

## HAPPINESS IS A WARM SPACESHIP

The rainbow floods were doused. The station band had left. Empty of her load of cadets, the F.S.S. *Adastra* floated quietly against the stars. The display of First Assignments in the station rotunda was deserted. The crowd had moved to the dome lounge, from which echoed the fluting of girls, the braying and cooing of fathers, mothers, uncles, and aunts, punctuated by the self-conscious baritones of the 99th Space Command class.

Down below, where the Base Central offices functioned as usual, a solitary figure in dress whites leaned rigidly over the counter of Personnel.

"You're absolutely certain there's no mistake?"

"No, it's all in order, Lieutenant Quent." The girl who was coding his status tabs smiled. "First officer, P. B. *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz*, dock eight-two, departs seventeen thirty—that's three hours from now. You have to clear Immunization first, you know."

Lieutenant Quent opened his mouth, closed it, breathed audibly. He picked up the tabs.

"Thank you."

As he strode away a tubby man wearing a *Gal News* badge trotted up to the counter.

"That lad is Admiral Quent's son. What'd he get, Goldie?"

"I shouldn't tell you—a peebee."

"A what? No!"

She nodded, bright-eyed.

"Sweetheart, I'll name you in my will!" He trotted off.

In the medical office Quent was protesting, "But I've had all my standard shots a dozen times!"

The M.O. studied a data display which stated, among other things, that Quent was a Terra-norm Human male, height 1.92 m., skin Cautan, hair Br., eyes Br., distinguishing marks, None. The data did not mention a big homely jaw and two eyebrows which tended to meet in a straight line.

"What's your ship? Ah, the *Rosenkrantz*. Take off your blouse."

"What do I need shots for?" persisted Quent.

"Two fungus, one feline mutate, basic allergens," said the M.O., briskly cracking ampoules.

"Feline what?"

"Other arm, please. Haven't you met your fellow officers?"

"I just got this rancid assignment twenty minutes ago."

"Oh. Well, you'll see. Flex that arm a couple of times. It may swell a bit."

"What about my fellow officers?" Quent demanded darkly.

The M.O. cracked another ampoule and cocked an eye at the display.

"Aren't you the son of Admiral Rathborne Whiting Quent?"

"What's that got to do with my being assigned to a clobbering peebee?"

"Who knows, Lieutenant? Politics are ever with us. I daresay you expected something like the *Sirian*, eh?"

"Well, men considerably below me on the ratings did draw the *Sirian*," Quent said stiffly.

"Clench and unclench that fist a couple of times. No, unclench it too. Tell me, do you share your father's, ah, sentiments about the integration of the Federal Space Force?"

Quent froze. "What the—"

"You've been in space a year, Lieutenant. Surely you've heard of the Pan Galactic Equality Covenant? Well, it's being implemented, starting, with a pilot integration program in the peebees. Three of your future fellow officers were in here yesterday for their pan-Human shots."

Quent uttered a wordless sound.

"You can put on your blouse now," said the M.O. He leaned back. "Life's going to be a bit

lumpy for you if you share your father's prejudices."

Quent picked up his blouse.

"Is it prejudice to think that everyone should have his own—"

"Do you want your boy's life to depend on an octopus?" recited the M.O. wryly.

"Oh, well, there he went too far. I told him so." Quent wrenched his way into his dress blouse. "I'm not prejudiced. Why, some of my—"

"I see," said the M.O.

"I welcome the opportunity," said Quent. He started for the door. "What?"

"Your hat," said the M.O.

"Oh, thanks."

"By the by," the M.O. called after him, "*Gal News* will probably be on your trail."

Quent stopped in midstride and flung up his head like a startled moose. A small figure was trotting toward him down the corridor. His jaw clenched. He took off down a side corridor, doubled through a restricted zone and galloped into the rear of the freight depot, shoving his tabs at a gaping cargoman.

"My dittybox, quick."

Box in arms, he clambered into a cargo duct, ignoring the chorus of yells. He made his way down the treads until he came to an exit in the perimeter docks. He climbed out into the spacious service area of the *Adastra* from which he had debarked two hours before.

The inlet guard grinned. "Coming back aboard, Lieutenant?"

Quent mumbled and started off around the docking ring, lugging his box. He passed the immaculate berths of the *Crux*, *Enterprise*, *Sirian*, passed the gleaming courier docks, plodded on into sections crowded with the umbilical tubes of freighters and small craft and crisscrossed with cables and service rigging. He stumbled and was grazed by a mobile conveyor belt whose driver yelled at him. Finally he came to an inlet scrawled in chalk "PB ROSEKZ". It was a narrow, grimy tube. Nobody was in sight.

He set down his box and started in, trying not to rub his white shoulders against the flex. The tube ended in an open lock which gave directly into a small wardroom cluttered with parcels and used drinking bulbs.

Quent coughed. Nothing happened.

He called out.

A confused sound erupted from the shaftway opposite. It was followed by a massive rear end clad in shorts and a shaggy gray parka. The newcomer turned ponderously. Quent looked up at an ursine muzzle set in bristly jowls, a large prune of a nose.

"Who you?" demanded the ursinoid in thick Galactic.

"Lieutenant Quent, First Officer, reporting," said Quent.

"Good," rumbled the other. He surveyed Quent from small bright eyes and scratched the hair on his belly. Quent had erred about the parka.

"You know refrigerate for storage?"

"Refrigerant?"

"Come. Maybe you make some sense."

Quent followed him back into the shaftway and down a dark ladder. Presently they came to a light above an open hatch. The ursinoid pointed to a tangle of dripping tubes.

"What's it for?" Quent asked.

"Make cold," growled the other. "New model. Should not slobber so, *vernt?*"

"I mean, what's it refrigerating?"

"Ants. Here, you take. Maybe better luck."

He thrust a crumpled folder into Quent's hand and shouldered past him up the ladder, leaving a marked aroma of wet bear rug.

The leaflet was titled: *Temperature-Controlled Personnel System Mark X5 Series D, Mod.,*

*Appvl. Pdg.* Quent peered into the hatch. Beyond the pipes was a dim honeycomb of hexagonal cubicles, each containing a dark bulge the size of a coconut. He heard a faint, chittering sound. Quent began to examine the dialed panel beside the hatch. It did not seem to match the leaflet diagram. Somewhere above him the ladder clanked.

"Futile," hissed a voice overhead. Quent looked up. A thin gray arm snaked down and plucked the folder from his grasp. Quent had a glimpse of bulging, membranous eyes set in a long skull, and then the head retracted and its owner clambered down. It, or he, was a lizardlike biped taller than Quent, wearing a complicated vest.

"You are Quent—our new first officer," the creature clacked. Quent could see its tongue flicker inside the beaked jaws. "I am Svensk. Welcome aboard. You will now go away while I adjust this apparatus before the captain buggers it completely."

"The captain?"

"Captain Imray. Hopeless with mechanisms. Do you intend to remain here chattering until these ridiculous ants decongeal?"

Quent climbed back to the wardroom, where somebody was trying to sing. The performer turned out to be a short, furry individual in officer's whites with his hat on the back of his head and a bulb of greenish liquor in one brown fist.

*"Il pleut dans mon coeur comme il pleut dans la ville,"* caroled the stranger.

He broke off to pop round yellow eyes at Quent.

"Ah, our new first officer, is it not? Permit me." Incisors flashed as he grabbed Quent by the shoulders and raked sharp vibrissae across Quent's cheeks. "Sylvestre Sylla, at your service."

Quent exposed his own square teeth.

"Quent."

"Quent?" Sylla repeated. "Not Rathborne Whiting Quent, *Junior!*" he asked in a different tone, touching a black tongue to his incisors.

Quent nodded, coughing. The wardroom seemed to reek of musk.

"Welcome aboard, First Officer Quent. Welcome to the *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz*, patrol boat. Not, of course, the *Sirian*," Sylla said unctuously, "but a worthy ship, *voyons*. I trust you are not disappointed in your first assignment, First Officer Quent?"

Quent's jaw set.

"No."

"Permit me to show you to your quarters, First Officer."

Sylla waved Quent to the upper ladderway, which opened from the wardroom ceiling. Above the wardroom was a section of cubicles for the crew, each accessible by a flexible sphincter port. Beyond these the shaftway ended in the bridge.

"Here you are, First Officer," Sylla pointed. "And your luggage, sir?"

"I left it outside," said Quent.

"Doubtless it is still there," replied Sylla and dived gracefully through another sphincter.

Quent climbed down and exited from the tube in time to rescue his dittybox from a grapple. As he wrestled it up the shaftway he could hear Sylla promising to defeather Alouette.

The cubicle proved to be slightly smaller than his cadet quarters on the *Adastra*. Quent sighed, sat down on his hammock gimbal, took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. He put his hat back on and took out his pocket recorder. The recorder had a played message tab in place. Quent flicked the rerun and held it to his ear.

*Ping-ping-ping*, went the official channels signal. He heard a sonorous throat-clearing.

"Congratulations on your Academy record, Lieutenant. Your mother would have been, um, proud. Well done. And now, good luck on your first mission. One that will, I trust, profoundly enlighten you."

The recorder pinged again and cut off. Quent's frown deepened. He shook his head slowly. Then he took a deep breath, opened his dittybox and rooted through a bundle of manuals. Selecting one, he pushed out through the sphincter and climbed up to the bridge.

In the command chair the ursine Captain Imray was flipping fuel selectors and grunting into the engineroom speaker. Quent looked around the small bridge. The navigator's console and the computer station were empty. A little old man in a flowered shirt sat in the commo cubby. He glanced around and batted one baggy eye at Quent, without ceasing to whisper into his set. He had a gray goatee and yellow buck teeth.

The first officer's chair was beside the shaft ladder. Quent removed a parcel from the seat, sat down and opened his manual. When the captain ceased grunting Quent cleared his throat.

"Shall I take over the check, sir? I gather you are going through phase twenty-six."

The ursinoid's eyes widened.

"Some help I get," he boomed. "Sure, sure, you take."

Quent activated his console.

"Gyro lateral thrust, on," he said, manipulating the auxiliary. There was no reply from Engines.

"Gyro lateral thrust, on," Quent repeated, thumbing the engineroom channel.

"Morgan don't say much," remarked Captain Imray.

"The engineering officer?" asked Quent. "But—but you mean he would respond if the function were negative, sir?"

"Sure, sure," said Imray.

"Gyro torque amplifiers, on," said Quent. Silence. "Primary impellor circuit, live," he continued grimly and worked on down the check. At: "Pod eject compensator—" a brief moan came from Engines.

