I'll go away and leave you to it."

"I'm on watch," I said virtuously. "And, in any case, Peggy has probably come here to report some mechanical malfunction. Or something."

"Yes," she said.

She dropped into the chair that had been vacated by the telepath, accepted a cigarette from my pack. I waited until Claude was gone and then asked, "What's the trouble, Peggy?"

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing mechanical, that is. Although I should check some of the wiring where the shell splinters pierced the inner sheathing."

"Then why don't you?" I asked.



"Because," she told me, "for the first few days in space one has more important things to worry about. There's the file, and the auxiliary machinery, and . . ."

"Surely the wiring is part of the auxiliary machinery," I pointed out.

"Not this wiring. It's the power supply to the trimming and reefing gear-and we won't be using that for a while, not until we make landfall."

"Planetfall," I corrected.

"Ralph says landfall," she told me.

"He would," I said. "He must have brought at least a couple of trunks full of books about windjammers-fact, fiction and poetry-away with him. Mind you, some of it is good." I quoted:

"I must go down to the sea again,

To the lonely sea and the sky,

And all I ask is a tall ship

And a star to steer her by . . ."

I gestured widely towards the Grollor sun, the distant spark that, thanks to the Doppler effect, was shining with a steely glitter instead of its normal ruddiness. I said, "There's his star to steer by." I thumped the arm of my chair. "And here's his tall ship."

"And so he has everything he wants," she said.

"Everything." I decided to be blunt. "He's got his tall ship, and he's got his star to steer by, and he's got his woman."

"But," she said, "I could give him so much more."

"Peggy," I admonished, "don't kid yourself. You're attractive, and you're capable-but Sandra is rather more than attractive. And she's a good cook. Take my advice: just forget any school-girlish ideas you may have of becoming the captain's lady. Make this voyage-after all, you've no option now-and then get the hell out . . ."

"And marry and raise a family," she concluded. "But I don't want to, Peter. I don't want to. I don't want to be the wife of some grubby little clerk or mechanic and spend all my remaining days on Lorn."

"All right," I said, "if that's the way you feel about it. But this is an order, Peggy. Lay off Ralph. We're probably in enough trouble already without having triangles added to our worries."

She took a cigarette from my pack, lit it and put it to her mouth. She stared at the eddying wisps of smoke. She said, "That poetry you quoted. Tall ships and stars. That's what Ralph really wants, isn't it?"

"Tall ships and stars and the trimmings," I said.

"Never mind the trimmings," she told me. "And when it comes to trimmings, I can out-trim Sandra."

"Peggy," I said, "you can't. You're not . . . experienced."

Her face lit up briefly with a flash of humor. "And whose fault is that?" she asked. Then, soberly, "But I can give him real trimmings. Any woman can sprawl in bed, arms and legs wide open-but I'm the woman who can make Ralph, and his ship, go down in history."

"Judging by the flap when we shoved off," I said, "they already have."

She said, "Correct me if I'm wrong-but the Erikson drive, as it stands, will never be a commercial success. It takes far too long for a cargo, even a non-perishable cargo for which there's no mad rush, to be carted from point A to point B. And there's the problem of manning, too. As far as this ship was concerned, Uncle Andy was able to assemble a bunch of misfits with no close ties for the job, people who wouldn't give a damn if the round voyage lasted a couple of objective centuries. But it mightn't be so easy to find another crew for another lightjammer. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said, after a pause.

She went on, "I'm new to space, but I've read plenty. I'm no physicist, but I have a rough idea of the modus operandi of the various interstellar drives. And, so far, there's been no faster-than-light drive."

"What!" I exclaimed.

"No, there hasn't. I'm right, Peter. The basic idea of the Ehrenhaft drive was that of a magnetic particle trying to be in two places at the same time in a magnetic field or current, the ship being the particle. But, as far as I can gather, space was warped so that she could do just that. I couldn't follow the math, but I got the general drift of it. And then, of course, there's the Mannschenn drive-but there the apparent FTL speeds are achieved by tinkering with time."

"Hmm," I grunted. "Hmm."

"Getting away from machinery," she said, "and back to personalities, Ralph loves his ship. I'm sure that if he had to make a choice between Sandra and Flying Cloud it wouldn't be Flying Cloud left in the lurch. But . . . but what do you think he'd feel about a woman who made him the captain of the first real FTL starwagon?"

I said, "You'd better see Doc on your way aft. He stocks quite a good line in sedative mixtures."

She said, "You're laughing at me."

"I'm not," I assured her. "But, Peggy, even I, and I'm no physicist, can tell you that's it quite impossible to exceed the speed of light. As you have already pointed out, we can cheat, but that's all. And in this ship we can't even cheat. We can no more outrun light than a windjammer could outrun the wind that was her motive power." I pointed to a dial on the panel before me. "That's our log. It works by Doppler effect. At the moment our

speed is Lume 0.345 and a few odd decimals. It's building up all the time, and fast. By the end of the watch it should be about Lume 0.6 . . ."

She said, "A fantastic acceleration."

"Isn't it? By rights we should be spread over the deck plates like strawberry jam. But, thanks to the antigravity, this is almost an inertialess drive. Anyhow, thanks to our utterly weightless condition, we may achieve Lume 0.9 recurring. But that's as high as we can possibly get."

"I see," she said doubtfully. Then she added, "But . . ." She shrugged and said, "Oh, never mind."

She got up to leave.

"Thanks for dropping in." I said.

"And thanks for the fatherly advice," she said.

"Think nothing of it," I told her generously.

"I shan't," she said, with what I belatedly realized was deliberate ambiguity.

And then she was gone.

## Chapter 13

It was a couple of mornings later as measured by our chronometer, and, after a not very good breakfast, I was making rounds. It's odd how that unappetizing meal sticks in my memory. Sandra was acting third mate now, and Ralph had decreed that Martha Wayne take over as catering officer. And Martha, as the old saying goes, couldn't boil water without burning it. Sandra's scrambled eggs had always been a delight-fluffy but not watery, with the merest hint of garlic, prettied up with chopped parsley and paprika, piled high on crisp, lavishly buttered toast. The less said about Martha's scrambled eggs the better.

Anyhow, I was not in a good mood as I made my way aft from the wardroom. Flying Cloud was still accelerating slightly, so "down" was aft. Rather to my disappointment I discovered nothing with which to find fault in the farm, the compartment housing the hydroponic tanks and the yeast and tissue-culture vats. I hurried through the antimatter room—frankly, that huge, spherical casing surrounded by great horseshoe magnets always gave me the shivers. I knew what was inside it, and knew that should it ever make contact with normal matter we should all go up in a flare of uncontrolled and uncontrollable energy. In the auxiliary machinery space I did start finding fault. It was obvious that Peggy had done nothing as yet about removing the splinter-pierced panels of the internal sheathing to inspect the wiring.

But there was no sign of Peggy.

I continued aft, through the reactor room and then into the tunnel that led to the extreme stern. As I clambered down the ladder I heard the clinking of tools and the sound of a voice upraised in song. It was Doc Jenkins' not

unpleasant tenor.

"Sally Brown, she's a bright mulatter-

Way, hey, roll and go!

She drinks rum and chews terbaccer-

Spend my money on Sally Brown!

"Sally Brown, she's a proper lady-

Way, hey, roll and go!

Got a house right full o' yaller babies-

Spend my money on Sally Brown!"

I dropped the last few feet into the transom space, landing with a faint thud. Doc Jenkins and Peggy looked up from what they were doing. Doc was wearing only a pair of shorts and his pudgy torso was streaked with grime and perspiration. Peggy was clad in disreputable overalls. She was holding a welding torch.

She said, rather guiltily, "Good morning, Peter."

"Good morning," I replied automatically. Then, "I know that I'm only the mate, but might I inquire what you two are up to?"

"We're going to make this bitch roll and go," replied Peggy happily.

"What do you mean?" I asked coldly.

I looked around the cramped compartment, saw two discarded space-suits that had been flung carelessly on to the deck. And I saw what looked like the breech of a gun protruding from the plating. Around its circumference the welding was still bright. I looked from it back to the spacesuits.

"Have you been outside?" I demanded.

"No," said Peggy.

"Don't worry, Peter," said Jenkins. "We didn't lose any atmosphere. We sealed the transom space off before we went to work, and put the pump on it . . ."

"Remote control," said Peggy, "from inside."

"And you pierced the hull?" I asked with mounting anger.

"Only a small hole," admitted the doctor.

"Damn it!" I flared. "This is too much. Only four days out and you're already space-happy. Burning holes in the shell plating and risking all our lives. And I still don't know what it's all about. When Ralph hears of this . . ."

"He'll be pleased," said Peggy simply.

"He'll be pleased, all right. He'll roll on the deck in uncontrollable ecstasy. He'll have your guts for a necktie, both of you, and then boot you out of the airlock without a spacesuit. He'll . . ."

"Be reasonable, Peter," admonished Jenkins.

"Be reasonable? I am being reasonable. Peggy here has work that she should be doing, instead of which I find her engaged in some fantastic act of sabotage with you, one of the ship's executive officers, aiding and abetting."

"Come off it, Peter," said the Doc. "I'm second mate of this wagon, and I signed the articles as such, and one of the clauses says that deck and engine room departments should cooperate . . ."

"Never mind this second mate business," I told him. "As ship's surgeon, you're still a member of the deck department, ranking with, but below, the mate. And as far as I'm concerned, the prime function of the engine room department is to do as it's bloody well told."

"Then why don't you tell me something?" asked Peggy, sweetly reasonable.

"I will," I promised. "I will. But, to begin with, you will tell me something. You will tell me just what the hell you two are playing at down here."

"Is that a lawful command?" asked Peggy.

"I suppose so," admitted Jenkins grudgingly.

"All right," she said slowly. "I'll tell you. What you see . . ." she kicked the breech of the cannon with a heavy shoe . . . "is the means whereby we shall exceed the speed of light."

