

## The Man Who Sailed The Sky

It was fortunate, Sonya always said, that the Federation Survey Service's Star Pioneer dropped down to Port Stellar, on Aquarius, when she did. Had not transport back to the Rim Worlds, although it was by a roundabout route, become available it is quite possible that her husband would have become a naturalized Aquarian citizen. Seafaring is no more (and no less) a religion than spacefaring; be that as it may, John Grimes, Master Astronaut, Commodore of the Rim Confederacy's Naval Reserve, Honorary Admiral of the Ausiphalian Navy and, lately, Master Mariner, was exhibiting all the zeal of the new convert. For some months he had sailed in command of an Aquarian merchantman and, although his real job was to find out the cause of the rapidly increasing number of marine casualties, he had made it plain that insofar as his own ship was concerned he was no mere figurehead. Although (or because) only at sea a dog watch, he was taking great pride in his navigation, his seamanship, his pilotage and his ship handling.

"Damn it all," he grumbled to Sonya, "if our lords and masters wanted us back they'd send a ship for us. I know that Rim Eland isn't due here for another six weeks, on her normal commercial voyage—but what's wrong with giving the Navy a spot of deep space training? The Admiralty could send a corvette . . ."

"You aren't all that important, John."

"I suppose not. I'm only the Officer Commanding the Naval Reserve, and the Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners . . . Oh, well—if they don't want me, there're some people who do."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

"Tom told me that my Master Mariner's Certificate of Competency and my Pilotage Exemption Certificates are valid for all time. He told me, too, that the Winneck Line will give me another appointment as soon as I ask for it. There's just one condition . . ."

"Which is?"

"That we take out naturalization papers."

"No," she told him. "No, repeat, capitalize, underscore no."

"Why not, my dear?"

"Because this world is the bitter end. I always thought that the Rim Worlds were bad enough, but I put up with them for your sake and, in any case, they've been improving enormously over the past few years. But Aquarius . . . It's way back in the twentieth century!"

"That's its charm."

"For you, perhaps. Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed our voyage in Sonya Winneck—but it was no more than a holiday cruise . . ."

"An odd sort of holiday."

"You enjoyed it too. But after not too long a time you'd find the life of a seafaring commercial shipmaster even more boring than that of a spacefaring one. Do you want to be stuck on the surface of one planet for the rest of your life?"

"But there's more variety of experience at sea than there is in space . . ."

Before she could reply there was a tap on the door. "Enter!" called Grimes.

Captain Thornton, the Havenmaster of Aquarius, came into the suite. He looked inquiringly at his guests. "Am I interrupting something?" he asked.

"You are, Tom," Sonya told him. "But you're welcome to join the argument, even though it will be the two of you against me. John's talking of settling down on Aquarius to continue his seafaring career."

"He could do worse," said Thornton.

Sonya glared at the two men, at the tall, lean, silver-haired ruler of Aquarius, at her stocky, ragged husband whose prominent ears, already flushing, were a thermometer of his rising temper. Grimes, looking at her, had the temerity to smile slightly, appreciatively. Like the majority of auburn-haired women she was at her most attractive when about to blow her top.

"What are you grinning at, you big ape?" she demanded. "You."

Before she could explode Thornton hastily intervened. He said, "I came in with some news that should interest you, both of you. I've just got the buzz that the Federation's Star Pioneer is putting in to Port Stellar. I know that you used to be in the Survey Service, John, and that Sonya still holds a Reserve commission, and it could be that you'll be meeting some old shipmates . . ."

"Doubtful," said Grimes. "The Survey Service has a very large fleet, and it's many years since I resigned . . ."

"Since you were asked to resign," remarked Sonya.

"You were still in your cradle, so you know nothing about the circumstances. But there might be some people aboard that Sonya would know."

"We shall soon find out. I have to throw a party for the Captain and officers—and you, of course, will be among the guests."

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Grimes knew none of Star Pioneer's officers, but Sonya was acquainted with Commander James Farrell, the survey ship's captain. How well acquainted? Grimes felt a twinge of jealousy as he watched them chatting animatedly, then strolled over to the buffet for another generous helping of the excellent chowder. There he was engaged in conversation by two of the Pioneer's junior lieutenants. "You know, sir," said one of them, "your name's quite a legend in the Service . . ."