"What?"

"Morgan says don't bother him, he done all that," Imray translated.

Quent opened his mouth. The main voder suddenly began barking.

"Control to peebee *Rosy*! Pee bee *Rosy*, prepare to clear dock at this time. Repeat, peebee *Rosy* to station north, go! Peebee *Kip* four-ten, repeat, four-ten. Control to peebee *Kip*, dock eight-two now clearing. Repeat, peebee *Kip* green for dock eight-two."

"Morgan, you hear?" boomed Imray. "We green for go, Morgan?"

A faint squeal from Engines.

"But Captain, we're only at check-phase thirty," said Quent and ducked as Lieutenant Sylla hurtled out of the shaft to land in the navigation console with a rattle of claws. Sylla slapped the screens to life with one hand while punching course settings with the other. Imray and the commo gnome were yanking at their webs. From below came the clang and hiss of the disengaging lock, and the next instant the station gravity went off.

As Quent pawed for his own web he heard Imray bellowing something. The auxiliaries let in and the *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz* leaped to station north.

Quent hauled himself down to his chair, trying to orient the wheeling constellations on the screens.

"How's she look, Morgan?" Imray was asking. "Green we go out?"

Another hoot came from Engines. Sylla was smacking course settings with one furry fist.

"Svensk! Appleby! You set?" Imray bawled.

"But Captain—" Quent protested.

Sylla kicked the fix pedal, twiddled his calibrator and dropped the fist.

"*Gesprüch!*" roared Imray and slammed home the main drive.

Quent's head cleared. He was crosswise in his seat.

"With no web is risky, son," said Imray, shaking his jowls.

"We weren't due to go for forty-five minutes!" expostulated Quent. He righted himself as

acceleration faded. "The check is incomplete, sir. Control had no right—"

"Apparently the first officer did not hear the four-ten," said Sylla silkily.

"Four-ten?"

"Four-ten is ship in bad trouble, must dock quick," Imray told him.

"But that should be three-three-delta-ex-four-one-otto point with the vessel's designation."

"Doubtless in the star class vessels First Officer Quent is used to," said Sylla. "Here he will find life less formal."

"What was the four-ten, Pom?" called a clear, sweet voice.

Quent twisted. Looking up from beside his elbow was a dazzling girl-face framed in copper curls. Quent craned further. The rest of her appeared to meet the wildest demands of a man who had spent the last year on a training ship.

"Huh?" he asked involuntarily.

"Hi," said the apparition, waving her hand irritably in front of Quent's nose and continuing to gaze at the commo officer.

"The *Kip*," said the little man over his shoulder. "That's the pee- bee *Kipsuga Chomo*, sir," he wagged his goatee at Quent. "Three hundred hours with some contaminant gas. They sealed up in the bridge but Ikky had to bring 'em in by himself. Not much air in these here peebees."

He turned back to his board.

Quent glanced around. Three hundred hours was over two weeks. He shuddered.

"But why didn't—"

"Why did not someone come to their rescue?" Sylla cut in. "The first officer forgets. Patrol boats are the ones that go to the rescue. Who comes to aid a patrol boat? Only another patrol boat—in this case ourselves, who were sitting at Central awaiting our new first officer. *Tant pis*, they were only a gaggle of Non-Humans—"

Imray swatted the air crossly.

"Now, now, Syll."

"Soup's hot," said the girl. "Ooh! My jam."

She reached a slim white arm around Quent's ankles. Quent tracking closely, saw that the parcel he had displaced had collided with the gimbals—together with his hat—and was exuding a rosy goo.

"Tchah!" She snatched it up and departed down the shaft.

Quent picked up his hat and shook it. Jam drops drifted onto his leg.

Captain Imray was clambering into the shaftway.

"The first officer will take the first watch, is that not correct?"

Without waiting for an answer Sylla sailed past the captain and vanished. Only the commo officer remained absorbed in his inaudible dialog.

Quent collected the floating jam in his handkerchief and wedged the cloth under his seat. Then he kicked off on a tour of the cramped bridge. The screens were, he saw, inoperative under drive. He pulled up to the library computer and signaled for their course data display. Instead of the requested data the voder came on.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call—

Quent reached for the erase.

"Don't do that, sir," the commo man said.

"Why not? I want some data."

"Yes, sir. But that's Lieutenant Sylla's setup, sir. Very fond of water poetry, he is. Just leave it, sir, Lieutenant Svensk will get whatever you want."

Quent glared at the computer, which was now reciting:

Degged with dew, dappled with dew,  
Are the groins of the braes—

He switched it off.

“Perhaps you would be so good as to inform me of our course and of the parameters of our patrol sector?” he asked icily. “I am Lieutenant Quent, First Officer.”

“Yessir, Lieutenant.” The little man’s face split in a grin that sent his goatee pointing at his buck teeth. “Pomeroy here, sir. Lester Pomeroy, Ensign. Sure is good to see a fellow Human aboard, sir, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“Not at all, Ensign,” said Quent.

“I guess maybe you feel a bit put out, sir,” Pomeroy went on in a confidential tone. “Them en-aitches prob’ly never even introduced themselves—right, sir?”

“Well, I haven’t had time to look over the roster yet.”

“What roster?” Pomeroy chuckled. “Anything you want to know, sir, just ask Pomeroy. You want to know the gen? Well, there’s Captain Imray, he’s from Deneb way. Navigator, Lieutenant Sylla—I don’t know exactly where he’s from. He’s what they call a lutroid. Puts out terrible strong when he’s wrought up. And Lieutenant Svensk, he’s Science when he’s set low of course, and conversely he’s Guns when the need arises. His vest, see? And then there’s me for Commo and Morgan for Engines—he don’t say much. Wait till you meet Morgan. And there’s our combat team—but they don’t count.”

“Why not?” asked Quent dazedly.

“They’re froze, that’s why. And froze they’ll stay. Nobody wants to get them boys out.” Pomeroy gave a nervous giggle.

“But I know the one you’re itching to meet, Lieutenant, sir. Miss Mellicent Appleby, Logistical supply. Ain’t she a treat? Cooks up a storm, too. But there’s one thing she don’t supply, I better warn you, sir.” His grin faded. “She don’t supply no Appleby. So far, anyhow.”

Pomeroy paused, waited. Quent said nothing.

“Now, you ask about our patrol beat—no, sir,” he broke off as Quent moved to the display tank. “No use to try that, sir. Svensk has it stressed up as a psodospace—some crazy snake game. But it’s simple. We’re Sector Twelve, like a big piece of cake, see?” He gestured. “Here we are at the point. That’s Base Central. First stop is right close in—that’s Strugglehome. If they’re all green we go on to Davon Two. If they’re not hurting we swing over to Turlavon and Ed. And if nothing comes up we dock in at Midbase. If they haven’t any grief we hang around and check Route Leo—service the beacons and so forth—and then we hit the Chung Complex. That’s a mess. When we’re through there we make the long hop out to Farbase—and if they’re all quiet we start on around through Goldmine and Tunney and Sopwith and so on, back home to Central. Eighteen mail colonies, one route and two bases. Takes about a hundred and twenty days, provided nothing comes up.”

“What sort of thing is apt to come up, Mr. Pomeroy?”

“Distress calls, wrecks, jitney duty for some royal groundhog going from here to there, wonky beacons, exploding mail, field freeze-ups, ghost signals, flying wombats—you name it, we get it sooner or later.” His poached eyes rolled mournfully. “We’re the boys that do the dirty, sir, you know. If it’s too clobby to mess with, lay it on the poor old pee-bees. Take our last tour. Everything was tight till we hit the Chung Complex. They got a crustal instability on a little water planet and both their big ships blowed out on the other side of the system. So *we* have to ferry the bleeders off—and they won’t go without their livestock. Thirty-three days hauling octopuses, that’s what.”

Quent frowned. “In a Space Force vessel?”

“Ah, them en-aitches don’t care,” Pomeroy grimaced.

Quent kicked back to his chair in silence.

“Never you mind, Lieutenant sir,” the little man commiserated and hoisted an amber bulb,

his wrinkled neck working.

He wiped the bulb with his shirttail. "Have some Leo Lightning, sir?"

Quent jerked upright. "Drinking on the bridge?"

Pomeroy winked broadly.

"Captain Imray don't care."

"Mr. Pomeroy," said Quent firmly. "I appreciate your intentions—but there will be no drinking on this bridge while I am O.C. Kindly stow that bulb."

Pomeroy stared blankly.

"Yes, sir," he said at last and turned to his board.

The bulb remained in plain sight.

Quent opened his mouth, closed it. Muscles flickered in his square unhandsome countenance. A clamor was rising from the wardroom below: Svensk's clack, Sylla's waspish tenor, mingled with the captain's boom. The words could not be distinguished, but his fellow officers were clearly not a harmonious team. Presently they subsided, and the ladder clanked as they retired to rest.

Quent sighed through his teeth and picked up the jam-spattered manual. The *Ethel P. Rosenkrantz*, of which he was first officer, was in full star drive with twenty-three essential operational procedures, all his responsibility, unchecked.

. . .

Five hours later the ladder clanked again and the hulk of Captain Imray heaved up to the bridge. He was followed by Lieutenant Sylla in free glide. The lutroid landed in his console with a passing flick that made Pomeroy jump for his bulb.

"Twenty-twenty hours, First Officer Quent relieved by Captain Imray," said Quent formally to the log.

"Sure, sure, I take her, son," chuckled Imray, settling himself.

"You go look Appleby, *vermt*?"

"I am going to make a preliminary inspection of the ship, Captain."

"Good." Imray beamed. "See how conscience the humans, Syll? From them example you could learn."

"*Sans doute*," snarled Sylla. "It is also possible that our first officer feels a need to familiarize himself with the humble patrol boat, which perhaps did not engage his attention during his training as a future star-class admiral."

"Now, Syll," growled Imray.

"Come on, Lieutenant, sir," Pomeroy pulled Quent's sleeve.

Quent's right fist uncalled slowly. He followed the little man into the shaft.

In the wardroom Pomeroy helped himself from a net of wrapped sandwiches and settled down with his bulb at the gimbaled table. Quent surveyed the room. It was a cylinder with walls composed of lockers in which, according to his manual, were stored suits, tools, repair and grappling rigs, fuse panels, and the oxy supply. These could be checked later. On his left was the lock and a slave screen, now blank. Across from the lock was a pantry cubby and the shaftway down which he had first followed Imray.