"But it's impossible," I said.

"How do you know?" she countered.

"It's common knowledge," I sneered.

"Way back in the Middle Ages," she said, "it was common knowledge that the sun went around Earth . . ."

But I was giving her only half my attention. Out of the corner of my eyes I was watching Doc Jenkins. He was edging gradually towards the switch of the power point into which the welding tool was plugged. I shrugged. I didn't see why he had to be so surreptitious about it. If Peggy wanted to finish whatever welding she had been doing when I had disturbed them, what did it matter?

Or perhaps it did matter.

I said, "I suppose this welded seam is tight?"

"Of course," she said.

"Then we'll get back amidships. You've plenty of work to do in the auxiliary motor room."

"I have," she admitted.

Then my curiosity got the better of me. "But just how," I demanded, "did you ever hope to attain FTL?"

"This," she said, gesturing with the torch towards the breech of the gun, "is an auxiliary rocket. There is already a charge of solid propellant-Doc mixed it for me-in the firing chamber. We were going to connect up the wiring to the detonator when you interrupted us."

"It's just as well that I did interrupt you," I said. "But how was it supposed to work?"

"I thought that it would be obvious. The ship is already proceeding at almost the speed of light. The rocket is just to give her the extra nudge . . ."

I couldn't help laughing. "Peggy, Peggy, how naive can you be? And with homemade solid propellant yet!"

"Solid propellants have their advantages," she said.

"Such as?" I asked scornfully.

"This!" she snapped.

The welding torch flared blindingly. I realized her intention, but too late. As I tried to wrest the tool from her hands the metal casing of the firing chamber was already cherry red.

I felt rather than heard the whoomph of the exploding powder . . .

### III: THE WINDS OF IF

#### Chapter 14

Everything was different, and yet the same.

"Even so," Ralph was saying, "the chow in this wagon leaves much to be desired."

I looked up irritably from the simmering pot of lamb curry on the stove top-and then, obeying an odd impulse, I looked down again, stared at the savory stew of meat and vegetables and hot spices, stared at my hand, still going through the stirring motions with the spoon.

I asked myself: What am I doing here?

"You have about three pet dishes," went on Ralph. "I admit that you do them well. But they're all that you do do well . . ."

This time I did look up at him. What was he doing in civilian shirt and shorts? Then, pursuing the thought, But why should the Federation Government's observer, even though he is a full commander in the Survey Service, be wearing uniform?

"Sandra's getting browned off with the lack of variety," said Ralph.

"Mrs. Malcolm, you mean," I corrected him coldly.

"Captain Malcolm, if you insist," he corrected me, grinning.

I shrugged. "All right. I'm only the catering officer, and she's the captain. At the same time, I am the catering officer, and she's my wife."

"Such a set-up," said Ralph, "would never be tolerated in a Federation ship. To be frank, I came out to the Rim as much to see how the Feminists managed as to investigate the potentialities of this fancy new drive of yours. And this ship, cut off from the Universe for objective years, is the ideal microcosm."

"We get by, out here on the Rim," I said shortly.

"Even so," he said, "you're not a Rim Worlder yourself. You're none of you Rim Worlders, born and bred, except the engineer and that tame telepath of yours. I can understand the women coming out here, but not the men. It must rankle when you're allowed to come into space only in a menial capacity."

"Our boss, Commodore Grimes, is a man," I said. "And most of the Rim Runners fleet is manned by the male sex. Anyhow, there's nothing menial in being a cook. I'm far happier than I was as purser in the Waverly Royal Mail. Furthermore," I said, warming up to the subject, "all the best chefs are men."

Ralph wiped a splatter of curry from his shirt. (I had gestured dramatically with my spoon.) "But it doesn't follow," he said, "that all men are the best chefs."

"Everybody likes my curry," I told him.

"But not all the time. Not for every meal," he said. "Well, Malcolm, I'll leave you to it. And since we have to eat your curry, you might see that the rice isn't so soggy this time."

Interfering bastard, I thought. I brought the spoon to my lips and tasted. It wasn't a bad curry, I decided. It wasn't a bad curry at all. Served with the sliced cucumber and the shredded coconut and the chopped banana, together with the imported mango chutney from Caribbea, it would be edible. Of course, there should be Bombay Duck. I wondered, as I had often wondered before, if it would be possible to convert the fish that flourished in our algae vats into that somewhat odorous delicacy.

Again I was interrupted.

"More curry?" complained Claude Smethwick.

"It's good," I told him. I scooped up a spoonful. "Taste."

"Not bad," he admitted. "If you like curry, that is. I don't have to be telepath to know that you do." He handed the spoon back to me. "But I didn't come here to get a preview of dinner."

"Then what did you come for?" I asked shortly.

"Peter, there's something wrong about this ship. You're the only one that I can talk to about it. Commander Listowel's an outsider, and Doc has gone on one of his verse and vodka jags, and the others are . . . women."

"They can't help it," I said.

"I know they can't-but they look at things differently from the way that we do. Apart from anything else, every one of them is chasing after that Survey Service commander . . ."

"Every one?" I asked coldly.

"Not Sandra, of course," he assured me hastily. (Too hastily?) "But Sandra's got all the worries of the ship-after all, she is captain of the first interstellar lightjammer-on her shoulders, and Martha and Peggy are trying hard to get into Listowel's good books-and bed?-and so there's only you."

"I'm flattered," I said, stirring the curry.

"There's something wrong," he said.

"You said that before," I told him.

"And I'll say it again," he said.

"Well, what is wrong?" I demanded.

"You know the deja vu feeling that you get when the Mannschenn drive starts up? Well, it's something like that. But it's not that . . . it's more, somehow."

"I think I know what you mean . . ." I said slowly.

He went on, "You'll think that I'm crazy, I know. But that doesn't matter-all you so-called normals think that psi people like me are at least halfway round the bend. But I've a theory: couldn't it be that out here, on the Rim, on the very edge of this expanding Galaxy, there's a tendency for alternative time tracks to merge? For example, just suppose that the feminist ships had never got out here . . ."

"But they did," I said.

"But they could very easily not have done. After all, it was back in the days of the Ehrenhaft drive, the gaussjammers. And you've read your history, and you know how many of those cranky brutes got slung away to hell and gone off course by magnetic storms."

"So in this alternative Universe of yours," I said tolerantly, "the Rim Worlds never got colonized."

"I didn't say that. You've only to look at the personnel of this ship-all outsiders but Peggy and myself, and neither Peggy nor I can claim descent from the first families. My ancestors came out long after the Feminist movement had fizzled on Earth, and so did Peggy's . . ."

I stirred the curry thoughtfully. "So on another time track there's another



Aeriel, the first of her kind in space, and another Peter Malcolm in the throes of cooking up a really first-class curry for his unappreciative shipmates."

"Could be," he said. "Or the ship could have a different name, or we could be serving in her in different capacities-all but myself, of course."

I burst into song.

"Oh, I am the Cook, and the Captain bold,

And the mate of the Nancy brig,

And the Bo's'n tight, and the Midshipmite,

And the crew of the Captain's gig!"

"But not," I was interrupted, "the engineer."

I turned away from the stove. "Oh, it's you, Peggy."

"Who else?" She took the spoon from my hand, raised it to her lips, blew on it. She sipped appreciatively. "Not bad, not bad . . ." A few drops of the sauce dribbled on to the breast of her once-white boiler suit, but she ignored them. They made quite a contrast, I decided, to the smears of black grease. She said, "You'll do me for a rough working mate, Peter."

"Thank you."

She absentmindedly put the spoon into a side pocket that already held a wrench and a hammer. I snatched it back, carefully wiped it and returned it to the pot.

She asked, her voice deliberately casual, "Have you seen Ralph?"

"I think he's gone up to the control room," I told her.

She said sulkily, "He's been promising to let me show him the auxiliary motor room for the last three days."

"After all," I consoled her, "he's not an engineer commander."

"But . . ."

"Curry again?" complained a fresh voice.

I resumed my stirring with an unnecessary clatter. I muttered mutinously, "If my galley is going to be turned into the ship's social club there won't be anything. But aren't you supposed to be on watch, Miss Wayne?"

"The old woman relieved me," she said. "She's showing Ralph just how a lightjammer should be handled." She leaned back against a bench, slimly elegant in her tailored shirt and shorts, nibbling a piece of celery she had picked up from the chopping board. "If the Federation Survey Service doesn't build a fleet of improved Erikson drive wagons it won't be Sandra's fault."

"Love me, love my ship," muttered Peggy.

"What was that?" I asked sharply.

"Nothing," she said.

Both women looked at me in silence, and I was suddenly afraid that what I could read in their eyes was pity.

## Chapter 15

Everything was different again.

I was relaxing in the easy chair in the captain's day room, smoking a cigarette and listening to a recording of the old-time sea chanteys of distant Earth. I wondered what those ancient sailormen would have made of this fabrication of metal and plastic, with atomic fire in her belly, spreading her wings in the empty gulf between the stars, running free before the photon gale. Then I heard the door between bathroom and bedroom open, and I turned my head. Sandra, naked from her shower, walked slowly to the chair at her dressing table and sat down before the mirror. I had seen her naked many times before. (But had I?) But this was the first time. (But how could it be?) I felt the stirrings of desire.

I got up and walked through to the bedroom. I put my hands gently on her smooth shoulders, kissed her gently behind the ear.

"No," she said. "No."

"But . . ."

"I've done my hair," she said, "and I don't want it messed up."

"Damn it all," I told her, "we are married."

But are we? I asked myself.

"Take your hands off me," she ordered coldly.

I did so, and looked at her and at her reflection in the mirror. She was beautiful. But I tried to find fault. There was that mole just above her navel. And the feeble gravitational field was kind to her; her breasts were proud and outthrusting without artificial support, her stomach flat. In a heavy gravitational field, I told myself, she would not be as lovely.