"Indeed?" Grimes felt flattered.

The other young man laughed—and Grimes did not feel quite so smug. "Yes, sir. Any piece of insubordination—justifiable insubordination, of course—is referred to as 'doing a Grimes . . .'"

"Indeed?" The Commodore's voice was cold.

The first young man hastened to make amends. "But I've heard very senior officers, admirals and commodores, say that you should never have been allowed to resign . . ."

Grimes was not mollified. "Allowed to resign? It was a matter of choice, my choice. Furthermore . . ." And then he became aware that Sonya, with Commander Farrell in tow, was making her way toward him through the crowd. She was smiling happily. Grimes groaned inwardly. He knew that smile.

"John," she said, "I've good news."

"Tell me."

"Jimmy, here, says that I'm entitled to a free passage in his ship."

"Oh."

"I haven't finished. The Survey Service Regulations have been modified since your time. The spouses of commissioned officers, even those on the Reserve List, are also entitled to a free passage if suitable accommodation is available. Star Pioneer has ample passenger accommodation, and she will be making a courtesy call at Port Forlorn after her tour of the Carlotti Beacon Stations in this sector of space . . ."

"We shall be delighted to have you aboard, sir," said Farrell.

"Thank you," replied Grimes. He had already decided that he did not much care for the young Commander who, with his close-cropped sandy hair, his pug nose and his disingenuous blue eyes, was altogether too much the idealized Space Scout of the recruiting posters. "Thank you. I'll think about it."

"We'll think about it," said Sonya.

"There's no mad rash, sir," Farrell told him, with a flash of white, even teeth. "But it should be an interesting trip. Glebe, Parramatta, Wyong and Esquel . . ."

Yes, admitted Grimes to himself, it could be interesting. Like Aquarius, Glebe, Parramatta and Wyong were rediscovered Lost Colonies, settled originally by the lodejammers of the New Australia Squadron. Esquel was peopled by a more or less humanoid race that, like the Grollons, had achieved the beginnings of a technological civilization. Grimes had read about these worlds, but had never visited them. And then, through the open windows of the hall, drifted the harsh, salty smell of the sea, the thunderous murmur of the breakers against the cliff far below.

I can think about it, he thought. But that's as far as it need go.

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"We'll think about it," Sonya had said—and now she was saying more. "Please yourself, John, but I'm going. You can follow me when Rim Eland comes in. If you want to."

"You'll not consider staying here on Aquarius?"

"I've already made myself quite clear on that point. And since you're hankering after a seafaring life so badly it'll be better if you make the break now, rather than hang about waiting for the Rim Runners' ship. Another few weeks here and it'll be even harder for you to tear yourself away."

Grimes looked at his wife. "Not with you already on the way home."

She smiled. "That's what I thought. That's why I took Jimmy's offer. He is rather sweet, isn't he?"

"All the more reason why I should accompany you aboard his blasted ship."

She laughed. "The old, old tactics always work, don't they?"

"Jealousy, you mean?" It was his turn to laugh. "Me, jealous of that puppy!"

"Jealous," she insisted, "but not of him. Jealous of the Survey Service. You had your love affair with the Service many years ago, and you've gotten over it. You've other mistresses now—Rim Runners and the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve. But I was still in the middle of mine when I came under the fatal spell of your charm. And I've only to say the word and the Service'd have me back; a Reserve Officer can always transfer back to the Active List . . ." She silenced Grimes with an upraised hand. "Let me finish. If I'd taken passage by myself in Rim Eland there'd have been no chance at all of my flying the coop. There's so much of you in all the Rim Runners' ships. And the Master and his officers would never have let me forget that I was Mrs. Commodore Grimes. Aboard Star Pioneer, with you not there, I'd soon revert to being Commander Sonya Verrill. . ."

Slowly, Grimes filled and lit his pipe. Through the wreathing smoke he studied Sonya's face, grave and intent under the gleaming coronal of auburn hair. He knew that she was right. If he persisted in the pursuit of this new love for oceangoing steamships, she could return to her old love for the far-ranging vessels of the Interstellar Federation's military and exploratory arm. They might meet again sometime in the distant future, they might not. And always there would be the knowledge that they were sailing under different flags.