Quent kicked over to the shaft and started aft. The next section contained the main food stores, a small galley-cum-infirmarium, waste intakes and the fore quadrant of the regeneration system which ran through several sections of the hull. He glanced through its hatch panel at a lighted mass of culture trays and continued crab-wise along the dim shaft, vaguely aware that his feet were encountering a filmy substance. He was now passing more sphincters which gave access to cubicles for transient passengers and package mail.

"Must you trample on my laundry, Lieutenant?" inquired a soprano voice in his ear.

Miss Appleby's head protruded from a port behind him. Her gaze was directed toward his

leg, which seemed to be wrapped in turquoise silk.

"Oh. Sorry." He disentangled, trying not to kick. "I'm doing a tour of the ship."

"Well, do your touring someplace else, please," she said. "These are my quarters."

"All these?" He gestured.

"When we haven't any transients, I don't see why not."

He parted a port at random and looked in. The cubicle was draped in fluffy stuff and the hull wall sparkled with holograms. Quent had the impression of an offensively healthy character in ceaseless action. He moved to another cubicle—it proved to be full of bundles tied with bows. Not mail. He tried another, Miss Appleby's head revolving as she watched him. This one held what appeared to be a private kitchen and it smelled of fudge.

"These wires," he called back to the head. "Are they authorized?"

"Captain Imray never objected. Please get on with it. I'm trying to take a bath."

Quent peered. There were indeed rainbow droplets in the curls around her delicate ears. He licked his lips.

"Yes, ma'am," he said absently, drifting toward her.

"By the way, Lieutenant," said the charming head. "Did you notice those holos in there?"

"Very nice." He drifted faster, smiling hopefully.

"Didn't you recognize them?"

"Should I?" he beamed.

"Yes, I think so," she said calmly. "That's my fiancé, Bob Coatesworth. Vice Admiral Robert B. Coatesworth. Think it through, Lieutenant."

With a soft sucking sound her head vanished back into the cubicle.

Quent halted. He pounded his fist slowly against his head—several times. Then he resumed his journey aft.

Beyond the bulkhead he found emergency pod inlets, which would require a careful check, and the refrigerant storage quadrant he had met before. He peered through the view panel. The drip seemed to have stopped.

The regeneration chamber ended here, giving room for the landleg stabilizers and the *Rosenkrantz's* small-weapons turrets, all of which he would have to go over in detail later on. This ship was old. The manual referred to it as a heavy-duty, primitive type, equipped for planetside landings. Was the system still operational? Pomeroy had told him that their mail exchange was normally conducted from orbit.

Through the next bulkhead the shaft opened into the echoing gloom of the main cargo hold. This felt dank, perhaps in memory of the octopi. He made his way along the hull past the airsled and the cradles filled with mail pods. He gave the main cargo hatch a brief check and turned to the engineroom hatchway.

The hatch refused to open.

"First Officer to Engineer," he said to the speaker. "Open up."

The engineroom was silent.

"The first officer speaking," he said more loudly. "Open the hatch."

The speaker gave a squeal that sounded like "Blow."

"What's wrong?" Quent shouted. "Open up."

"Blo-oo-oo-ow," moaned the speaker.

"I'm inspecting the ship. Engineer, undog this hatch."

No reply.

Quent pounded on the grille.

"First Officer Quent," said Sylla's voice from the hold voder. "The captain requests that you cease annoying the engineer."

"I'm not annoying the engineer. He won't let me in."

"Better you try some other time, son," said Imray's rumble.



"But—yes, sir," Quent gritted.

He pounded his head again, less gently. Then he started back through the hold, pursued by the dim sound of bagpipes from Engines. The shaft was now empty of Miss Appleby and her laundry. Pomeroy was still in the wardroom, nursing his bulb.

"Morgan throw you out, sir? Them en-aitches got no respect."

Quent silently helped himself to some sandwiches and a tea bulb and rummaged through the cassette locker until he recognized some Sector Twelve names—Strugglehome, Turlavon, the Chung Complex. He carried the lot to his cubicle, carefully stowed away his stained dress whites and slung his hammock cocoon. The sandwiches turned out to be delicious. Before he had heard through the data on Turlavon his eyelids closed.

"Wake up, Lieutenant."

Quent came half out of his cubicle and with Pomeroy hanging onto his arm.

"You was having nightmares, sir."

The little man's left eye seemed to be swelling shut. Across the way Svensk's bony head poked out. Imray and Sylla were peering down from the bridge. They were all grinning.

"Uh—sorry."

Quent disengaged himself and pulled back into his cabin.

"Orbit in an hour, sir," Pomeroy called. "Strugglehome."

In the twenty ship days to Midbase, Quent acquired considerable enlightenment. At Strugglehome he asked Sylla to show him the mail-pod exchange routine. Here he learned that the slow man on a pod grapple can get a set of mashed fingers. The lutroid apologized effusively. By Davon Two Quent's hand was in shape to help Svensk prepare a shipment from the culture chamber. The big saurian became animated in the fetid warmth and treated Quent to a harangue on phylogenetics. Quent finally told him to go away. He then learned, too late, that the chamber hatch controls were defective on the inside. Three hours later, when Miss Appleby decided to investigate the pounding noises, Quent was purple from breathing CO<sub>2</sub> and she had to help him out.

"Wha's girl doing on this thing anyway?" he gasped.

"Oh, a lot of us log officers take en-aitch tours," she dimpled. "It's so restful."

Quent shuddered and clamped his big jaw.

About Appleby herself he learned that she spent all her time in her cubicles fixing up her trousseau and her hoard of stuff for her future home. The amount of loot she had astonished him. But she seemed to have been equally effective in loading up the *Rosenkrantz's* T.E.—the ship bulged with stores. She also emerged on the dot with excellent meals, which seemed to be Captain Imray's chief interest in life.

During the hop to Turlavon Quent made two more efforts to get into Morgan's domain, and was again rebuffed. He settled down to learning the ship bolt by bolt, manual in hand.

Turlavon passed without incident, but at Ed they had to wait for the planet station crew to finish harvesting. For three whole watches Quent struggled with unstable orbits, until he learned that Ed had enormous masscons and that someone had disassembled the ship's grav-mass analyzer. He bore it all stoically, but his jaw was corded with knots which seemed to have been there before. He had, after all, been an admiral's son for a long time.

At Midbase they lay into the main cargo umbilical to offload a flywheel for the station gyros. The delay at Ed had thrown them out of synch with Base time and the station dark-period caught them early. Quent used the chance to check over the ship's exterior valve seals. He had worked back to the main lock when his hand light picked up a small gray creature flitting past the aft fins. It was about a meter tall and roughly humanoid.

Quent called out. The figure accelerated and vanished among the dock belts.

Quent frowned after it and went into the wardroom. Captain Imray was grunting over his greenbook tabs. The others were on the bridge, listening to the station newscast.

"Morgan," said Quent. "Would he be about so high—and gray?"

Imray leaned back and rubbed his prune nose.

"That's him. He go now listen is them gyros all right. Like a mother for gyros is Morgan."

"He must have left by the engineroom crash hatch." Quent pointed to the panel. "Why isn't the telltale light on?"

"The first officer's appetite for the minutest details of our humble craft is truly admirable," yawned Sylla, lounging in. "If it were not so tedious."

"Mr. Sylla, if that hatch lock—"

"Sure, sure," said Imray. "But Morgan never leave nothing open. Not Morgan. He like to come, go, private, *vernt*?"

"Do you mean that you've allowed Morgan to kill the telltale circuits, Captain?"

"The mammalian insecurity syndrome," remarked Svensk, unfolding himself out of the shaft. He was playing with a small wire toroid which changed shape disturbingly. "The leaky-womb phobia," he creaked.

"I give you the panic of the omelet," Sylla snapped.

"Captain Imray," said Quent, "by regulation it's my responsibility to oversee the engineroom. With your permission, this would seem to be the time for me to take a look."

Imray squinted at him.

"Morgan very sensitive being, son, very sensitive." He wiggled his big black-nailed hands to show Morgan's sensitivity. Quent nodded and started aft.

"Nothing touch, son," Imray called after him. "Morgan—"

The engineroom personnel hatch was still dogged. Quent went to the hull and unbolted a pod cradle, revealing a duct panel designed to service the life-support conduit to Engines. He unscrewed the panel and tugged. It did not move. He displaced another cradle and found a magnetic contraption with no discoverable leads. He summoned Svensk, who arrived unhurriedly and gave it a brief inspection.

"Can you open this?"

"Yes," said Svensk, and started back through the hold.

"Mr. Svensk, come back. I want you to open this lock."

"The semantic confusions you homotherms get into are beyond belief," croaked Svensk. "Are you not aware that Morgan desires this to remain closed?"

"As first officer of this ship I am ordering you to open it."

"When I said I could open it—I meant with the proper tools."

"What are the proper tools?"

"Linear force must be applied in the presence of a certain set of alternating pressures in a gaseous medium."

He arched his long neck. Quent scowled at him.

"Pressures? Mr. Svensk, are you deliberately—" Quent suddenly stabbed his wrench at the saurian. "It's a sonic lock, isn't it? Set for... Mr. Pomeroy, bring that recorder in the wardroom locker back here. I want you to imitate Morgan's voice."

Reluctantly, Pomeroy tooted while Quent tugged, and the panel slid open. Instead of the shining banks and alleyways of a normal engineroom they were looking into a pitch-dark tangle.

"What in the name of space—?" Quent reached into the filaments.

"Sir, I wouldn't do that," warned Pomeroy.

"Fascinating!" Svensk's skullhead came over Quent's shoulder.

"What is that mess?"

"I fancy it is part of the sensor system by which Morgan maintains contact with the stress

structure of his mechanisms. I had no idea he had achieved anything so extensive.”

“Just close it up, please sir,” Pomeroy begged.

Quent stared into the web.

“I’m going in,” he gritted.

From behind them came a piercing wail. Quent spun and a gray wraith flew at his face, spitting sparks. He reeled back, his arms over his eyes. The hatch clashed shut.

“Oh sir, that’s done it!” cried Pomeroy.

The lights went out. The hold voder broke into a skirling, howling din. Quent heard Svensk pounding away from them, and stumbled after the sound. The wardroom voder began to roar. Quent found his hand light and rushed to the bridge. The deck was a bedlam of noise and every console was flashing. Svensk and Sylla were yanking out computer cables. Quent slammed down the circuit breakers. There was no effect. The hideous din yammered on.

“Nothing to do but get out till he calms down,” Pomeroy yelled in Quent’s ear. “Thank the Lord we aren’t in space.”

The others had left. As Quent went out Miss Appleby flew past in a whirl of turquoise silk.

“You idiot,” she raged. “Look what you’ve done.”