But I knew that she would be.

"Don't maul me," she said.

"Sorry," I muttered.

I went to sit on the bed.

"Haven't you anything better to do?" she asked.

"No," I said.

She made a sound that can only be described as a snarl and then, ignoring me, went on with her toilet. There was a session with the whirring hair dryer, after which she affixed glittering clips to the lobes of her ears. She got up then and walked to the wardrobe, ignoring me. She took out a uniform shirt of thin black silk, a pair of black shorts and a pair of stiletto-heeled black sandals. Her back to me, she shrugged into the shirt and then pulled the shorts up over her long, slim legs. She sat on the bed (and I might as well not have been there) and buckled the sandals over her slender feet. She returned to the mirror and with a tiny brush applied lip rouge.

"Going ashore?" I asked sarcastically.

"If you must know," she told me, "Commander Listowel has a fine collection of films made by the Survey Service on worlds with non-human cultures."

"Good," I said. "I'll brush my hair and wash behind the ears."

"You," she said, "were not invited."

"But . . ."

Her manner softened-but briefly, very briefly. "I'm sorry, Peter, but when senior officers of different space services want to talk shop they don't want juniors in their hair."

"I see," I said.

She got up from the chair. In the form-molding shirt, the abbreviated shorts, she looked more naked than she had when she had come through from the shower. I was acutely conscious that under the skimpy garments there was a woman. My woman. (Or was she? Had she ever been?)

"You needn't wait up for me," she said.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're rather sweet," she said, "in your own way."

"Thank you," I said.

I watched her go, then lit another cigarette and stuck it in my mouth. I knew now what was happening. I'd seen it happen before, to other people, but that didn't make it any better. Ashore it would have been bad enough-but here, in deep space, with Sandra the absolute monarch of this little, artificial world, there was nothing at all I could do. Ashore, even in a Feminist culture, a man can take strong action against an erring wife and her paramour. But if I took action here I should be classed as a mutineer.

But there must be something that I could do about it.

There must be something.

How much did Martha know? How much did Peggy know?

Women know women as no man can ever know them. There is that

freemasonry, the lodge into which no male may ever intrude. There is the freemasonry-but, too, there are the rivalries within the lodge. There is the bitchiness. And all is fair in love and war, and if I could turn the jealousy being felt by both Martha and Peggy to my own account, so much the better. (It would have been better still to have slugged it out with Listowel and then to have dragged Sandra by the hair, kicking and screaming, to bed-but, knowing Sandra, so far as any man can know any woman, I didn't feel like taking the risk. She was still the captain, and I was the cook, and the extreme penalty for mutiny in space is death.)

Peggy, I thought, would be the best bet. As a woman Martha might hate Sandra's guts, but as mate she would be loyal to the captain. Peggy, brought up in the workshop rather than the wardroom, would be less overawed by gold braid and Queen Mother's Regulations.

I still didn't like it. It seemed more than somewhat gutless to go whining in search of outside help, but I was feeling desperate. I threw my cigarette in the general direction of the disposer, then got up and went into the alleyway. I looked towards the door of the guest room, in which Listowel was berthed, and wondered what was happening behind it. I almost strode towards it, my fists clenched ready to start hammering on the featureless panel. Almost.

But I hadn't the guts.

I went, instead, to the companionway leading down to the next deck, to the compartment in which the subordinate officers were housed. From Martha's cabin drifted the faint strains of music-or of what she called music, a recording of one of Krashenko's atonal symphonies. So she was alone, which meant that Peggy would be alone too. (Peggy made no secret of the fact that she liked something "with a bit of tune to it.") Doc Jenkins, as acting second mate, would be on watch. And Claude Smethwick almost certainly would be sending his thoughts ranging across the light years, gossiping with his fellow telepaths aboard distant ships and on distant worlds.

I tapped at Peggy's door and heard her call out what I thought was an invitation to enter.

I stepped into the cabin-then started to back out. She was prone on her bunk, absorbing the radiation of a sunlamp. She was wearing a pair of dark glasses and a thoughtful expression.

I stammered, "I'm sorry. I thought you said to come in."

She said, "I did say come in. Shut the door. There's a draft."

I shut the door, then sat down heavily in the chair. It was rather too close to the bunk. (Or, perhaps, it wasn't close enough . . .) I thought, To hell with it. If she's not embarrassed, why should I be? and looked at her with appreciation. There was something hauntingly familiar about her unclad body as well as something surprising. In her overalls she was dumpy and unglamorous-naked, she was rather beautiful. She was plump, but in the places where it counted, and her waist was narrow. I thought that I should be able to get my two hands around it. I thought that it would be nice to

try.

She said, "A penny for them."

I told her, "I was wondering if this lamp of yours could be used to make Bombay Duck."

She asked, "What is Bombay Duck?"

I said, "It's fish, uncooked and dried in the sun. It stinks. You crumble it over curry."

She said, "You're a bloody liar, Peter."

"I'm not. That's all that Bombay Duck is. Stinking dried fish."

"I'm not disputing that. Your thoughts, at this moment, may be below your navel, but they're not centered on your stomach."

"Well . . ." I muttered lamely.

"And furthermore, Mr. Malcolm, you needn't expect that I'm going to catch you on the rebound, or that you're going to catch me the same way."

I said, "It would be a neat solution."

"Now, perhaps. But probably a messy one later, when certain persons who shall be nameless decide that their duties to their respective services come first." She declaimed:

"I could not love thee, deah, so much,

Loved I not honour more."

I said, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

She said, "I don't care if you burst into flame."

"Not very original," I told her. "And not very funny." I lit a cigarette. She stretched a shapely arm and took it from me, but still succeeded in displaying no more than her rear elevation. I lit another cigarette and put it to my lips. I said, "Come to think of it, it is rather hot in here."

"Is it?" she asked. Then she said, "No, you may not remove your shirt. And you may not, repeat not, remove your shorts. If you do, I shall holler rape. And as you're in my cabin, and not I in yours, you'll find yourself well in the cactus."

"Oh," I said.

"Precisely," she said.

For a while I smoked in silence, and she smoked in silence. I thought, You can look, but you can't touch. I asked, "Aren't you done on that side?"

She said, "No."

We smoked in silence; this time, she broke it.

"Why did you come to see me, Peter?"

I said, "I thought you might be able to help."

"And why should I want to help you?"

"Just enlightened self-interest," I said. "You want Listowel, God knows why. I want Sandra back. If you get that stuffed shirt commander it'll leave my everloving wife at loose ends-and I don't think, somehow, that she'll make a pass at either Doc Jenkins or poor old Claude."

"All right," she said. "You help me, and I help you. If the old woman returns to her husband that leaves Ralph all on his ownsome. Then Martha and I can fight it out between us."

"This mutual aid . . ." I said.

"It's all rather complicated," Peggy told me. She threw the end of her cigarette into the disposer. "It all hinges on the fact that Sandra puts the ship first. And I think-mind you, it's not a certainty-that you can get yourself well into her good books. How would it be if you could say, 'Look, darling, I've made you the captain of the first FTL ship in history,?'"

"This ship is not faster than light," I said. "But the Mannschenn drive ships are, and the Ehrenhaft drive wagons, what few there are left of them."

"Is that so?" she countered.

"Of course," I said.

"Oh." She paused for a second or so, then said slowly, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but the Erikson drive, as it stands, will never be a commercial success. It takes far too long for a cargo, even a non-perishable cargo for which there's no mad rush, to be carted from point A to point B. And there's the problem of manning, too. As far as this ship was concerned, Auntie Susan was able to assemble a bunch of misfits with no close ties for the job, people who wouldn't give a damn if the round voyage lasted a couple or three centuries-objective centuries, that is. Or even subjective. But it mightn't be so easy to find another crew for another lightjammer. Agreed?"

I said, "You drifted away from the script."

"What do you mean?" she asked. Her face looked frightened.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing. It's just that I seem to have heard you say almost the same words before."

She said, but doubtfully, "You're space-happy, Peter." Then she went on: "I'm new in space, relatively new compared to the rest of you, but I've read plenty. I'm no physicist, but I have a rough idea of the modus operandi of the various interstellar drives. And, so far, there's been no faster-than-light drive."

"What!" I exclaimed, but somehow I didn't feel as surprised as I should have.

"No, there hasn't. I'm right, Peter. The basic idea of the Ehrenhaft drive was that of a magnetic particle trying to be in two places at the same time in a magnetic field or current, the ship being the particle. But, as far as I can gather, space was warped so that she could do just that. I couldn't follow the math, but I got the general drift of it. And then, of course, there's the Mannschenn drive-but, there, the apparent FTL speeds are achieved by tinkering with time . . ."

"Hmm," I grunted. "Hmm."

"Getting away from machinery." she said, "and back to personalities, Sandra loves her ship. I'm sure that if she had to make a choice between Ralph and Aerial it wouldn't be Aerial left in the lurch. Or if she had to make a choice between you and Aerial . . . but what do you think she'd feel about the man who made her captain of the first real FTL starwagon?"

I said, "You'd better see Doc when he comes off watch. He stocks quite a good line in sedative mixtures."

She said, "You're turning down a good chance, perhaps your only chance, Peter."

"Damn it all," I said, "even I, and I'm no physicist, can tell you that it's quite impossible to exceed the speed of light. As you have already pointed out, we can cheat, but that's all. And in this ship we can't even cheat. We can no more outrun light than a windjammer could outrun the wind that was her motive power." I started to point towards something that wasn't there. "That's our log. It works by Doppler effect. At the moment our speed is . . ."

She looked at me hard, a puzzled expression on her face. "A log? Here? What the hell's wrong with you, Peter?"

I said, "I don't know."

She said, "There's something screwy about this ship. But definitely. Anyhow, let me finish what I was going to say. I maintain that we can give it a go-exceeding the speed of light, I mean."