"All right," he said abruptly. "Better tell your boyfriend to get the V.I.P. suite ready."

"I've already told him," she said. She grinned. "Although as a mere Reserve Commander, traveling by myself, I shouldn't have rated it."

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The last farewells had been said, not without real regrets on either side, and slowly, the irregular throbbing of her inertial drive drowning the brassy strains of the traditional Anchors Aweigh, Star Pioneer lifted from the Port Stellar apron. Guests in her control room were Grimes and Sonya. Usually on such occasions the Commodore would be watching the ship handling technique of his host, but today he was not. He was looking down to the watery world fast falling away below. Through borrowed binoculars he was staring down at the slender shape that had just cleared the breakwaters of the Port Stellar seaport, that was proceeding seawards on yet another voyage; and he knew that on her bridge Sonja Winneck's officers would be staring upward at the receding, diminishing ship of space. He sighed, not loudly, but Sonya looked at him with sympathy. That was yet another chapter of his life over, he thought. Never again would he be called upon to exercise the age-old skills of the seaman. But there were worse things than being a spaceman.

He pulled his attention away from the viewport, took an interest in what was going on in the control room. It was all much as he remembered it from his own Survey Service days—dials and gauges and display units, telltale lights, the remote controls for inertial, auxiliary rocket and Mannschenn Drives, the keyboard of the Gunnery Officer's "battle organ." And, apart from the armament accessories, it was very little different from the control room of any modern merchantman.

The people manning it weren't quite the same as merchant officers; and, come to that, weren't quite the same as the officers of the Rim Worlds Navy. There was that little bit of extra smartness in the uniforms, even to the wearing of caps inside the ship. There were the splashes of fruit salad on the left breast of almost every uniform shirt. There was the crispness of the Captain's orders, the almost exaggerated crispness of his officers' responses, with never a departure from standard Naval terminology. This was a taut ship, not unpleasantly taut, but taut nonetheless. (One of Grimes's shortcomings in the Survey Service had been his inability, when in command, to maintain the requisite degree of tension.) Even so, it was pleasant to experience it once again—especially as a passenger, an outsider. Grimes looked at Sonya. She was enjoying it too. Was she enjoying it too much?

Still accelerating, although not uncomfortably, the ship drove through the thin, high wisps of cirrus. Overhead the sky was indigo, below Aquarius was already visibly a sphere, an enormous mottled ball of white and gold and green and blue—mainly blue. Over to the west'ard was what looked like the beginnings of a tropical revolving storm. And who would be caught in it? Grimes wondered. Anybody he knew? In deep space there were no storms to worry about, not now, although in the days of the lodejammers magnetic storms had been an ever-present danger.

"Secure all!" snapped Commander Farrell.

"Hear this! Hear this!" the Executive Officer said sharply into his microphone. "All hands. Secure for free fall. Report."

Another officer began to announce, "Sick Bay—secure, secure. Enlisted men—secure. Hydroponics—secure . . ." It was a long list. Grimes studied

the sweep second hand of his wristwatch. By this time a Rim Runners' tramp would be well on her way. Quite possibly, he admitted, with some shocking mess in the galley or on the farm deck. ". . . Mannschenn Drive Room—secure. Inertial drive room—secure. Auxiliary rocket room—secure. All secure, sir."

"All stations secure, sir," the Executive Officer repeated to the Captain.

"Free fall—execute!"

The throb of the inertial drive faltered and died in mid-beat.

"Centrifugal effect—stand by!"

"Centrifugal effect—stand by!"

"Hunting—execute!"

"Hunting—execute!"

The mighty gyroscopes hummed, then whined. Turning about them, the ship swung to find the target star, the distant sun of Glebe, lined it up in the exact center of the Captain's cartwheel sights and then fell away the few degrees necessary to allow for galactic drift.

"Belay gyroscopes!"

"Belay gyroscopes!"

"One gravity acceleration—stand by!"

"One gravity acceleration—stand by!"

"One gravity acceleration—execute!"

"One gravity acceleration—execute!"

The inertial drive came to life again.

"Time distortion—stand by!"

"Time distortion—stand by!"

"Mannschenn Drive—stand by!"

"Mannschenn Drive—stand by!"

"Mannschenn Drive—3 lyps—On!"