Imray stood glowering on the deck. Svensk towered at full height, his eyes veiled in membranes. Sylla paced with ears laid back and there was a decided pungency in the air.

Quent slammed the lock but the uproar reverberating through the *Rosenkrantz* was clearly audible.

“He’s got an override on those circuits,” Quent fumed. “I’m going in there and cut off his air.”

“Asinine,” grated Svensk. “We are in air.”

“His water, then.”

“To do so would render the refrigerant exchange inoperative.”

“There must be something—what does he eat?”

“Special concentrates,” snapped Miss Appleby. “I stocked him with a year’s supply at Central.”

Quent kicked a freight belt.

“In other words, Morgan runs this ship.”

Imray shrugged angrily.

“He run it—we run it—we go,” he growled.

“When Space Force Monitor hears about this it’ll be Morgan who goes,” Quent told them darkly

Sylla spat.

“The first officer had forgotten the *Kipsuga Chomo*. Or perhaps he recalls the four-ten which inconvenienced him?”

“What?” Quent turned on the lutroid. “I have forgotten nothing, Mr. Sylla. What has the *Kip* to do with Morgan?”

Imray shook his jowls.

“No, Syll, no!”

Svensk coughed.

“Look, sir,” said Pomeroy. “Morgan’s fixing to make a night of it. He don’t quit. How’s for you and me to go by the office and see about a place to sleep?”

Miss Appleby sniffed. “That would be useful.”

The din continued unabated. Reluctantly, Quent went off with Pomeroy to the Midbase station offices, where they found one billet for a female only. Midbase was bulging with colonists awaiting transfer on Route Leo. In the end the male complement of the *Rosenkrantz* settled down to doze uncomfortably on a textile shipment and to endure the jibes of the

cargomen when the lights came on.

Horrible sounds came from the *Rosenkrantz* all morning. After noon mess Morgan appeared to tire. The officers went warily back on board.

"Have to give him time to cool down," said Pomeroy. As if on cue the voders erupted briefly. A few minutes later they did it again. The others went to their hammocks, leaving Quent in the wardroom to brood.

He was still there when Miss Appleby came in.

"I'm afraid I was rude to you, Lieutenant Quent."

He looked up dully. She seemed to be all aglow.

"Actually what you did was ever so lucky for me."

She smiled, setting down a parcel. She served herself tea and a cookie. Instead of taking them to her quarters she came back and sat down at the table with an excited wiggle.

Quent's eyes opened. He sat up.

"That Mrs. Lee," she confided happily. "You know, the colonist? She's got twenty meters of Gregarin passanterie. It took me all day to talk her into swapping me one meter for a petite suit liner and a case of bottlehots. I'd never have got it if we hadn't been held up, thanks to you."

She glowed at him over her tea bulb.

"Well, I—"

"It'll make *the* vest of all time for Bob," she sighed. "Bob loves vests—off duty, of course."

Quent put his head back on his fists. He had been raised with two older sisters.

"That's—great."

"You're depressed," she observed.

Quent heaved a sigh and shook his head. Against his better judgment he found himself looking into her large green eyes.

"Miss Appleby," he blurted. "When I came on this ship I was completely unprejudiced against Non-Humans. Completely. I welcomed the chance to show my father that other beings were just as fit to serve in space as—" His voice faded. "Now I just don't know. This mess—that insufferable Morgan—"

"Yours is a strange reaction, Lieutenant. We girls always say it's much safer on a ship with one of Morgan's people. They'll do anything for the ship. Like the *Kip*, you know."

"What do you know about the *Kipsuga*?"

"Why, just that their engineer saved them. He got them back to Central. Ikka somebody. Pom says he died."

Quent frowned.

"Funny they didn't tell me about him."

"Probably your father is the reason they keep things from you, don't you think, Lieutenant?" She stood up, hugging her parcel. "They're fine people," she told him earnestly. "You just have to understand their ways. That's what Bob says. He says a lot of Space Force officers are prejudiced without knowing it."

Quent looked up at her. She radiated Galactic amity.

"Could be," he said slowly. "Miss Appleby, maybe I haven't—"

"Try a little harder," she encouraged him. "That Mrs. Lee said a newsman was asking about you."

"It is time to eat."

The harsh croak cut her off. Svensk unfolded himself from the ladder.

"Right away."

Appleby vanished. Svensk turned a suspicious eye on Quent.

"Serpent," jeered Sylla, bouncing down, "You reptiles did not understand that time existed before until we provided you with thermal vests. At home we have still the taboo against

eating lizards because of their unfortunate tendency to putrefy while torpid.”

“Activity fails to correlate with intelligence,” Svensk clacked haughtily.

“On the other hand,” Sylla licked his vibrissae, “our primates are regarded as quite palatable. Braised, naturally, with just a *rien* of celery. Amusing, is it not, First Officer Quent?”

Quent exhaled carefully.

“If you feel so, Mr. Sylla.” He stretched his mouth sideways in a lifelike smile. “Excuse me, I believe I’ll lie down.”

The silence behind him lasted so long he almost wondered about it.

The next fortnight was spent laboriously servicing beacons along Route Leo. The beacons were elderly M20s, which Quent had cursed while navigating from the *Adastra*. Now he found their trouble lay in the bulky shielding which attracted dust, thus building up electrostatic imbalances that distorted the beacon’s spectrum and eventually its orbit. They had to be periodically cleaned and neutralized. The job required long hours and close cooperation among crewmen. By the fourth and last beacon Quent’s jaw had developed a permanent ache.

“Have you not yet finished, First Officer?”

Quent was clinging awkwardly to the far end of the slippery kinetic bleeder. Above him Sylla wriggled through the beacon grids with the agility of his otter forbears, warping his vacuum line expertly as he went.

“It is clear that the Academy does not contemplate its graduates shall endure the indignity of labor,” Sylla jibed.

“I admit I’m inexperienced in this and not as fast as you are,” Quent said mildly. “Mr. Svensk. Where are you casting that sweep line?”

“As per your request, down,” said Svensk from the far side. “Although it seems senseless.”

“I meant down here—toward me.” Quent took a deep breath. “Not toward the center of gravity of the beacon-ship system. A loose way of speaking, I’m afraid.”

“Lieutenant Quent, sir,” said Pomeroy’s voice from the ship.

“If you wouldn’t mind sir, could you turn your volume down a bit? There seems to be some sort of grinding sound in your speaker and the *Greenhill* signal is awful weak, sir.”

*Greenhill*, a colony ship out of Midbase, was running a check on the beacon calibrations as it went by.

Quent swore and snapped off his helmet speaker. A moment later he felt a jerk on his lines and found himself revolving in space two meters from the end of the bleeder. His line had no tension. When he stopped his tumble he saw that Svensk had fouled him with the sweep and was departing over the limb of the beacon. Sylla was nowhere in sight.

“Do you want your life to depend on an octopus?” Quent muttered under his breath. He reached for the speaker switch, then paused. His orbit was decaying. He straightened out and began to breathe measuredly.

The others had gone inboard and unsuited when Quent finally finished clearing the bleeder shaft. In the wardroom he stumbled into Miss Appleby taking a server of food to Imray’s cubicle.

“I want you to know I’m trying,” he told her wearily.

“That’s the spirit, Lieutenant.”

She would make a super admiral’s wife, Quent realized.

The *Greenhill* confirmed the beacon calibrations and the *Rosenkrantz* headed out to the Chung Complex. When they came out of drive their screens lit up in glory. The Chung was a cluster of colored suns, warm and inviting after the bleakness of Route Leo.

“Don’t you believe it, sir.” Pomeroy broke the thread of his crochet work against his stained frontals. “I dread this place, I do.” His eyes rolled as he reached for his bulb. “All en-itches here. Under water, too, most of ’em, the slimy things. Even Mr. Sylla hates them.”

Despite Pomeroy's forebodings the first calls passed off with only routine problems of mail and message exchange. The little man continued to follow Quent about, mumbling gloomily. He was also dosing himself with increasing quantities of Leo Lightning whenever he could sneak off the bridge.

"Let Pomeroy tell you, sir," he grumbled in the night watches, "They're devils down there. We oughtn't have any dealings with things like them. Pomeroy knows. Pomeroy's seen sights no Humans had ought to bear. Worms. Worms is the least of it." His goatee bobbed over his scrawny adam's apple. "Worms and worse."

The Chung orbits continued without troubles other than those provided by Svensk and Sylla—and even these two appeared to be letting up. Quent's only view of the "worms and worse" was on the ship's screens. Most of the alien commo officers were aquatic. A few did appear wormlike and two had tentacles. There was one truly repellent squid affair with unidentifiable organs floating around its eye stalks. There was also a rather genial dolphinoid to whom Pomeroy was vitriolic. They were the ones who had required transport for the octopi.

"I'm a broadminded man, sir," Pomeroy told Quent that night. "Tolerant, Pomeroy is. I put up with 'em." He hiccuped. "No choice. Pomeroy's sunk low. I don't deny it. But them things down there—" He shuddered and hitched closer confidentially. "They think they're as good as Humans, sir. Just as good as you, or better. What'll happen when them things decides they wants to come in the Force, sir? Expect a Human to take orders from a worm?" His bloodshot eyes bored anxiously into Quent's.

"Mr. Pomeroy. In case you are under the impression that I share my father's views on Non-Humans in the Space Force, you are mistaken."

"That's right, sir, you're a tolerant man too, sir. But a person can't help wondering—"

"Kindly wonder to yourself in the future, Mr. Pomeroy," Quent said coldly. "For your information, I am fully in favor of the integration program. If a being is a competent spacer, I don't see that his personal appearance enters in."

Pomeroy closed his mouth and turned back to his board in offended silence. Presently he paid a prolonged visit to the wardroom and returned, wiping his mouth. For several watches he spoke only when Quent addressed him.

At the last Chung stop they picked up a short-range freight shuttle whose jockey needed a lift to Farbase. The jockey was a smaller version of Svensk. They got his shuttle stowed without mishap and the *Rosenkrantz* went into drive for the long run out to Farbase. Quent's eyebrows began to unknot.

The run was made in comparative peace, for Quent. Svensk and the freighter pilot bankrupted each other at some exotic topological game, while Sylla occupied himself with trying to key a poetry-scanning function into the computer. Imray grew increasingly taciturn and spent long hours in his cubicle. Sometimes Quent would hear him in a rumbling argument with one of the others. Quent devoted himself to a discreet inspection of the ship's wiring and managed not to upset Morgan. Things seemed to be settling down.