"But it's impossible," I said.

"How do you know?" she countered.

"It's common knowledge," I sneered.

"Way back in the Middle Ages," she said, "it was common knowledge that the sun went round the Earth."

"Oh, all right," I grunted. "But tell me, please, just how do you expect to attain FTL speeds?"

"With an auxiliary rocket," she said. "Just a stovepipe, sticking out from the stern end of the ship. I can make it-and you, with your access to the chemicals for the hydroponics tanks, can make the solid propellant, the black powder. We're doing about Lume 0.9 recurring at the moment, all we need is a nudge . . ."

I couldn't help laughing. "Peggy, Peggy, how naive can you be? And with homemade solid propellant yet!"

"You can make it," she said. "And it's to your advantage."

I looked at her. During our heated discussion she had turned over. The dark glasses made her look so much more naked. I said, "I'm not sure that I'm really interested in getting Sandra back . . ."

She flopped back again on her belly in a flurry of limbs.

She said coldly, "Let's not forget the purpose of this discussion. Frankly, it was my intention to bribe you with the body beautiful to play along with me on this FTL project, but it wouldn't be right. You want Sandra back, and I want Ralph. Let's keep it that way, shall we?"

"But . . ." I extended a hand to one smooth buttock.

"On your bicycle, spaceman," she told me. "Hit the track. Make another pass, and I holler rape. After all, you're in my cabin, I'm not in yours. Come and see me again when you've got two or three pounds of black powder made up. And if you can't make it, then Martha and I will figure out some other way."

I asked, "She's in on this?"

"Of course," said Peggy scornfully. "I hate the bitch, but she's a good mate. I'd never be able to cut a hole in the stern for my auxiliary rocket unless she approved."

My hand had strayed back again and was stroking the silky skin on her back. I imagined that I heard her purring, like some great, sleek, lazy cat. And then, with shocking suddenness, she was off the bunk and bundling me towards the door.

"Out," she snarled. "Out. And don't come back until you have that powder."

"But . . ."

"Out!" she said with determined finality, and I was standing in the alleyway, staring resentfully at the panel that had slammed shut on her golden loveliness.

\* \* \*

I don't know whether or not you have ever tried to make black powder, but I can tell you this: it's easier talking about it than doing it. You want flowers of sulfur, and you want charcoal (or carbon) and you want saltpeter. At first I made the mistake of trying to mix the ingredients dry, and all I got was a grayish dust that burned with a halfhearted fizzle. Then I substituted potassium chlorate for the sodium nitrate, and my sample went off prematurely and took my eyebrows with it. I came to the conclusion then that the powder would have to be properly mixed with water, and then dried out-using, of course, the recommended ingredients. And it worked out, even though I dried the sludge by exposure to vacuum instead of in the sun, as was done (I suppose) by the first cannoners.



Anyhow, it was as well that I had something to occupy my mind. It was obvious, far too obvious, what was going on between Listowel and Sandra. Peggy's scheme was a harebrained one, but it might just get results. I had little doubt that it would get results-but what those results would be I could not imagine. Meanwhile, everybody in Aerial continued to do his or her appointed duty, even though the ship was fast becoming a seething caldron of sexual jealousies.

And then, one night (as reckoned by our chronometer) I had the last batch of gunpowder mixed and dried. There was a five-gallon can full of the stuff. I picked it up, let myself out of the galley and made my way to the officers' flat. As I entered the alleyway I saw Doc Jenkins knocking on the door of Martha Wayne's cabin. I wondered who was in control, and then wished that I hadn't wondered. The control room would be well-manned, of course. There would be the captain, and there would be that blasted Survey Service commander, the pair of them looking at the stars and feeling romantic.

"Ah," said Jenkins, noticing me, "the commissioned cook. In person. Singing and dancing."

"Neither singing nor dancing," I said grimly.

"And what have you got in the can, Petey boy? You know that I have the monopoly on jungle juice."

"Nothing to drink," I said.

"Then what is it?"

"Something for Peggy."

"Something for Peggy," he mimicked. "Something for Peggy . . ." He quoted:

"When in danger or in fear,

Always blame the engineer . . ."

I tried to edge past him, but he put out his hand and grabbed my arm. In spite of his flabby appearance he was strong. And I was afraid to struggle; there was the possibility that the can of black powder might get a hard knock if I did. (I know that in theory it was quite safe, but I still didn't trust the stuff.)

"Not so fast," he said. "Not so fast. There's something going on aboard this ship, and as one of the executive officers, as well as the surgeon, it's my duty to find out what it is."

The door of the chief officer's cabin slid open. Martha stood there looking at us. "Come in," she ordered sharply. "Both of you."

We obeyed. Martha shut the door behind us and motioned us to chairs. We sat down. With a certain relief I put the can of powder gently on the carpeted deck-and then, before I could stop him, Doc snatched it up. He shook it.

He demanded, "What's in this?"

"Some powder," I said lamely.

"Powder?" He worried the lid off the container. "Powder? What sort of powder?"

"Abrasive powder," I lied. "Peggy gave me the formula and asked me to cook some up for her."

"Oh." He put the can, lid still off, down beside his chair, away from me. He took a cigarette from the box on Martha's desk, lit it, put it to his lips. He inhaled deeply, inhaled again. The burning end glowed brightly, the ash lengthened as we watched. He made as though to use the open can as an ash tray.

Martha's hand flashed out, smacked the cigarette from his fingers and sent it flying across the cabin in a flurry of sparks.

Jenkins looked hurt. "What was that in aid of?"

She said, "You were going to spoil the . . . mixture."

"How? If it's abrasive powder, a little ash might improve it."

"Not this mixture," she said.

"No," I supported her. "No. It wouldn't."

"I'm not altogether a fool," grumbled Jenkins.

"No?" asked Martha sweetly. "No?" She extended a slender leg, and with her slim foot gently shoved the can out of harm's way. "No?"

"No!" he almost shouted. "I've lived on primitive worlds, Martha, planets where military science is in its infancy. And here's Peter, lugging around a dirty great cannister of villainous saltpeter, and there's Peggy, sweating and slaving over something that looks like a breech-loading cannon." He snorted. "If it were a couple of dueling pieces it would make sense. Pistols for two and coffee for one. And then after the commissioned cook and the bold commander had settled their differences, you and Peggy could do battle, at twenty paces, for the favors of the survivor.

"But a cannon . . . it doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't," agreed Martha. She got up and went to a locker. I thought that she was going to offer us drinks. There were racked bottles there, and glasses. And there was a drawer under the liquor compartment, which she pulled open. She took from it a nasty-looking Minetti automatic.

She said, "I'm sorry, Doc, but you know too much. We have to keep you quiet for the next few hours. And you, Peter, see about tying him up and gagging him, will you?" She motioned with the pistol. "Down, boy, down. I shan't shoot to kill-but you wouldn't like your kneecaps shattered, would you?"

Jenkins subsided. He looked scared-and, at the same time, oddly amused. "But I don't know too much," he expostulated. "I don't know enough."

Martha allowed a brief smile to flicker over her full mouth. She glanced at me fleetingly. "Shall we tell him, Peter?"

I said, "It wouldn't do any harm. Now."

Martha sat down again, the hand with the pistol resting on one slender thigh. It remained pointing directly at Jenkins. Her finger never strayed from the trigger.

"All right," she said. "I'll put you in the picture. As you are aware, there's a considerable amount of ill-feeling aboard this vessel."

"How right you are!" exclaimed Jenkins.

"We think that the captain is behaving in a manner prejudicial to good order and discipline."

He chuckled softly. "Mutiny, is it? In all my years in space I've never seen one. But why that absurd, archaic cannon? After all, you've access to the ship's firearms." He added, "As you've just proved, Martha."

"It's not mutiny," she snapped.

"Have I another guess?"

She told him, "You can guess all the way from here to Grollor, but you'll never guess right."

"No?" He made as though to rise from his chair, but her gun hand twitched suggestively. "No? Then why not tell me and get it over with."

"If you must know," she said tiredly, "it's a way-it might work and it might not-to distract Sandra's attention from Ralph. She's more in love with her ship than with anybody in the ship but if Peter were to be able to say, 'Look, darling, thanks to me you are now the captain of the first real FTL starwagon,' she'd be eating out of his hand."

He stared at me in mock admiration. "I didn't know you had it in you, Peter."

"He hasn't," said Sandra. "It was Peggy and I who cooked up the scheme. We don't know if it will succeed or not-but something is bound to happen when Peggy's solid fuel rocket gives the ship just that extra nudge."

"And all these years," whispered Jenkins, "I've regarded you as just a stuffed shirt-mind you, a well-stuffed shirt-and Peggy as a barely literate mechanic. But there's a streak of wild poetry in you, in both of you. Mind you, I don't think that Listowel is worth the trouble. But throwing your bonnet over the windmill is always worthwhile. This crazy scheme appeals to me. I'm with it, Martha, and I'm with you. I've been dreaming about something on those lines myself, but not so practically as you have done . . ."

His hand went to the side pocket of his shorts-and Martha's hand, holding the pistol, lifted to cover him. But it was a folded sheet of paper that he pulled out.

"Martha," he pleaded, "put the Outer Reaches Suite on your playmaster, will you? Or get Peter to put it on, if you don't trust me. And, if you would be so good, something to wet my whistle . . ."

"Fix it, Peter," ordered Martha.

I fixed it, first of all pouring a stiff whiskey on the rocks for each of us, then adjusting the controls of the gleaming instrument. The first notes of the Suite drifted into the cabin. It wasn't music that I have ever cared for. There was too much of loneliness in it, too much of the blackness and the emptiness—the emptiness that, somehow, was not empty, that was peopled with the dim, flimsy ghosts of the might-have-been.

Jenkins drained his glass, then unfolded the piece of paper and blinked at it.