"Mannschenn Drive—3 lyps—On!"

There was the familiar thin, high keening of the ever-precising gyroscopes, the fleeting second (or century) of temporal disorientation, the brief spasm of nausea; and then, ahead, the sparse stars were no longer steely points of light but iridescent, pulsating spirals, and astern the fast diminishing globe of Aquarius could have been a mass of multi-hued, writhing gases. Star Pioneer was falling down the dark dimensions, through the warped continuum toward her destination.

And about time, thought Grimes, looking at his watch again. And about bloody time.

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Glebe, Parramatta, Wyong . . . Pleasant enough planets, with something of the Rim Worlds about them, but with a flavor of their own. Lost Colonies they had been, settled by chance, discovered by the ships of the New Australia Squadron after those hapless lodejammers had been thrown light-years off course by a magnetic storm, named after those same ships. For generations they had developed in their own way, isolated from the rest of the man-colonized galaxy. Their development, Commander Farrell complained, had been more of a retrogression than anything else. Commodore Grimes put forward his opinion, which was that these worlds were what the Rim Worlds should have been, and would have been if too many highly efficient types from the Federation had not been allowed to immigrate.

Sonya took sides in the ensuing argument—the wrong side at that. "The trouble with you, John," she told him, "is that you're just naturally against all progress. That's why you so enjoyed playing at being a twentieth century sailor on Aquarius. That's why you don't squirm, as we do, every time that you hear one of these blown away Aussies drawl, 'She'll be right . . .'"

"But it's true, ninety-nine percent of the time." He turned to Farrell. "I know that you and your smart young technicians were appalled at the untidiness of the Carlotti Stations on all three of these planets, at the slovenly bookkeeping and all the rest of it. But the beacons work and work well, even though the beacon keepers are wearing ragged khaki shorts instead of spotless white overalls. And what about the repairs to the one on Glebe? They knew that it'd be months before the spares for which they'd requisitioned trickled down through the Federation's official channels, and so they made do with the materials at hand . . ."

"The strip patched with beaten out oil drums . . ." muttered Farrell. "Insulators contrived from beer bottles . . ."

"But that beacon works, Commander, with no loss of accuracy."

"But it shouldn't," Farrell complained.

Sonya laughed. "This archaic setup appeals to John, Jimmy. I always used to think that the Rim Worlds were his spiritual home—but I was wrong. He's much happier on these New Australian planets, which have all the shortcomings of the Rim but nary a one of the few, the very few good points."

"What good points are you talking about?" demanded Grimes. "Overreliance on machinery is one of them, I suppose. That's what I liked about Aquarius, and what I like about these worlds—the tacit determination that the machine shall be geared to man, not the other way round . . ."

"But," said Sonya. "The contrast. Every time that we step ashore it hits us in the eye. Jimmy's ship, with everything spick and span, every officer and

every rating going about his duties at the very peak of efficiency—and this city (if you can call it that) with everybody shambling around at least half-asleep, where things get done after a fashion, if they get done at all. It must be obvious even to an old-fashioned . . . seaman like yourself."

"Aboard a ship," admitted Grimes, "any sort of ship, one has to have some efficiency. But not too much."

The three of them were sitting at a table on the wide veranda of the Digger's Arms, one of the principal hotels in the city of Paddington, the capital (such as it was) of Wyong. There were glasses before them, and a bottle, its outer surface clouded with condensation. Outside the high sun blazed down on the dusty street, but it was pleasant enough where they were, the rustling of the breeze in the leaves of the vines trailing around the veranda posts giving an illusion of coolness, the elaborate iron lace of pillars and railing contributing its own archaic charm.

A man came in from outside, removing his broad-brimmed hat as soon as he was in the shade. His heavy boots were noisy on the polished wooden floor. Farrell and Sonya looked with some disapproval at his sun-faded khaki shirt, the khaki shorts that could have been cleaner and better pressed.

"Mrs. Grimes," he said. "How yer goin'?"

"Fine, thank you, Captain," she replied coldly.

"How's tricks, Commodore?"

"Could be worse," admitted Grimes.

"An' how's the world treatin' you, Commander?"

"I can't complain," answered Farrell, making it sound like a polite lie.