This impression strengthened when they got to Farbase. They exchanged the mail and off-loaded the freight shuttle with surprising dispatch. Pomeroy actually changed his shirt. He and the others set off to call on another peebee, the *Jasper Banks*, which was there en route to a long distance job. Miss Appleby went after the depot officer who had promised her a set of Chung pearl glasses for herself and a case of fish-eggs for the mess. The small, bleak station offered Quent no diversion. He decided to go out and check over the exterior antennae.

He was suiting up when he heard the others coming back onboard. He climbed to the bridge to find them preparing to take off.

"Call Appleby," Imray grunted curtly. "We go now."

The next leg was to the sector rim colonies of Goldmine, Tunney, and Sopwith. The ship

lifted off with scarcely another word exchanged by its officers. And as soon as they were in drive Imray left the bridge.

The short run to Goldmine was made in thickening silence. Imray stayed in his cubicle. The others seemed on edge. Only Pomeroy had anything to say—he kept pestering Appleby for reports on Imray's health.

"He says his heart bothers him but he won't let me use the medical analyzer," she informed them. "His appetite's good, though."

"He's due to retire soon, sir." Pomeroy shook his head.

Imray did not appear on the bridge at Goldmine. When they were on course for Tunney he called Quent to his cabin.

"Is no good," he said hoarsely as soon as Quent's head came through the sphincter. The ursinoid's muzzle looked haggard and his fur was staring.

"You take over, son." He gestured feebly, dislodging an empty server.

"Sir, I think you should let Miss Appleby bring the medikit."

Imray groaned.

"For old age, medicals can nothing do. Little pills I try. No good."

"We'll turn back to Farbase hospital."

"What they do? Torture me only. I know. With my people—goes quick. You captain. I tell Morgan mind you."

"You're ordering me to take over as acting captain, sir?"

Imray nodded, his little eyes roving feverishly.

"But—"

"No but. You captain."

Imray's eyes closed and his breathing became noisy.

Quent studied him, scowling.

"Yes, sir," he said slowly. "I'll have Pomeroy patch you into the record log."

One of Imray's eyes glinted briefly and closed again.

Quent withdrew into the shaft of the *Rosenkrantz*. His first command. All the knots which had been smoothing from his face came back, tighter than before.

The others accepted the situation without comment, beyond Sylla's sarcastic use of his new title. Morgan, too, proved as good as Imray's word. He continued silent but during the maneuvers at Tunney the energies were flawless. Quent's frown deepened.

He took to roaming the ship at odd hours, sleeping little and poorly. They were now at the farthest leg of their patrol, running along the sector rim to Sopwith. On their starboard the Galaxy was unpatrolled and largely unknown. Quent spent hours at the scanners. He had seen wild space before from the bridge of the mighty and virtually invulnerable *Adastra*. From a peebee with four small rockets and only meteor shielding it looked decidedly wilder. Quent dreamed of nucleonic storms and got up to check over the sensors again.

Toujours j'entends la mer qui fait du bruit,  
Triste comme l'oiseau seule...

Quent groaned and pulled the cocoon flaps over his ears to shut out the mechanical drone from the bridge. Sylla was making the computer translate poetry into his native Ter-French. Presently the droning was replaced by incomprehensible wrangling.

Quent sighed and jackknifed out of his cocoon. It was nearly his shift and they would be coming into Sopwith soon.

In the shaft he found Pomeroy backing out of Imray's cubicle, bulb in hand.

"How is he, Mr. Pomeroy?"

The little man wagged his head, bleary eyed, but said nothing.

In the wardroom Miss Appleby was setting out fresh smoked ham she had wangled at

Tunney.

"Just coffee, thank you," Quent told her.

She smiled sympathetically at the standing furrow in his brow and vanished back to her storerooms.

Quent took his coffee up to the bridge, relieving Svensk and Sylla, and settled wearily to hear a data tape. Pomeroy straggled into his cubby and began to doze. In the wardroom the other two continued to argue fitfully.

Suddenly Pomeroy sat up.

"Sopwith, sir. Seems to be a bit of trouble."

"What type of trouble, Mr. Pomeroy?"

"Too early to tell yet, sir. Mostly noise."

Sopwith was a Non-Human affiliated planet whose native name was Szolphuildhe. The native race was described as small, timid, pinkish in color, bipedal, and probably bisexual, with a fibers-and-ceramics technology. It was Human habitable but no Humans lived there.

"Sounds like they been attacked by a band of marauding monsters," Pomeroy reported presently. "Says they came in a sky-boat—wait a minute, sir." He squinted, listening. "About them monsters, sir. Appears like they're Humans."

"Humans?"

"That's how the kinks describe 'em, sir. Like us."

"What are they doing to the ki—to the Sopwithians?"

"Seems they're eating 'em, sir."

"Eating them, Mr. Pomeroy?"

Pomeroy nodded. Quent leaned over the shaft and called Svensk. When the saurian's big head appeared, Quent asked, "What Human spacers could have landed here and attacked the natives or—ah—exploited them as food?"

Svensk's raised his eye membranes reflectively.

"Possibly you refer to Drakes?"

"What are Drakes?"

"The Drakes, as they call themselves, are a band of Humans, strength unknown, base unknown, possessing not less than five spaceships, who maintain themselves by sporadic raids upon shipping and colonies," Svensk creaked. "Until recently reported only in Sector Ten, they—"

"One of our little sector problems." Sylla grinned. He bounded to his console and began to polish his claws. "Quite beneath the notice of the Academy."

"Navigator, a sensor orbit, please. Mr. Svensk, let's pick up the location of that vessel as soon as possible. Mr. Pomeroy, ask them where that sky-boat is, how big it is, how many attackers, and what weapons."

The Sopwith commo officer believed that the ship had come down somewhere northeast of the port city. It was bigger and brighter than the sun, carrying at least five hands of monsters. They spouted burning flames which made no noise.

"That's thirty of 'em," said Pomeroy. "As to their weapons, Drakes would have lasers, flame-throwers, grenades, and maybe a rocket-launcher or two, groundside. Them kinks don't know ships or weapons, sir. Flinging stones is about it, with them."

They still had not located the alien ship when the Sopwith city area went into night. The Sopwith commo officer on the ground was growing balky.

"He says the monsters are coming in again," Pomeroy reported. "Listen."

The voder gabbled wildly, gave out a string of shrieks and cut off.

"That's it, sir. He's taken off. Well, there'll be no business here. We'd better log up the report and get on."

"Mr. Svensk, what's that field like?" asked Quent thoughtfully.



The lizard was absorbed in his sensor adjustments.

"Mr. Svensk. Is that field usable?"

Svensk reared up. "Very primitive." He shrugged.

"Navigator," Quent said icily. "Landing trajectory to field, please."

Three pairs of eyes rounded on him.

"Landing?" Sylla licked his chops. "The acting captain is perhaps unaware that patrol boats do not—"

"I've inspected our system, Mr. Sylla. It's fully operational. In case you're concerned, my training has included the landing of comparable craft."

"But sir," protested Pomeroy, "What about Morgan? He don't like going planetside, sir."

Quent glanced at the voders and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Morgan, there is an emergency on this planet and we must land. I count on your cooperation. Mr. Sylla, is that course ready?"

"Set," snapped Sylla through his teeth.

Quent engaged the auxiliaries and started to code in the autopilot. As he touched it the familiar din cut loose from the voder.

"Mr. Morgan." Quent rapped the speaker. "Stop that racket. We must land, do you understand? I'm taking us down!"

To the din was added a crackling sputter and the lights jumped. Svensk dived for his computer leads.

"Stop that, Morgan. Stop it. I'm going to land or I'll crash the ship. Hear that—you'll crash us."

"In the name of the Path," Imray roared from the shaft. "What?"

"It's our duty to land, sir," Quent said. "Emergency on the planet."

Imray burst onto the bridge, paws over his ears. He stared at Quent.

"I'm committing us."

Quent slammed the manual override.

Imray grabbed up his speaker.

"Morgan—Morgan, boy, it's me." Imray's voice sank to a huge croon. "Be good boy, Morgan—down we must go. I swear you, for little minute only—ship it will not hurt. Morgan! You hear, Morgan? Morgan boy, listen Imray—ten meters superconductors I get you. Beautiful."

The uproar dwindled to a mewling in Imray's speaker.

"You let us go down nice, Morgan, *vermt*?"

Silence. Imray clapped his fist to his chest and his head slumped.

"Is too much, son," he wheezed and retreated down the shaft.

"Counting to autopilot," said Sylla. Quent coded feverishly as deceleration grabbed them. On the screens the arid, undistinguished planet whirled closer.

The autopilot took hold unceremoniously and spiraled them in, shaken but right side up. When the roil cleared they looked across a moonlit field to a cluster of sheds around the antennae rig. There were no lights.

"They've all sloped off, sir," said Pomeroy. "Nothing we can do here till morning."

"Mr. Pomeroy, you speak the native language," said Quent. "I will meet you at the cargo lock. Have the sled ready."

"But sir—"

"Mr. Svensk, am I correct that we need no special masks or suiting on this planet?"

Svensk gave a sighing exhalation.

"No need," he croaked.

They followed Quent in silence while he broke out two field kits and two ballistic hand lasers. At the cargo lock he opened both ports and ordered Pomeroy into the sled.

“Lieutenant Sylla, you will take over the ship. One of you will be on the bridge at all times. If we’re not back by sunrise, make what investigation you can without endangering the ship. If you can’t help us without hazard to the ship, lift off at once and signal the facts to Farbase. Understood?”

Sylla’s eyes were popping.

“Understood, Acting Captain!” He sketched a salute.

Svensk watched in silence, his bony head folded to his shoulders in the gravity.

Quent launched the sled out into the moonlight. The country below was flat scrubland gashed by a few dark arroyos, now dry. The “city” was a huddle of hivelike buildings with a central plaza. Quent hovered by a torch-lit structure, a shrine. Nothing moved.

“No damage visible so far. We’ll go down and talk to the chief.”

“Be careful, sir,” Pomeroy warned uneasily.

In the plaza they pounded and shouted at the door of the largest hive-house. It was finally opened by a small squat Sopwithian entirely draped in a softly gleaming robe.

“Tell him we’re friends. Where’s the chief?”

The doorkeeper scuttled off on his knuckles, robes jingling. The inside of the adobe hive was a labyrinth of basket-work passages, every surface bossed with bits of metal and colored tassels. The native returned, beckoning, and they scrambled up a wicker corridor to a chamber where an even broader Sopwithian in a shinier robe sat impassive in a lanterned alcove. The ceiling was so low even Pomeroy had to squat.