"Down the years

And the light years,

Wings wide spread

To the silent gale . . .

Wide wings beating

The wall between

Our reality and our reality

And realities undreamed . . .

And realities undreamed . . .

Or dreamed?

Down the years

And the darkness—"

He broke off abruptly, and Martha stiffened, her Minetti swinging to cover the open door. Peggy was there, demanding irritably, "Aren't you people going to lend a hand? Do I do all the work in this bloody ship?" She saw Doc, muttered, "Sorry. Didn't know you had company."

"We have company, Peggy," corrected Martha.

"You mean he . . ."

"Yes. He knows."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Doc happily. "And I'll help you to beat your wings against the wall."

"What wall?" demanded Peggy disgustedly.

It was odd that we now trusted Doc without any question. Or was it so odd? There were those half-memories, there was the haunting feeling that

we had done all this before. Anyhow, we poured Peggy a drink, had another one ourselves, and then made our way aft. In the workshop we picked up the thing that Peggy had been making. It did look like a cannon, and not a small one either. It was fortunate that our acceleration was now extremely gentle, otherwise it would have been impossible for us to handle that heavy steel tube without rigging tackles.

We got it down at last to the transom space and dropped it on the after bulkhead. Martha climbed back, with Peggy and myself, into the airscrew motor room; Doc stayed below. While Peggy and I climbed into spacesuits Martha passed the other equipment down to Jenkins-the welding and cutting tools, the can of powder. And then Doc came up, and Peggy and I, armored against cold and vacuum, took his place.

Over our heads the airtight door slid shut. I heard the faint whirr of the pump that Peggy had installed in the motor room, and realized that the atmosphere was being evacuated from our compartment. I saw the needle of the gauge on the wrist of my suit falling, and watched it continue to drop even when I could no longer hear anything.

Peggy's voice in my helmet phones was surprisingly loud.

She said, "Let's get moving."

It was Peggy who did most of the work. A tool in her hands was an extension of her body-or even an extension of her personality. The blue-flaring torch cut a neat round hole in the bulkhead and then, after I had lifted the circle of still glowing steel away and clear, in the shell plating beyond. This section I kicked out, and watched fascinated as it diminished slowly, a tiny, twinkling star against the utter blackness. Peggy irritably pulled me back to the work in hand. Together we maneuvered the rocket tube into place. It was a tight fit, but not too tight. And then Peggy stitched metal to metal with the delicate precision that an ancestor might have displayed with needle, thread and fine fabric.

I watched her with something akin to envy-and it was more than her manual dexterity that I envied. She had something that occupied all her attention; I had not. I had time to doubt, and to wonder. At the back of my mind a nagging, insistent voice was saying, No good will come of this.

I heard Peggy's satisfied grunt in my helmet phones and saw that the job was finished. She unscrewed the breech of the tube, and flipped it back on its hinge. She picked up a wad of rags, shoved it down the barrel, but not too far down. I managed to get the lid off the powder cannister and handed it to her. She poured the black grains onto the wad. Her guess as to the positioning of it had been a good one; only a spoonful of gunpowder remained in the can. This she transferred to a tubular recess in the middle of the breech block, stoppering it with another scrap of rag. She replaced the block then, gasping slightly as she gave it that extra half-turn to ensure that it was well and tightly home.

"O.K., Martha," she said. "You can let the air back in."

"Valve open," Martha's voice said tinnily from the phones.

I watched the needle of my wrist gauge start to rise, and heard after a while the thin, high screaming of the intruding atmosphere. And then the airtight door over our heads opened and I saw Martha and Doc framed in the opening, looking not at us but at what we had done. After a second's hesitation they joined us in the transom space. Martha helped Peggy off with her helmet; Doc removed mine for me.

"A neat job," said Martha.

"It will do," said Peggy.

"I hope," added Doc, but he did not seem unduly worried.

"You wire her up," said Peggy to Martha. "I can't do it in these damn gloves."

"Anything to oblige," murmured Martha. She handed the double cable that she had brought down with her to Jenkins and started to loosen the thumbscrews on the breech block.

"I know that I'm only the captain," said a cold, a very cold voice, "but might I inquire what the hell you're doing?"

"We're going to make this bitch roll and go," replied Jenkins happily.

I looked up from the makeshift rocket and saw that Sandra and Listowel were standing in the motor room, looking down at us through the doorway. Sandra was icily furious. Listowel looked mildly interested.

Sandra's finger pointed first at Peggy, then at myself. "Spacesuits . . . have you been outside?" she demanded.

"No," said Peggy.

"Don't worry, skipper," said Jenkins. "We didn't lose any atmosphere. We sealed the transom space off before Peggy and Peter went to work, and put the pump on it . . ."

"But you pierced the hull," she said with mounting anger.

"Only a small hole," admitted Jenkins.

"This," she grated, "is too much. Only a couple of weeks out and you're already space-happy. Burning holes in the pressure plating and risking all our lives. Are you mad?"

"No," stated Doc. "And when you find out what it's about you'll be pleased."

"Pleased? I shall be pleased all right. I shall roll on the deck in uncontrollable ecstasy. And I'll have your guts for a necktie, and then I'll boot you out of the airlock without spacesuits. I'll-"

"Be reasonable, Sandra," admonished Listowel rashly.

"Reasonable? I am being reasonable. All these officers have work that they should be doing, instead of which I find them engaged in some fantastic act of sabotage . . ."

"Sandra," I put in, "I can explain."

"You? You ineffectual puppy!" I saw with shock that there was a pistol in her hand. "Come up out of there, all of you. That is an order." She turned to her companion. "Commander Listowel, as captain of this vessel I request your aid in dealing with these mutineers."

"But-" I began.

"Drop whatever you're doing," she snapped, "and come up."

"Better do as she says," grumbled Peggy. She picked up her welding torch.

"Just let us tell you what it's all about, skipper," pleaded Jenkins, edging towards the power point into which the torch was plugged.

"No," said Sandra flatly.

"But . . ." murmured Peggy, her voice trailing off.

There was the sharp click of a switch and the torch flared blindingly. I realized Peggy's intention, but too late. As I tried to wrest the tool from her hands (but why? but why?), the metal casing of the firing chamber was already cherry red.

I felt rather than heard the whoomph of the exploding powder . . .

## Chapter 16

Her body against mine was warm and resilient, yielding-and then, at the finish, almost violently possessive. There was the flaring intensity of sensation, prolonged to the limits of endurance, and the long, long fall down into the soft darkness of the sweetest sleep of all.

And yet . . .

"Sandra . . ." I started to say, before my eyes were properly focused on the face beside mine on the pillow.

She snapped back into full consciousness and stared at me coldly.

"What was that, Peter? I've suspected that . . ."

"I don't know, Peggy," I muttered. "I don't know . . ."

I don't know, I thought. I don't know. But I remember . . . what do I remember? Some crazy dream about another ship, another lightjammer, with Sandra as the captain and myself as catering officer and Ralph as some sort of outsider. And I was married to Sandra in this dream, and I'd lost her, and I was trying to win her back with Peggy's help. There was something about a solid fuel rocket . . .

"What is it, Peter?" she asked sharply.

"A dream," I told her. "It must have been a dream . . ."

I unsnapped the elastic webbing that held us to the bunk and floated away

from it and from Peggy to the center of the cabin. I looked around me, noting details in the dim light, trying to reassure myself of its reality, of our reality. It was all so familiar, and all so old. The ghosts of those who had lived here, who had loved here and hated here, generation after generation, seemed to whisper to me, This is Thermopylae. This is all the world you have ever known, ever will know . . .

It was all so unfamiliar.

And Peggy . . .

I turned to look at her as she lay on the bed, still held there by the webbing, the bands startlingly white against her golden skin. She was real enough. Her naked beauty was part of my memories-all my memories.

"Peter," she said. "Peter, come back."

From nowhere a tag of poetry drifted into my mind, and I murmured,

". . . and home there's no returning.

The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair."

It made an odd sort of sense.

Thermopylae-the last stand of the Spartans, back in the early dawn of Terran history; Thermopylae-one of the great windjammers that sailed Earth's seas; Thermopylae-the last stand of the Spartacists . . .

"Come back," she called pleadingly.

"I'm here," I told her. "I'm here. It was just that I had a little trouble getting myself oriented."

Stretching my right leg I was just able to touch the bulkhead with the tip of my big toe, and I shoved gently. I drifted back in the general direction of the bed. Peggy extended her arm and caught me, pulled me to her.

"Born in the ship," she scolded, "raised in the ship, and you still haven't the sense to put your sandals on . . ."

"There was that . . . strangeness . . ." I faltered.

"If that's what I do to you, my boy, I'd better see about getting a divorce. There's nothing strange about us. I'm a perfectly prosaic plumber, and you're a prurient purser, and our names start with a P as well as our ratings, so we're obviously made for each other. At least, I thought so until just now . . . but when the bridegroom, on his wedding night, starts calling his blushing bride by another woman's name it's rather much!" She smiled tantalizingly. "Of course, I had quite a crush on Ralph once-not that he'd ever notice me. Plumbers are rather beneath the captain's notice. He reminds me so much of my father . . ." Her face sobered. "I wonder what it would be like to live on a real world, a planet, with ample living room and with no necessity to stash parents away in the deep freeze when they've lived their allotted span? I wonder if our fathers and mothers, and their fathers and mothers, will ever be revived to walk on grass and breathe



fresh air . . . I wonder if we shall ever be revived after we're put away to make room for our children . . ." She reached out for something from the bedside locker-and suddenly her expression was one of puzzlement and disappointment. She whispered, "I wanted a cigarette. I wanted a cigarette to smoke and to wave in the air as I talked . . ."

I asked, "What is a cigarette?"