The newcomer—it was Captain Dalby, the Port Master—pulled up a chair to the table and sat down with an audible thump. A shirt-sleeved waiter appeared. "Beer, Garry," ordered Dalby. "A schooner of old. An' bring another coupla bottles for me friends." Then, while the drinks were coming, he said, "Your Number One said I might find you here, Commander."

"If it's anything important you want me for," Farrell told him, "you could have telephoned."

"Yair. Suppose I could. But yer ship'll not be ready ter lift off fer another coupla days, an' I thought the walk'd do me good . . ." He raised the large glass that the waiter had brought to his lips. "Here's lookin' at yer."

Farrell was already on his feet. "If it's anything serious, Captain Dalby, I'd better get back at once."

"Hold yer horses, Commander. There's nothin' you can do till you get there."

"Get where?"

"Esquel, o' course."



"What's wrong on Esquel?"

"Don't rightly know." He drank some more beer, taking his time over it. "But a signal just came in from the skipper of the Epileptic Virgin that the Esquel beacon's on the blink."

"Epsilon Virginis," corrected Farrell automatically. Then—"But this could be serious . . ."

"Nothin' ter work up a lather over, Commander. It's an un-watched beacon, so there's no need to worry about the safety of human personnel. An' it's not an important one. Any nog who can't find his way through this sector o' space without it ain't fit ter navigate a plastic duck across a bathtub!"

"Even so . . ." began Farrell.

"Sit down and finish your beer," said Grimes.

"Yer a man after me own heart, Commodore," Dalby told him.

"Did the Master of Epsilon Virginis have any ideas as to what might have happened?" asked Sonya.

"If he had, Mrs. Grimes, he didn't say so. Mechanical breakdown, earthquake, lightnin'—you name it." He grinned happily at Farrell. "But it suits me down ter the ground that you're here, Commander. If you weren't, I'd have ter take me own maintenance crew to Esquel an' fix the bloody thing meself. I don't like the place, nor its people . . ." He noticed that Sonya was beginning to look at him in a rather hostile manner. "Mind yer, I've nothin' against wogs, as long as they keep ter their own world an' I keep ter mine."

"So you've been on Esquel?" asked Sonya in a friendly enough voice.

"Too right. More'n once. When the beacon was first installed, an' three times fer maintenance. It's too bleedin' hot, for a start. It just ain't a white man's planet. An' the people . . . Little, gibberin' purple monkeys—chatter, chatter, chatter, jabber, jabber, jabber. Fair gets on yer nerves. I s'pose their boss cockies ain't all that bad when yer get ter know 'em—but they know what side their bread's buttered on an' try ter keep in our good books. If they hate our guts they don't show it. But the others—the lower classes I s'pose you'd call 'em—do hate our guts, an' they do show it."

"It often is the way, Captain," said Sonya. "Very often two absolutely dissimilar races are on far friendlier terms than two similar ones. I've never been to Esquel, but I've seen photographs of the natives and they're very like Terran apes or monkeys; and the apes and monkeys are our not so distant cousins. You and your men probably thought of the Esquelians as caricatures in very bad taste of human beings, and they thought of you in the same way."

"Yair. Could be. But I'm glad it's not me that has ter fix the beacon."

"Somebody has to," said Farrell virtuously.

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Star Pioneer was on her way once more, driving along the trajectory between Wyong and Esquel, her inertial drive maintaining a normal one standard gravity acceleration, her Mannschenn Drive set for cruising temporal precession rate. Farrell had discussed matters with Grimes and Sonya and with his own senior officers. All agreed that there was no need for urgency; the Esquel beacon was not an essential navigational aid in this sector of space; had it been so it would have been manned.

There was, of course, no communication with the world toward which the ship was bound. The Carlotti beacons are, of course, used for faster-than-light radio communication between distant ships and planets, but the one on Esquel was a direction finding device only. A team of skilled technicians could have made short work of a conversion job, rendering the beacon capable of the transmission and reception of FTL radio signals—but there were no human technicians on Esquel. Yet. Imperialism has long been a dirty word; but the idea persists even though it is never vocalized. The Carlotti beacon on Esquel was the thin end of the wedge, the foot inside the door. Sooner or later the Esquelian rulers would come to rely upon that income derived from the rental of the beacon site, the imports (mainly luxuries) that they could buy with it; and then, not blatantly but most definitely, yet another planet would be absorbed into the Federation's economic empire.