He gurgled at the chief, who replied briefly, now and then flapping his long robed forelimbs with a sharp jangle. The raiders, Pomeroy reported, had burned several farms northeast of town and carried off the families. Herdsmen had spied them roasting and eating the captives beside their ship.

“All right,” said Quent. He ducked his head to the chief and they scrambled out to their sled.

He took off in a howling rush northeast. Beyond the town the pasture scrub stretched barren to a line of mesa, all brightly lit by the big moon. Here and there were small beehive farms set in irrigated gardens.

“Where are those burned farms?” Quent peered. “Where’s that ship?”

“Take care, sir,” Pomeroy pleaded. “Them Drakes’ll come on us like devils—”

Quent began to fly a low search pattern. As he circled a farm heads popped out.

“They’re scared to death, sir. Think we’re Drakes. Pitiful.”

“Frightened.” Quent frowned around the moonlit horizon. “Ah, what’s that?”

Pomeroy writhed nervously.

“That’s a burnt one, all right. No need to look farther.”

Quent circled the blackened shell. Suddenly he skidded the sled into the farmyard and jumped out, kicking ashes. In a moment he was back and flung the sled airborne. He seized the speaker.

“Quent to *Rosenkrantz*. I’ve found that ship.”

The speaker crackled. Quent fended off Pomeroy’s arm, deftly appropriating the little man’s laser.

“Do you read, *Rosenkrantz*?”

“The ship is where, Acting Captain?” asked Sylla’s voice.

“About fifty kiloms northeast of field, in a canyon,” Quent told him. “There is also a raiding party in sight, headed this way. They are armed. They have sighted me. Now hear this: You will signal Farbase at once and prepare to lift ship. I’m going after these raiders. Repeat, signal Farbase and secure ship. I am now being fired on. Out.”

Knocking Pomeroy into the corner, Quent yanked out the speaker leads and slammed the sled at top speed back toward the field.

“Sir—Lieutenant Quent, sir, don’t—”

Quent ignored him. Presently he cut power and glided around the end of the field at bush level. They whispered out to the ship, dodged behind a landleg, and came upon Svensk and Sylla in the open port.

Quent vaulted out, weapon in hand.

“Have you signaled as ordered, Mr. Sylla?”

The lutroid shrugged.

“But what was one to report, Acting Captain?”

“Precisely,” snapped Quent and started for the bridge with both lasers in his belt. They followed.

Imray hulked in the command chair. He eyed Quent in silence, arms folded over his massive chest.

“Feeling better, sir?” Quent snarled. He wheeled and thrust his jaw into Sylla’s muzzle. “I’ll tell you why you failed to signal Farbase. And why you two were hanging out in the open lock when I ordered you to secure ship. Because you know damn well there are no raiders here.”

He had his back against the screens now and a laser drawn.

“No ship! No Drakes. It’s all one big farce and all of you are in it. You, you clown Pomeroy—you, *Captain* Imray! What are you trying to hide? Smuggling? Extortion? Or do I have to pound it out of you?”

He heard a rustle, saw Svensk’s hand at his vest controls.

“No, no, Svenka,” Imray growled. “Battles we don’t need.” He shook his head heavily. “We been *gesprüchtet*. I tell you boys, Drake business no good.”

“Agh, your Drakes, the whole thing stank from the start. Let me tell you something, gentlemen.” Quent shook the laser at Sylla, “You jeer about my training, but there’s a thing you don’t know about Academy life, my furry friend. In the years I’ve been a cadet I’ve been hazed and hoaxed and put on by experts. Experts!” His voice rose. “Caristo, what I’ve put up with. And you, gentlemen, are a clobbering bunch of amateurs. Tri-digigs.”

He snorted, glaring contemptuously at them. No one spoke.

“You didn’t think I caught on when you handed me the ship? Cooking up some way to gash my record. Here in Sopwith—I was supposed to pass it up, wasn’t I? Oh, yes. And you—” He stabbed the laser at Pomeroy. “You were going to bugger the log so you could show I refused to aid aliens against Humans, right? Then bring charges? But why? I’ll be rotated out soon enough—why did you have to ruin me, too?” He scowled, “My father. Blackmail. You’ve got something going here. I’m going to take this ship apart, right here on the ground. It’s on record that you’re unfit for duty, Captain. You didn’t think of that when you got so clobbering elaborate!”

They gaped at him. Sylla’s pupils swelled, contracted.

“I tell you, smart boy,” Imray grunted. He scratched his chest. “Son, you mistake—”

A shrill mew from Engines split the air. Imray jerked around. He yanked at his webs.

“I got you, boy.”

“Hold it,” shouted Quent. “Don’t try—”

Sylla and Pomeroy dived for their consoles. Svensk was vanishing down the shaft.

“I said ‘hold it.’” Quent grabbed the override lever. “You’re staying right here.”

“Sit, son, sit,” Imray rumbled. “Is danger, I swear by the Path. If don’t go up, lose ship.”

“That’s straight, sir. We’ll be killed if you don’t let us up.”

Sylla was coding frantically, his crest fur ridged. The cargo lock changed.

“If this is another—” Quent rasped. He released the lever and began to web up one-handedly, laser ready.

Imray’s hand smacked down and several invisible mountains fell on them as the *Rosenkrantz* careened off-planet.

“Back side moon, Syll,” Imray wheezed.

“All right. What goes?”

“Drakes,” said Pomeroy.

“You trying to go *on* with this?”

Svensk was scrambling out of the shaft, headed for his console. He brushed against Quent’s laser. On the screens the moon was ballooning up. They rushed across the terminator into darkness.

“Drakes is real, son,” Imray told him. “Catch ship on dirt—we finish. Is maybe judgment on us. Boys, they smell us?”

“I rather think they may not.” Svensk’s clack seemed to have been replaced by a cultivated Gal Fed accent. “Morgan sensed them just below the horizon and our emissions should have decayed by the time they get around.”

Frowning, Quent watched Imray braking to stability over the dark craters of the moon whose lighted side had guided his ground search.

“They’re coming around,” said Pomeroy. “Listen.”

A confused cawing filled the bridge. Quent made out the word *kavrot* in coarse Galactic. A *kavrot* was a repulsive small flying reptile that infested dirty freighters.

“Talking about us,” Pomeroy grinned. His goatee no longer waggled. “Kavrots, that’s us. Doesn’t sound like they know we’re here, though.” He cut the voder.

“Braking emissions,” said Svensk. “It appears they’re going down.”

Quent pushed up and moved in behind the lizard, laser in hand. Svensk did not look up, “If this is another gig—” He studied the displays. Nobody paid attention.

“*Captain?*” Sylla’s fist was up.

Imray grunted and the *Rosenkrantz* began to glide silently on her docking impellers down toward the sunlit peaks at the moon’s eastern horizon. Sylla’s paw beckoned Imray left, pushed right, dipping, banking as the mountains rose around them. His fist chopped down, Imray cut the power and they floated under a peak outlined in crystal fires. They were just shielded from the field on the planet below.

“Last pass coming up,” said Svensk. “Splendid. They’ve blown up the field antennae. That eliminates our trace. Sitting down, now.”

“From which one deduces?” asked Sylla.

“From which one deduces that they either do not know we are here or do not care or have some other plan. Possibly a trap?”

“First one best,” said Imray.

“They’re going to send out a party.” Pomeroy patched in and they heard the harsh voices now augmented by clangings.

Quent stowed the lasers by his console. “Are they Human?”

Imray nodded gloomily. “Is a judgment, boys. They going to mess up.”

“Eating the natives?”

“Maybe better so,” Imray growled. “No—we don’t know exact what they do. They come here once only, burn two farms, go quick. Why they come back?”

“You will recall my hypothesis at the time,” said Svensk.

“Heheh!” Sylla made a frying sound.

“Yes. Crude but effective.” Svensk nodded. “The adobe shells should make excellent hearths and the heat developed would be adequate to refine out most of the metals.”

Pomeroy caught Quent’s look.

“You saw the metal in their houses? All woven in, even on their clothes. Every house is loaded, accumulation of centuries. Haven’t a cat’s use for it—purely religious. They pick it up on ritual collecting trips. Spicules, nuggets, it’s all scattered around in grains in alluvial rubble. You couldn’t mine it. Point is, there’s tantalite, osmiridium, maybe some palladium. Big price

around here. When we found those farms burned, Svensk noticed they'd been at the ashes. Metal was gone. He figured they'd come back for more, burn the town out. And the damnfool Sops run in when they're scared." He grimaced, not comically.

"Why wouldn't they make the natives bring it to them?"

"Never get it. Sops are difficult. Much simpler this way. Also hairier, Drake style."

"If this is true, it's our clear duty to stop it," said Quent.

"*A la tri-di?*" Sylla laughed shortly.

"Son," said Imray, "Space Force is long way away. We here, only. What they got down there, Svenka?"

"Sector Ten was quite correct," said Svensk. "Unmistakable. They have succeeded in repairing that A.E.V. The shield was on for a minute just now."

Quent whistled.

"Do you mean they've got an Armed Escort Vessel? That shield will be a phased englobement—they can sense and fire right through it."

"Drake damn good spacer," Imray told him. "Always watch. We try sneak in, we get fireball in nose. We stuck, looks like."

"*Je me demande,*" said Sylla, "How do they propose to conflagrate the city?"

"A good point." Svensk stretched. "The farms, of course, were fired with portable flamers. This seems a slow method. Possibly irksome as well. I fancy they may intend to use the ship as a mobile torch."

"If they hover that low," Quent said thoughtfully, "they could only use the top half of their shield. An A.E. shield forms in two hemispheres. Same for the sensor field, too. They can't fully englobe much below a thousand meters."

"Ahe!" exclaimed Sylla. "One could thus attack them under the belly, *non?* But—we cannot get our ship from here to there undetected. And the sled, it functions only in the air... If only we possessed a space-to-air attack pod!"

"You do," said Quent.

They stared at him.

"The aft rocket turret. Look at your manual."

"Manual," said Imray blankly.

"In a few early peebees, the aft rocket cell is demountable and converts to a module capable of limited in-atmosphere function," Quent recited. "The empennage is sealed flush to the hull. You unbolt a stabilizer fin and swivel it around for the delta. I checked it over—it's there. Didn't you ever notice the shielding and lock on that thing?"

"Fantastic," said Svensk. "Now you mention—but how is it powered?"

"You couple on an emergency booster and impeller unit from the ship's drive after the thing is set up and the pilot is inside. Preferably a spare, if you have one—you'll recall that my inspections terminated at the engineroom bulkhead," he said bitterly.