"I . . . I don't know . . . I think it would be one of those tiny, white smoldering tubes that characters are always playing with in the old films . . . those men and women who played out their dramas on worlds like Earth and Austral and Caribbea, or aboard ships that could cross the Galaxy in a matter of months." She said intensely, "At times I hate the Spartacists. It was all very well for them, the disgruntled technicians and scientists who thought that they had become the slaves of capital and organized labor-whatever they were-and who staged their futile slave revolt, and built this crazy ship because they hadn't the money or materials to construct a Mannschenn drive job-whatever that was. It was all very well for them, the romantic Durnhamites, pushing out under full sail for the Rim Stars-but what about us? Born in this tin coffin, living in this tin coffin and, at the end, put to sleep in this tin coffin-unless we die first-in the hope of a glorious resurrection on some fair planet circling a dim, distant sun. And we've never known the feel of grass under our bare feet, never known the kiss of the sun and the breeze on our skins, making do with fans and UV lamps, taking our exercise in the centrifuge instead of on the playing field or in the swimming pool, subsisting on algae and on tissue cultures that have long since lost any flavor they once had. Why, even on Lorn . . ."

"Even on Lorn?" I echoed.

"What am I saying?" she whispered. "What am I saying? Where is Lorn?"

"Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo and Thule . . ." I murmured. "And the worlds of the Eastern Circuit-Tharn and Grollor, Mellise and Stree . . . Tharn, with the dirt streets in the towns, and the traders' stalls under the flaring gas jets as the evening falls, and the taverns with good liquor and good company . . . Mellise, and the long swell rolling in from half way across the world, breaking on the white beaches of the archipelago . . ."

"What's happened to us?" she cried. Then, "What have we lost?"

"How can we have lost," I asked, "what we have never known?"

"Dreams," she whispered. "Dreams . . . or the alternative time tracks that Claude is always talking about. Somewhere, or somewhen, another Peter and Peggy have walked the white beaches of Mellise, have swum together in the warm sea. Somewhen we have strolled together along a street on Tharn, and you have bought for me a bracelet of beaten silver . . ."

"Dreams," I said. "But you are the reality, and you are beautiful . . ." As I kissed her, as my caressing hands wandered over her compliant body, desire mounted. But there was a part of myself holding back, there was a cold voice at the back of my mind that said, You are doing this to forget. You are doing this to forget the worlds and the ships and the women that you have known. And, coldly, I answered myself with the question, Is there

a better way of forgetting? And why should one not forget a foolish dream?

Her urgent mouth was on mine and her arms were about me, and forgetfulness was sweet and reality was all we need ever ask, and-

A giant hand slammed us from the bunk, snapping the webbing, hurling against the bulkhead. The single light went out. We sprawled against the cold, metal surface, held there by some pseudo-gravity, hurt, frightened, still clinging desperately to each other. Dimly I heard the incessant shrilling of alarm bells and somewhere somebody screaming. We felt rather than heard the thudding shut of airtight doors.

The pressure against us relaxed and, slowly, we drifted into the center of the cabin. I held Peggy to me tightly. I could hear her breathing, could feel her chest rising and falling against my own. She stirred feebly.

"Peggy, are you all right?" I cried. "Darling, are you all right?"

"I . . . I think so . . ." she replied faintly. Then, with a flash of the old humor, "Do you have to be so rough?"

There was a crackling sound, and then from the bulkhead speaker issued the voice of Ralph, calm as always, authoritative.

"This is the captain. We have been in collision with a meteor swarm. Will all surviving personnel report to the control room, please? All surviving personnel report to the control room."

"We'd better do as the man says," said Peggy shakily, "even though it means dressing in the dark . . ."

#### IV: JOURNEY'S END

##### Chapter 17

We were in the control room-those of us who had survived.

We had made our rounds, armored against cold and vacuum. We had seen the results of our collision with the meteor swarm, the rending and melting of tough metal and plastic, the effects of sudden decompression on human flesh. We had seen too much. Speaking for myself, it was only the uncanny half-knowledge that this was only an evil dream that enabled me to keep a hold on my sanity.

We were in the control room, the seven of us.

There was Ralph Listowel, acting captain, strapped in his seat before the useless controls. Beside him, anchored to the deck by the magnetic soles of her sandals, stood Sandra, acting mate. And there was David Jenkins, ship's surgeon, and very close to him stood Martha Wayne, ship's chronicler. There was Peggy, ship's plumber. There was Claude Smethwick, always the odd man out. There was myself.

We had survived.

We had made our rounds of the stricken Thermopylae and had found no

other survivors. All the accommodation abaft officers' country had been holed, as had been the dormitory, the deep freeze, in which our parents-and their parents, and their parents-had been laid away, in stasis, to await planetfall. But they had never known what had hit them. They were luckier than our generation, for whom there must have been a long second or so of agonised realization, the horror of bursting lungs and viscera, before the end.

"Report," ordered Ralph tiredly.

There was a long silence, which Jenkins was the first to break. He said, "We suited up, and went through the ship. She's like a colander. There are no other survivors."

"None?" asked Ralph.

"No, skipper. Do you wish details?"

"No," said Ralph.

"I made rounds with Doc," said Sandra. "The deep freeze has had it. So has all the accommodation abaft officers' country. So has most of the accommodation forward of the bulkhead. Second mate, third mate, engineers, catering officer-all dead. Very dead . . ."

"And outside?" asked Ralph.

"I saw what I could from the blisters. It's a mess. Spars buckled. Twenty odd square miles of sail in ribbons . . ."

"Report," said Ralph, looking at me.

I told him, "I've been through the farm. We haven't got a farm any more. The tank room and the tissue culture room were both holed. Of course, the deep-frozen, dehydrated tissue cultures will keep us going for some time . . ."

"If we had air and water they would," said Jenkins glumly. "But we haven't."

"There are the cylinders of reserve oxygen," I pointed out.

"And how do we get rid of the carbon dioxide?" asked the doctor.

"Chemicals . . ." suggested Peggy vaguely.

"What chemicals?" he demanded. He went on, "Oh, we can keep alive for a few days, or a few weeks-but we shall merely be postponing the inevitable. Better to end it now, skipper. I've got the drugs for the job. It will be quite painless. Pleasant, even."

Ralph turned to Peggy. "Report."

She said, "The generator room's wrecked. The only power we have at our disposal is from the batteries."

"And their life?"

"If we practice the utmost economy, perhaps two hundred hours. But I may be able to get a jenny repaired-"

"And burn up our oxygen reserve running it," said Ralph. Then, to Smethwick, "Report."

"I've tried," the telepath whispered. "I've tried. But there's no contact anywhere. We are alone, lost and alone. But . . ."

"But?" echoed Ralph.

"I . . . I'm not sure . . ." Then, suddenly, Smethwick seemed to gain stature, to change his personality almost. Always until now the shyest and most retiring of men, he dominated us by his vehemence. "Don't you have the memories-the memories of the lives you've lived elsewhere, elsewhere? Haven't you any recollection of yourself as Captain Listowel of the Rim Runners, as Commander Listowel of the Federation Survey Service? And the rest of you," he went on, "don't you remember? This isn't the only life-or the only death . . ."

"Lorn and Faraway . . ." I said softly.

"Ultimo and Thule . . ." whispered Martha.

"And the planets of the Eastern Circuit," said Sandra flatly.

"You remember," cried Smethwick. "Of course you remember. I'm snooping now. I admit it. You can do what you like to me, but I'm snooping. I'm peeping into your minds. And it all adds up, what I can read of your memories, your half-memories. There's the pattern, the unbreakable pattern. All the time, every time, it's been just the seven of us-aboard Flying Cloud, aboard Aerial, and now aboard Thermopylae . . ."

"There's the pattern . . . we've tried to break free from it, but we've never succeeded. But we have changed it-every time we have changed it-and we can change it again. Whether for better or for worse I cannot say-but it can hardly be for worse now."

Ralph was looking at Sandra-and once, I knew, the way that she was looking back at him would have aroused my intense jealousy. "Yes," he said slowly. "I remember . . . hazily . . . even so, wasn't there some trouble with Peter?"

I was holding Peggy close to me. "There was," I said. "But not anymore."

"And what about you, Martha?" asked Sandra. "Do you remember?"

"I do," she said, "but I'm perfectly happy the way things are now. Both David and I are happy-so happy, in fact, that I don't welcome the idea of euthanasia . . ."

"Go on," urged Smethwick. "Go on. Remember!"

"I made a rocket," muttered Peggy hesitantly. "Didn't I?"

"And I mixed a batch of solid fuel," I supported her.

"No," contradicted Doc. "I did."

"Some bastard did," stated Ralph, looking rather hostile.

"Too right," said Sandra. "And whoever it was put us in the jam that we're in now. I was quite happy as catering-officer-cum-third-mate of Flying Cloud, and quite happy as captain of Aerial, and I rather resent finding myself chief officer of a dismayed derelict, with only a few days to live."

"You might have been happy," I told her, "but you must admit that the way things were aboard Aerial did not, repeat not, contribute to my happiness."

"My marriage to you was a big mistake," she said.

"Wasn't it just!" I agreed. "On my part! I should have known better. Give a woman a position of authority and she at once abuses it. 'I'm the captain, and I sleep with whom I bloody well please. See?' "

"I resent that," said Sandra.

"Resent away," I told her, "if it makes you any happier. Resenting seems to be your specialty, darling."

"But you were such a bloody lousy cook," she said.

"Like hell I was!" I flared. "I'm a bloody good cook, and you know it. Aerial ate a damn sight better than Flying Cloud ever did."

"I suppose," she said, "that you mixed gunpowder in with your curry."

"You wouldn't know the difference," I sneered.

"Who would?" she sneered back.

"I think his curry is good," said Peggy loyally.

"You would," snapped Sandra.

"The rocket!" Claude was screaming. "The rocket!"