"You sure manual say all that, son?" Imray demanded. "This thing work?"

"Certainly it says it," Quent snapped. "How do I know if it works?"

Sylla licked his chops.

"Thus, one could employ the thrust while concealed by this moon, and descend without power, avoiding detection because of the small size, and brake after one is below their horizon. One then approaches silently at ground level, on impellers—and when the enemy elevates himself, boom." He sprang to the shaft. "Let us view this marvel!"

In the hold Quent showed them the old demount levers, long since obstructed by mail-pod racks.

"One wonders how orthogonal a trajectory this thing would endure," said Svensk.

"Thermallium." Quent shrugged. "If the delta didn't come off."

"Somebody going to get killed bad." Imray peered suspiciously into the turret. "For engine

I must talk Morgan. Pfoo!"

"You talked him into harassing me easily enough," said Quent.

"No, that natural," grunted Imray, hauling over to the speaker.

"Someday that spook will meet a Drake and find out who his enemies are," said Pomeroy's voice from the bridge. "They have a party in the city now. Looting. Gives us some time."

"*Allons*, the suits," called Sylla from the ladder.

In an hour's sweating hullwork they had uncoupled the turret and dogged it to the fin. The old sealant was vitrified but the assembly went in with surprising ease.

"That stuff will burn off," said Quent. "What a contraption!"

"The aerodynamics of a rock," Svensk murmured. "Podchutes, perhaps, could be attached to these holes? I suggest as many as possible."

"The engine arrives!" Sylla popped out of the turret as the massive shape of Imray appeared around the *Rosenkrantz's* stern, propelling a drive unit bundled in a working shield.

"Two gross nanocircuits must I get," he grumbled as they all wrestled the inertia of the big unit. They brought it into line with the turret lock. Imray glanced in.

"You check how it steers, Syll?"

"That rather mystifying secondary panel on the rocket console," said Svensk. "Perfectly obvious, once the power leads were exposed. I shall have no trouble."

His long figure contorted as he groped for the leads to his thermal vest.

"*Fou-t'en!*" Sylla slid between him and the turret. "Is this a swamp for overheated serpents to combat themselves in? Desist—you will be worse than the ants. It is I who go, of course."

"So." Imray turned on Quent, who was moving in on the other side. "You want go, too?"

Quent grabbed the lock. "I'm the obvious choice."

"Good," said Imray. "Look here."

He tapped Quent on the shoulder with one oversized gauntlet and suddenly straightened his arm. Quent sailed backward into Sylla and Svensk. When the three sorted themselves out they saw that Imray had clambered into the turret, which he filled compactly.

"Close up engines, boys," he blared jovially into their helmets. "Watch tight, is hot. Syll, you set me good course, *vernt?*"

The three lieutenants glumly coupled the drive unit, bolted and thermofoamed the extra chutes, and piled back up to the bridge.

"Foxed you, didn't he?" grinned Pomeroy. He sobered. "They're still tearing up the chiefs house. We may have them figured all wrong."

The screens showed Imray's vehicle lurching past on a climbing course above the dark moonscape.

"Svensk, explain to him the navigation." Sylla crouched over his console. "He must modify to azimuth thirty heading two eighteen or he will burst into their faces at once. Now I devise the settings for his burndown."

"Sure, sure," said Imray's voice. They saw his rocket module yaw to a new course. "Svenka, what I do with pink button?"

"Captain," Svensk sighed, "if you will first observe the right-hand indicators—"

"At least the impellers work," said Quent.

Pomeroy fretted: "This is all guesswork."

Svensk was now relaying the burn configuration, which the ursinoid repeated docilely enough.

"At one-one-five on your dial, check visual to make sure you are well below their horizon. Do not use energy of any sort until you are two units past horizon. Captain, that is vital. After that you are on manual. Brake as hard as you can, observing the parameter limit display and—"

"After that I know," interrupted Imray. "You take care ship. Now I go, *vernt?*"

"You are now go," said Sylla, motioning to Pomeroy.

"Gespro-oo—" trumpeted the voder before Pomeroy cut it.

"What does that mean?" asked Quent.

"I've never known," said Svensk. "Some obscure mammalian ritual."

"Our captain was formerly a torch gunner," Sylla told Quent. "But perhaps you—"

"I've heard of them," said Quent. "But I thought—"

"That's right," said Pomeroy. "Ninety-nine percent casualties. Flying bombs, that's all. He can run that thing, once he gets down."

"He will be out of the moon's shadow and into their sensor field in fifteen seconds," said Svensk. "One trusts he remembers to deactivate *everything*."

The voder cut off. For a flash Quent thought his eardrums had gone but as acceleration topped out he heard the others fill their lungs.

"Their shield does appear to have collapsed," said Svensk. "I can't be positive in this—"

"He got 'em." Pomeroy yelled. "Power's gone! Wait—they're coming back on emergency. Listen to 'em cry!"

Noises blared from the Drake ship.

"Where's Imray?" Quent threw in the retros and they pitched again. Sylla came scrambling out of the shaft, hanging onto Imray's chair.

"Where is he?"

"I can't at the moment," Svensk protested. "The resultants—"

"Listen." Pomeroy tuned the uproar to ululating wails. "The Denebian national anthem." He flopped back in his seat, grinning. "Might as well go get him—that ship's dead in the dirt. He cracked one up their landleg socket while they were gawking at us. Must have been bloody under 'em!"

Quent jolted to a thump on his back. Sylla climbed down, grinning. Svensk arched his neck—his bony beak was not adapted for expression.

"Is he all right?" called Appleby's voice. "I fixed some hot jam truffles."

"So that was the anomaly," said Svensk. "Incredible. The nutritive drive of the Human female."

"Bloody good, too," said Pomeroy. He jerked to his board. "Holy Space—"

"What is it?"

"The *Jasper* just hailed us," he told them. "She's coming by. Five minutes earlier and we'd all been up the pipe."

He sagged again and reached for his bulb.

"By the Path!" Imray howled on the voder. "You pick me up or I *sprücher* you too."

Quent was clumsy with exhaustion by the time they got the rocket module stowed and the hot drive unit back to Morgan. He gave a perfunctory glance at the wrecker ports and then followed the others to the bridge, where Pomeroy was watching the grounded Drakes.

"I take over, son." Imray sprawled in his command chair, rolling his hide luxuriously. "Watch tight. Bad mess they get loose before Farbase come." He chomped a jam tart.

"Are you all ready for the bad news?" Pomeroy wheeled around to face them. "Remember that *Gal News* man we ducked at Farbase? He's on the shuttle. Coming here."

Imray choked.

"Wants to interview you." Pomeroy pointed at Quent. "And Appleby, too."

Quent shut his eyes. "He can—why won't they let me alone?" Absently he fingered the laser by his console.

"Admiral Quent's son in battle with Drake pirates," Pomeroy grinned sourly, "while Admiral Coatesworth's fiancée cheers? His board's all lit up."

"This rather cooks it," said Svensk. Sylla was drumming his claws.

They all looked at Quent.

"What you tell him, son?"

"Tell 'em," Quent muttered exhaustedly. "Why, I'll tell 'em the ship stinks and your computer is full of mush—and the engineroom is a fugnest—" his voice rose—"infested by a spook who has you so terrorized you have to bribe him to move the ship. And my fellow officers are a set of primitive jokers captained by a maniac who has to resort to physical force—and the only Humans who can stand the ship are an unshaven alcoholic and a madwoman who buggers the sensors with fudge machines and underwear, and—Heysu Caristo!" He rubbed his neck. "My first ship. Look, I'm going to sack out, alright?" He pushed off for the ladder.

"You tell them that?" Imray demanded, beaming. "Flying fugnest?"

"Hell no, why should I? It's not true."

He pulled to the shaft and rammed into Imray's hard paw.

"Son, you got to."

"*Huh?*"

"Tell them can't stand. Want new job. Must!" Imray was shaking them both for emphasis.

"Wait—one—minute." Quent disengaged himself. "That's exactly what you were putting me on to think, wasn't it? But why?" He frowned around at them. "Why? I mean, hell, I'm *for* integration."

"Precisely the problem," said Svensk.

Imray whacked his thigh exasperatedly.

"Who you think build this boat?"

"Well, it's a Human design—"

"Human fix up. Is build by Svenka people, original. Was part their navy. Space Force say, indefinite loan. Little boats, you never hear. Space Force come along, make treaty. Suck up little boats. Even ants they got some type space boat, *vernt*, Svenka?"

"More of a pod, I believe." Svensk crossed his long legs.

"Something, anyway. Son, you think like your father say, all en-aitch people want integrate with Space Force?"

"Well, uh," said Quent. "The Gal Equality party."

"Sure, sure." Imray nodded. "Some en-aitch people want be officer big starship, is fact. Also fact, en-aitch people want have say in Gal Council. But is different here."

He leaned back, folded his arms.

"Here is original en-aitch space force, us little boats. We been on these boats long time. Long, long time. We been patrol since was no sector, eh Syll? When Humans come with us, is only individual Humans. One here, one there. Pom know. But we not integrated with you. *You* is integrated with us."

"Bravo!" cried Sylla.

"Hear, hear," said Svensk gravely.

"But, what—" said Quent.

"The captain means," Pomeroy told him, "that *he's* not about to get integrated with the Space Force. None of us are. We do our job. They can stow their sociological programs. Their directives. Channels. Personnel fitness profiles. Rotation and uptraining tours. Pissah! If this integration trail business goes green, we've had it. And—" he poked his finger at Quent—"you are a prime test case, Lieutenant."

"Even Morgan they try steal," Imray rumbled angrily.

Quent opened his mouth, closed it.

"We were so confident," said Svensk. "It did seem ideal, when you turned out to be Admiral Quent's son. We felt it would be simple to impress you as being, as it were, quite unintegrable." He sighed. "I may say that your determined optimism has been a positive



nightmare.”

“Let me get this straight.” Quent scowled. “You wanted me to yell so hard for reassignment that the program would be shelved?”

“Correct.” Sylla slapped his console. The others nodded.

“What about this flimflam here in Sopwith?”

“Too fancy,” grunted Imray.

“We were getting desperate,” said Pomeroy. “You just wouldn’t discourage. So we thought maybe we could work it the other way, build up a case that would convince the Gal Eq crowd that Humans weren’t ready to, ah—” He looked away. “Well, you figured it.”

“I knew you were out to clobber me,” Quent said grimly. “Only I thought it was my father.”