I told him what to do with the rocket, tail fins and all. I said to Sandra, "It's high time that we got things sorted out. You behaved very shabbily. Even you must admit that. I've nothing against Ralph-in fact I think that's he's more to be pitied than blamed. But if it hadn't been for the way that you carried on aboard both Flying Cloud and Aerial there wouldn't have been any rockets. There wouldn't have been any misguided attempts to break the light barrier."

"So it's all my fault," she said sarcastically.

"Of course," I told her.

"And that refugee from a bicycle shop, to whom you happen to be married at the moment, has nothing at all to do with it. Oh, no. And neither has the incompetent pill peddler who mixed the first batch of powder. And neither have you, who mixed the second. But, as far as I'm concerned, what really rankles is this. I don't mind all this switching from one time track to

another-after all, variety is the spice of life. What I do object to is being the victim of the blundering machinations of the same bunch of dimwits every bloody time. It's too much. Really, it's too much."

"My heart bleeds for you," I said. "Let me suggest that on the next time track you get you to a nunnery. Preferably a Trappist one. If there are such institutions."

Her face was white with passion. Her hand flashed out and caught me a stinging blow across the mouth. My feet lost their magnetic contact with the deck and I floated backwards, fetching up hard against the bulkhead.

Peggy, her voice bitter, said, "You deserved that."

"No," said Martha. "No. Everything has been Sandra's fault."

"Pipe down," ordered Ralph. "Pipe down, all of you. And you, Malcolm, please refrain from making any more slanderous attacks on my wife."

"My wife," I said.

"Not in this continuum," he corrected me. "But what happened in the alternative Universes has a certain bearing upon our present predicament. Thanks to your otherwise unpardonable outburst, we can remember now--"

"And about bloody well time you did," said Claude.

"We can't all be perfect," stated Ralph, with mild sarcasm. "Even so, we can try. We know the way out now-and, this time, we're all of us involved. All of us. We must break the light barrier once more, and the only way that we can do it is by giving this wagon that extra push. Has anybody any suggestions?"

Martha said slowly, "We must have been close to Lume 1 when the meteors hit us. But the impact was at right angles to our trajectory . . ."

"Work it out by the parallelogram of forces," Ralph told her. "If you really want to, that is. But we have the Doppler log-it's still working-and that gives us the answer without any fooling around with slipsticks. Even though we are a dismayed derelict we're still bowling along at a good rate. But it'll take more than a powder-fuelled rocket to give us the boost."

"There's the reserve oxygen," I said.

"And there's plenty of alcohol," added Jenkins.

"And Peggy's a plumber in this incarnation," said Sandra, rather nastily.

"So . . ."

## Chapter 18

It was dark outside and, despite the heating units and insulation of our suits, bitterly cold. Astern of us was the dull-glowing Galactic lens, a monstrous ember in the black ash of the ultimate night. Ahead of us, flaring with an unnatural steely brilliance, was one of the distant island

nebulae. But we were in no mood for astronomical sight-seeing. Almost at once our attention was caught and held by the horrible tangle of twisted wreckage that extended all the way from the stern, where we were standing, to the stem of the huge ship, standing out sharply and shockingly in the harsh glare of our working lights: the buckled spars, the vast, disorderly expanse of tattered sail and snapped cordage, the rent and battered shell plating. But we did not look long, nor did we want to. There was work to do-burning and welding, man-handling the massive pipe sections into place, heating and beating the twisted plating of the stern so that it conformed, more or less, to our plans.

Peggy took charge-and it was Peggy, too, who did most of the work. A tool in her hands was an extension of her body-or, even, an extension of her personality. She stitched metal to metal with the delicate precision that an ancestress might have displayed with needle, thread and fine fabric. I watched her with envy, and it was not only her manual dexterity that I envied. She was so sure of herself, so certain. And I was not certain. Oh, I had no doubts that this was the only way out of our predicament-but once we had won through to an alternative time track should we be any better off? In Thermopylae we had achieved what seemed to be a stable grouping, like paired with like, but would it, could it last?

I looked at Peggy, and I hoped with all my heart that it would.

I heard her satisfied, peculiarly feminine grunt in my helmet phones. She said flatly, "That's that."

"Even so," murmured Ralph doubtfully, "will it hold?"

"Long enough," she told him cheerfully. "Long enough. After all, Ralph, this isn't the first time . . ."

"No," said Sandra, a nasty edge to her voice, "it isn't."

"That will do," ordered her husband coldly.

"And now we'll connect up the tanks and bottles," said Peggy.

We clambered back inside through the rents in the shell plating, back into the wrecked lazaret. Intended for use as a sick bay by the ship's builders, it had become over the generations a storeroom, a repository for things that never had been used, that never would be used, that had been stashed away in the belief that somebody, sooner or later, would find a use for them. We had found the piping there, a fine assortment, large and small bore. Some had been damaged by the meteor swarm, most of it had not been. Finding it saved us both time and labor.

The oxygen cylinders and the tanks of alcohol, however, we had to lug through the ship from the centrally situated storage compartments. The work was heavy and awkward, but that wasn't the worst part of it. The trouble was that we were obliged to see again the torn, frozen bodies of our late shipmates. And there was that sense of responsibility that was so hard to shake off. If it hadn't been for the pattern, as we were thinking of it, if it hadn't been for the odd design which made it somehow imperative that the seven of us, and only the seven of us, should be attempting to

break the light barrier by means of rocket power, would Thermopylae have come to grief? And had we, of our own volition, established the pattern? Or had the pattern existed always, and were we no more than puppets?

But we worked on. We were still alive, and we had every inducement to stay that way. We convinced ourselves that we were in, but not of, Thermopylae. We felt that we were innocent bystanders involved by blind chance in a catastrophe not of our making, not of our concern. All that concerned us was getting the hell out, and that as soon as possible. My parents, I knew, were among those who had perished when the cosmic debris destroyed the deep freeze. But my parents, I knew with even greater certainty, were solid citizens of Dunedin, capital of the Empire of Waverly, who, without fail, sent me a canned turkey every year in the pious hope that it would arrive at or before Christmas. Then there was the carroty cat Susan. I had known her before I met Peggy. I had known her very well indeed. I had seen her-what was left of her-as I helped lug the oxygen cylinders back aft from the stores. And I told myself, That pitiful, broken body means nothing to me. I have never slept with it. When I was in Flying Cloud, when I was in Aerial, I never knew anybody catted Susan . . .

I told myself that.

But we worked, all of us, fetching and carrying at Peggy's command, sweating in our suits, gasping in the stale air. We watched the makeshift contraption growing as we worked-the alcohol tanks with the oxygen bottles attached to them to drive the fluid into the firing chamber, the other oxygen bottles that would feed directly into the rocket motor. It was a dreadfully inefficient setup, but it didn't matter. Mass ratio didn't worry us. We weren't concerned with escape velocity; all that we wanted was that extra nudge, the push that would drive us faster than light, that would expel us from this continuum in which we didn't belong.

We worked, stumbling, fumbling automatons, breathing our own stinks, our skin chafed and sore inside our suits. We worked, tired and hungry and thirsty as we were. There was the urgency, there was the feeling that if we failed to meet the deadline we should be marooned here, doomed to die in a little, ruined world not of our making. We worked, half-blinded by the actinic flaring of Peggy's torch, cursing the tools that slipped from our clumsy, gloved hands, cursing each other for carelessness and failure to cooperate.

But we worked.

And, astern of us, the target at which the cannon of our jury rocket was aimed, we could see the dull-glowing Galactic lens, the smear of smoky crimson against the darkness. Whatever happened, we all knew, there was no return, ever, to the warmth and light of the center. We belonged on the Rim. Aboard Flying Cloud, aboard Aerial, aboard Thermopylae-we belonged on the Rim . . .

"Now," Peggy was saying. "Now. Stand by, all of you . . ."

"Wait!" Ralph's voice was sharp. "There'll be acceleration. Unless we've secured ourselves we shall fall through the holes in the plating-and that



will be the end."

"Then secure yourselves," said Peggy.

I shuffled to where she was standing, got one arm around a stanchion, the other around her waist. I saw that the others were similarly disposing themselves. Peggy, with both hands free, opened two valves. From the venturi of the rocket jetted a white vapor. Then her right hand went out to a crude switch-and, abruptly, the white vapor became a torrent of fire.

It won't work, I thought. It won't work. Not this time . . .

Desperately I clung to the stanchion, fighting the pseudogravity of our acceleration. I tried not to look down through the rents in the shell plating, tried to ignore the light-years-deep chasm beneath us. I clung with desperation to the stanchion and even more desperately to Peggy, who needed both hands to adjust the valves.

The weight on my arms, as acceleration mounted, became intolerable, but I knew that I must not, could not, would not let go.

Then I felt the ominous vibration as the stanchion started to give.

## Chapter 19

Ahead of us had been the spark of luminescence that was a planet, astern of us the disc of fire that was a sun. We had done the things that had to be done-mechanically, not too inefficiently. But I was still seeing, in my mind's eye, the dull-glowing lens of the Galaxy, smoky crimson against the sooty depths of the ultimate night, still feeling, in my left hand and arm, the strain-the strain, and the crackling of the weakening, snapping stanchion. What was real and what was unreal? Was this world towards which we were headed some sort of latter-day Valhalla, a heaven (or hell?) for the souls of departed spacemen?

But we had done the right things-shortening sail, trimming sail, rotating the spars so that the black surfaces of some of the vanes were presented to the major luminary, so that their reflecting surfaces were catching the reflected light from the planet. We had slowed down sufficiently for the making of a safe approach.

"Even so," Ralph was saying, slowly and softly, "what world is it? What world can it be?"

I reached out for the big binoculars on their universally jointed mount. I thought, I'll play this for real. But it must be real. Or must it? Slowly, carefully, I adjusted the focus. What had been only short hours ago little more than a point of light was now a great shining sphere. I stared at it stupidly. About a third of the planetary surface was cloud-covered, mainly in the polar regions. I could observe clearly the seas and the continents-blue and brown and green, the snowclad peaks of the mountain ranges a sparkling white-the seas and the continents, the utterly unfamiliar configurations of land and water.