“It was in no way personal, Quent,” Sylla assured him heartily. “Believe me, we would do the same for anyone, *non?*”

“But this is insane!” Quent protested. “How can you? I mean, do you realize my father got me assigned here? He’s sure I’ll come around to his way of thinking and furnish him with political ammunition to use against integration.”

“That rather optimises things, doesn’t it?” Svensk rattled his neck-plates. “Increased familial solidarity is a plus value for primates.”

Quent snorted.

“What were you supposed to be, Mr. Spock? I knew damn well you’re a Gal Tech graduate. You should have taken the course on oedipal conflicts. Also the one on ethics,” he added acidly. “Some primates set quite a value on truth.”

“But you’ve got to help us, Lieutenant,” Pomeroy said urgently.

Quent was preoccupied. “How many languages *do* you speak, anyway? There was a Pomeroy who wrote some text—”

“Lieutenant! Look, we’ll all help fix up a tale of woe you can give them—”

“Are you serious?” He looked at them, appalled. “You expect me to falsify my official duty report? Lie about you and the ship?”

“What one little lie?” Imray’s voice sank to the crooning tone he used on Morgan. “Son, you good spacer. Save ship, *vernt?* You say this integration nonsense okay, we finish. You not let Space Force mess up old Rosy, son.”

“But goddammit,” Quent exploded. “It’s not just one lie. It’d go on and on—investigations, appeals—my father smirking around with the Humanity Firsters trumpeting every word I said on one side—and the Gal Eq people reaming me from the other. I’d never be free of it. Never. How could I function as a space officer?” He rubbed his head wearily, “I’m sorry. I’ll say as little as possible, believe me. But I will not put on any act.” He turned to go below.

“So stubborn, the Humans,” Sylla snarled. Quent continued down the ladder.

“Wait, Quent,” said Svensk. “This publicity you dread can’t be escaped, you know. Suppose you say nothing. The facts speak for themselves. Gal Eq will be delirious: *Arch-racist’s Son Leads Non-Human Attack on Human Pirates*, for starters. Prolonged cheers. All-Gal network showing the hero and his en-aitch pals. I daresay they’ll nominate you for the next Amity award. Really, you’re just as well off doing it our way.”

Quent stared at him in horror.

“Oh, no. No.” He began to pound his forehead on the ladder. “It’s not fair.” His voice cracked. “I thought when I got to space they’d forget me. It’s been bad enough being Rathborne Quent Junior, but this—spending the rest of my life as a—a ventriloquist’s dummy for Integration politics. Everywhere I go! Every post, my whole career. How can I be a spacer?”

Imray was shaking his head. “You natural victim social situation, son, looks like. Too bad.” He exhaled noisily, and licked a piece of jam off his fist. “So, is settled. You going help us, *vernt?*”

Quent lifted his head. His jaw set.

"No, I told you. That's out," he said bleakly. "I didn't come into the service to play games." His voice trailed off. "Call me next watch, right? We're all pretty weary."

"Sure, sure," said Imray. "Syll, Svenka, you boys go. We got time think something."

"Forget it," Quent told him. "There's no way out of this one. Caristo!" He sighed, hauling down the shaft. "I wish I could just disappear."

He stopped dead and looked up thoughtfully.

"Ah-ah," he said.

He climbed back up and retrieved the lasers. The last thing he remembered was leaning back on his hammock fully dressed with a laser in his hand.

Gal newsmen yelled at him, crowds jostled him. The bridge of the *Adastra* swarmed with kavrots. Quent came groggily awake, sure that he had heard a lock open. But the ship seemed to be normal. He sank back and dreamed that he was wearing a clangorous glass uniform. When the cocoon grabbed at him Quent struggled to consciousness. The *Rosenkrantz* was going into full star drive.

He plunged into the shaft and found himself nose to nose with an unknown girl.

"Gah!"

"Hello, Lieutenant," she said. "Want some breakfast?"

She was a dark girl in silver coveralls.

"Who—who're you?"

"I'm Campbell, your new log off." She smiled.

"Drakes." He hurled himself headlong for the bridge. "Where are they? What's happened?"

"Hi, there," said Pomeroy. The others looked up from their consoles. They seemed to be drinking coffee.

"Where are we headed? Where did she come from?"

"Sit, son," said Imray genially.

The dark girl bobbed up to place a bulb of coffee on his console.

"Is she a Drake?"

"Good heavens, no," she laughed. Quent blinked; the conformation under the coverall was interesting.

"I'm a duck." She vanished.

Dazedly Quent gulped some coffee.

"How long was I asleep? Farbase—they've come and gone, right?"

"Not likely." Pomeroy snorted. "They won't get to Sopwith for thirty hours yet."

"But who's watching the Drakes?"

"The *Rosenkrantz*, who else?" said Sylla, deadpan.

"What? Captain Imray, what is going on?"

Imray waved his paw.

"Problem finish, son." He belched comfortably. "We fix, eh, boys?"

"Oh, God." Quent squinted at them. He gulped some more coffee. "Mr. Pomeroy, you will explain yourself."

"Well, you can forget about that newsman and all that," Pomeroy told him. "When he gets to Sopwith he'll find the *Rosenkrantz* and he'll find Miss Appleby all right—but he won't find you. Nobody'll find you."

"Why not?" Quent glared around nervously.

"Because you are no longer on the *Rosenkrantz*," said Svensk.

"Brilliant, really, your notion of disappearing. Since we could scarcely remove you from the *Rosenkmntz*, we simply removed the *Rosenkrantz* from you." He stretched pleurably.

"Solves everything."

"What have you done now?"

“Observe!” Sylla pointed to the sealed log certificates.

Quent pulled himself over, eyes wary.

“P-B 640T J-B,” he read. “But’s that’s wrong. That’s not—”

“Peebee *Jasper Banks*, that is.” Pomeroy chuckled. “We’re the *Jasper Banks* now, see?”

“What?” Quent pawed at the case. “Those are official seals. You—”

“Not to worry, it’s just temporary. *Jasper* owed us a couple of favors. They were glad to oblige. Fact, they wanted to head back to Central anyway. So we just traded registry and log officers and gave them our mail. They took over the Drakes, see?”

“But that’s—”

“Beautiful.” Pomeroy nodded. “*Gal News* can pull the *Jasper* apart, they never heard of you. No one ever actually saw you on *Rosy*, did they? He’ll figure it’s some garble. Has to—there’s Appleby, all as advertised. And the Drakes. He’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

Quent took some more coffee. He felt like a man trying to shake off a bad dream.

“And the beauty part,” Pomeroy went on, “*Jasper’s* an all-Human peebee. That’ll really befuddle them.”

“No integration aspect left,” said Svensk. “Gal Eq will be dashed.”

“It can’t work. It’s—what about Appleby?”

“I hope this one so good cook,” muttered Imray.

“Appleby’s fine—she never heard of you,” Pomeroy assured him. “Morgan let her have these crystals she’s always wanted, see?”

“Uh. But—they’re going back to Central as us? What happens there? Personnel. My father,” Quent yelped.

“Personnel,” Pomeroy scoffed. “They’re dinged up half the time. They won’t get their circuits flushed till we’ve swapped back.”

“But my father—when do we trade back?”

“When we intersect, *bien sure*,” said Sylla.

“When’s that? Hold it. Wasn’t the *Jasper* headed on some job way out?”

“That’s right,” said Pomeroy. “The wild sector. Thirteen-zed, they call it. Wasn’t due to start patrol there for a while but they got this emergency call. So they sent out the *Jasper*. That’s us, now.”

“Quite remote and unexplored, really,” said Svensk, stretching. “Challenging.”

“New patrol good job,” Imray grunted. “You want be spacer, son, *vernt*? Nobody mess your career out there.” He scratched his broad chest contentedly. “Integration program? Pfoo! Never catch.”

“You mean we start patrolling out there? And they take our old one. When do we trade back with *Jasper*?”

“Assuming our circuit is, say, twice the length of theirs,” Svensk ruminated, “and assuming they keep near schedule, the perinode should precess around—”

“Spare me.”

Quent’s big jaw began to grind and he breathed forcefully. The reaction pushed him slowly out of his console. He hooked one leg around his seat back and hung over them scowling.

“My career,” he said tensely. “Your unspeakable solicitude... Sixty days on my first duty, I find myself involved in an actionable conspiracy. First officer of a vessel under fraudulent certification, on an illegal course in defiance of orders—without one clobbering prayer of ever getting back into anything resembling legal status. My career. Who’d believe me? What happens when—gentlemen, did it never cross your conniving minds that this is a general courts offense?” He reached out and laid his hand on the emergency starcall cradled between him and Imray. “My only sane course is to bring this to a halt right now—regardless.”

He yanked the caller from its cradle.

They gaped at him. Sylla’s ears folded back.

“Lieutenant, no,” said Pomeroy.

Quent fingered the starcall. His solemn face was corded.

“What’s the nature of this emergency, Mr. Pomeroy?”

“Some en-aitch trouble.” Pomeroy spread his hands. “Signal split before they got much. They gave the *Jasper* some stuff—”

“Three argon cylinders, one case of mudbinds, one pan-venom kit,” said Miss Campbell from the shaftway. “And an incubator.”

She placed a breakfast server on Quent’s console and departed.

“You figure it, sir,” Pomeroy chuckled hopefully.

Quent’s face did not soften. He tapped a square nail on the starcall, slowly, desperately. Nobody moved. Sylla’s leg muscles bunched; Quent’s free hand drifted to the laser. There was a faint slithering sound. Quent’s jaw jerked around to Svensk.

The big saurian’s fingers came away from his vest and he stretched ostentatiously, jogging the computer.

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!

Ten thousand fleets—

Quent slapped it silent with the laser. He lifted the starcall.

“No, son, no,” Imray protested.

Quent drew a deep breath. For a moment the *Jasper Banks* née *Rosenkrantz* fled on through the abyss in humming silence. The aroma of bacon drifted through her bridge. Quent’s strained face began to work convulsively.

“*Kavrots*,” he muttered.

He let out an inarticulate howl.

Sylla’s reflexes carried him into the bow grips and Pomeroy dived under his board. They goggled at Quent. He was making a wild whooping noise which they could not at first identify.

Then Pomeroy crawled out, grinning, and Imray’s shoulders started to quake.

Quent roared on. His face was astounded, like a man who hasn’t heard himself guffawing wholeheartedly in years. Invisible around him, ghosts of the *Adastra*, *Crux*, *Sirian* shriveled and whirled away.

“All right,” he gasped, sobering. He pushed the starcall and the laser back in place and reached for his breakfast.

“*Kavrots*. So be it. Who’s on watch in this fugnest?”