"What world is it?" asked Ralph again, addressing me directly this time.

"I don't know," I admitted, adding wryly, "But navigation in this ship-or these ships?-has been rather a lost art of late . . ."

"But not, unfortunately, rocketry," observed Sandra cattily.

"Pipe down," growled Ralph. "Pipe down. We've all of us come through, somehow, and we're back where we belong, in Flying Cloud. All we have to do now is to make a landing."

"But where, lord and master?" asked Sandra, too sweetly. "But where?"

"Does it matter?" he growled. "That looks to be a very pleasant world. Frankly, I shall be happy to set this scow down on any convenient stretch of calm water. After we're rested we'll see about getting our bearings . . ."

"In space?" she asked. "Or in time? Or both?"

"Does it matter?" he almost shouted. Then, "It's time we heard something from our tame telepath."

I said, "His amplifier up and died on him."

"I hope he hasn't dumped it," said Sandra, "although I never did fancy dog's brain in aspic. But Peter could make a curry of it."

"I'm not the cook," I told her coldly. "Not on this time track. And neither, my dear, are you the captain."

Ralph glared at us and then turned to the journalist. "Any luck, Martha?"

"Yes," she said, fiddling with the controls of her transceiver. "There are people there, and they're advanced enough to have radio. Their language is strange-to me, at any rate-but their music is human enough, even though it's a little corny for my taste." She switched over from headphone to speaker. There was a man singing, in a pleasant baritone, accompanied by some stringed instrument. The melody was hauntingly familiar, although the words were in that unknown tongue. Then, in spite of the shifts in key, the odd distortions of rhythm, I had it. In his own language, he was singing:

"Goodbye, I'll run

To seek another sun

Where I

May find

There are worlds more kind

Than the ones left behind . . ."

I said, "The Rim Runners' March . . ."

"You could be right," said Ralph doubtfully. Then, with growing assurance, he repeated, "You could be right. Even so, that piece of music is not the exclusive property of Rim Runners. It's old, old-and nobody knows how

many times it's had fresh lyrics tacked on to it. But hearing it, on their radio, is evidence that Terran ships have been in contact with this world. The Survey Service, perhaps, or some off-course star tramp. But I think that we can expect a friendly reception, assistance, even . . ." He was beginning to look more cheerful. "All right. We'll get the rest of the way off this wagon now. This is the ideal approach, towards the sunlit hemisphere of the planet. You know the drill, all of you. Trim sails-black surfaces towards the sun, reflecting surfaces towards the source of reflected light. Start the pumps as soon as they have some atmosphere to work on."

His strong, capable hands played over the control panel. I watched the telltale screen. There was the ship as seen from directly ahead, scanned by the camera at the end of its long bowsprit, eclipsing the sun. Surrounding her were the geometric array of vanes and spars, some blindingly white, some sooty black. I watched-but there was no change in the design. I heard Ralph curse softly, I looked back to him. The control panel was alive with red lights.

The intercom speaker crackled and from it issued Peggy's voice. "The wiring's gone. The power supply to the trimming motors. Burned out."

"Manual trimming," ordered Ralph sharply. "Get along to the trimming motor room, all of you. And fast."

I was the first out of the control room, with Sandra, Doc Jenkins and Martha hard on my heels. We shuffled through the alleyways at speed, keeping the magnetized soles of our sandals in contact with the deck, knowing that to fall free would be to waste time rather than to gain it. But it was a nightmarish means of progression. As we passed the psionic radio room we ran into Claude Smethwick, who had just come out into the alleyway. I grabbed his arm and hustled him along with us, refusing to listen to what he was trying to tell me.

The trimming motor room stank of burned insulation, of overheated and melted metal and plastic, of ozone. Peggy was there, frantically stripping panels from the bulkhead sheathing, laying bare the damaged wiring. I heard Sandra say, "If you'd done this before, Miss Cummings, instead of playing around with homemade fireworks . . ."

"Shut up!" I shouted. Then, "Peggy, put the manual controls in gear!"

"Peter," Claude Smethwick was babbling. "Peter, I've made contact. This world . . ."

"Later," I snapped. "Tell me later. We have to get the way off the ship."

"But . . ."

"Get your paws on to that wheel, all of you! Now . . . now . . . together!" The hand gear was stubborn, and our actions at first were clumsy and uncoordinated. "Together!" I shouted again.

The worst of it all was that we were having to work in free fall conditions. All that held us to the deck was the magnetism of the soles of our sandals. We had no purchase. Yet, at last, the big wheel started to turn-slowly,

slowly. I wondered how much time remained to us before we should plunge, a blazing meteorite, down through the planet's atmosphere.

I snatched a glance at the indicator and gasped, "Belay, there. Belay." So far, so good. The main drivers were trimmed. The auxiliary vanes still presented a greater reflecting surface to the sun than did the mainsails to the reflected light of the planet, but things were coming under control, the feeling of nightmarish urgency was abating.

Ralph's voice came through the intercom. "Trim 1 and 2 spinnakers. Then stand by."

"Turn back!" bawled Claude Smethwick. "We must turn back!"

"Why, Mr. Smethwick?" asked Ralph's disembodied voice coldly.

"I've been trying to tell you, but nobody will listen. I've been in touch with the telepaths on that planet. It's Llanith, one of the antimatter worlds. And they say, 'Turn back! Turn back!' "

"Mr. Malcolm," snapped Ralph. "Trim all sails!"

Again we strained and sweated, again we were driven by the nightmarish sense of urgency. The first pair of spinnakers was trimmed-and then, with the second pair of auxiliary vanes rotated barely a degree on their spars, the hand gear seized up. Peggy said nothing, just relinquished her hold on the wheel and walked rapidly to the spacesuit locker.

I demanded, "Where are you off to?"

She said, "I have to go outside."

"If there's time," muttered Sandra. "If there's time. Why don't you make another rocket, dearie?"

"What's the delay?" Ralph was demanding. "What's the delay?" Then, his voice suddenly soft, "Goodbye, all of you. It's been good knowing you. Goodbye, Sandra . . ."

She said fiercely, "I might be able to make it to control in time."

Dropping our hands from the useless wheel we watched her go. "Very touching," whispered Jenkins. "Very touching . . ." But, in spite of the slight edge of sarcasm to his voice, he was holding Martha Wayne very closely.

I said to Peggy, "This seems to be it. A pity, since everything's been tidied up so nicely."

She pushed the spacesuit back into its locker and came to stand beside me. She said, putting her hand in mine, "But this mightn't be the end, my dear. Even if there's no after life, we know that we're still living in the alternative Universes . . ."

"Or dying . . ." said Jenkins glumly.

And then-it's odd the way that the human brain works in a crisis-a snatch of

archaic verse that I must have learned as a child rose from the depths of my memory, flashed across my mind:

And fast through the midnight dark and drear,

Through the whistling sleet and snow,

Like a sheeted ghost the vessel swept

On the reef of Norman's Woe . . .

But the crew of the schooner Hesperus had died a cold death-ours would be a fiery one. I hoped that it would be sudden.

The ship lurched and shuddered, as though she had in actual fact driven on to a roof. There was a rending, tearing noise, felt as well as heard-the spars and sails, I realized, bearing the brunt of our impact with planet's atmosphere, were braking us, slowing us down. There was the thin, high scream of air rushing over and through projections on our hull, the gaps in our shell plating. The temperature rose sharply. I held Peggy to me tightly, thinking, This is it.

The screaming died to a faint whistle and was drowned by a new sound, the throbbing of the air compressors.

Ralph's voice from the bulkhead speaker was faint and shaky, yet reassuring. He said, "All hands report to the control room. All hands report to control-to splice the main brace. And then we'll make it landing stations."

## Chapter 20

It's not at all a bad sort of world, this Llanith, and I rather think that Peggy and I shall be staying here, even though Ralph and the local scientists are sure that they'll be able to work out just what did happen, just how Flying Cloud made the transition from normal matter to antimatter, or vice versa. The commodore will not have achieved the economical means of interstellar travel of his dreams, but we shall have presented him with something better, much better. There's little doubt that commerce and cultural exchange between the Llanithi Consortium and the Rim Worlds Federation will soon be practicable. And Peggy and I will have an edge on those who, in the not-too-distant future, will come to learn and to teach and to trade.

Meanwhile, Ralph has suggested that each of us tell the story, in his own words, of what happened. The stories, he says, will be of great value to the scientists, both on Llanith and back home on Lorn. It seems that there may have been other forces besides physical ones at play, that psychology may have come into it, and psionics. Be that as it may, it seems obvious-to Peggy and me, at any rate-that the attempt to exceed the speed of light was the governing factor.

Not that we worry much about it.

We're doing nicely, very nicely, the pair of us. My restaurant is better than paying its way; even though the Llanithi had never dreamed of such highly spiced dishes as curry they're fast acquiring the taste for them. And the

bicycles-another novelty-that Peggy makes in her little factory are selling like hot cakes.

Doc and Martha are settling down, too. There's quite a demand for the sort of verse and music that they can turn out without really trying. And when they get tired of composing they pick up their brushes and dazzle the natives with neo-abstractionism. And Claude? He gets by. A telepath can find himself at home anywhere-he can always contact others of his kind. If the Llanithi were purple octopi-which they aren't, of course-he'd be equally happy.

It's only Ralph and Sandra who aren't fitting in. Each of them possesses a rather overdeveloped sense of duty-although I am inclined to wonder if Sandra, in her case, isn't really hoping to find her way back to that time track on which the Matriarchate ruled the Rim Worlds and on which she was captain of her own ship.

If she ever does, I shall be neither her husband nor her cook.

This Universe suits me.