There was conventional radio on Esquel, but Star Pioneer would not be able to pick up any messages while her time and space warping interstellar drive was in operation, and not until she was within spitting distance of the planet. There were almost certainly at least a few Esquelian telepaths—but the Survey Service ship was without a psionic radio officer. One should have been carried; one had been carried, in fact, but she had engineered her discharge on Glebe, where she had become wildly enamored of a wealthy grazier. Farrell had let her go; now he was rather wishing that he had not done so.

The Pioneer fell down the dark dimensions between the stars, and life aboard her was normal enough. There was no hurry. Unmanned beacons had broken down before, would do so again. Meanwhile there was the pleasant routine of a ship of war in deep space, the regular meals, the card-playing, the chess and what few games of a more physically demanding nature were possible in the rather cramped conditions. Sonya was enjoying it, Grimes was not. He had been too long away from the spit and polish of the Survey Service. And Farrell—unwisely for one in his position—was starting to take sides. Sonya, he not very subtly insinuated, was his breed of cat. Grimes might have been once, but he was no longer. Not only had he resigned from the finest body of astronauts in the galaxy, known or unknown, but he had slammed the door behind him. And as for this craze of his for—of all things!—seamanship . . . Grimes was pained, but not surprised, when Sonya told him, one night, that aboard this ship he was known as the Ancient Mariner.

Ahead, the Esquel sun burgeoned; and then came the day, the hour and the minute when the Mannschenn Drive was shut down and the ship reemerged into the normal continuum. She was still some weeks from Esquel itself, but she was in no hurry—until the first messages started coming in.

Grimes sat with Sonya and Farrell in the control room. He listened to the squeaky voice issuing from the transceiver. "Calling Earth ship . . . Calling any Earth ship . . . Help . . . Help . . . Help . . ."

It went on and on without break, although it was obvious that a succession of operators was working a more or less regular system of reliefs at the microphone. Farrel acknowledged. It would be minutes before the radio waves carrying his voice reached the Esquelian receiver, more minutes for a reply to come back. He said, as they were waiting for this, that he hoped that whoever was making the distress call had more than one transceiver in operation.

Abruptly the gibbering plea for unspecified aid ceased. A new voice came on the speaker. "I talk for Cabarar, High King of Esquel. There has been . . . revolution. We are . . . besieged on Drarg Island. Cannot hold out . . . much longer. Help. You must . . . help."

There was a long silence, broken by Farrell. "Number One," he ordered, "maximum thrust."

"Maximum thrust, sir." Then, into the intercom, "All hands to acceleration couches! Maximum thrust!"

The backs of the control room chairs fell to the horizontal, the leg rests lifted. The irregular beat of the inertial drive quickened, maddening in its noisy nonrhythm. Acceleration stamped frail human bodies deep into the resilient padding of the couches.

I'm getting too old for this sort of thing, thought Grimes. But he retained his keen interest in all that was going on about him. He heard Farrell say, every word an effort, "Pilot . . . Give me . . . data . . . on . . . Drarg . . ."

"Data . . . on . . . Drarg . . . sir . . ." replied the Navigator.

From the corner of his eye Grimes could see the young officer stretched supine on his couch, saw the fingers of his right hand crawling among the buttons in the arm rest like crippled white worms. A screen came into being overhead, a Mercator map of Esquel, with the greens and yellows and browns of sprawling continents, the oceanic blue. The map expanded; it was as though a television camera was falling rapidly to a position roughly in the middle of one of the seas. There was a speck there in the blueness. It expanded, but not to any extent. It was obvious that Drarg was only a very small island.

The map was succeeded by pictorial representations of the beacon station. There were high, rugged cliffs, with the sea foaming angrily through the jagged rocks at the water-line. There was a short, spidery jetty. And, over all, was the slowly rotating antenna of the Carlotti beacon, an ellipsoid Mobius strip that seemed ever on the point of vanishment as it turned about its long axis, stark yet insubstantial against the stormy sky.

Farrell, speaking a little more easily now, said, "There's room on that plateau to land a boat—but to put the ship down is out of the question . . ."

Nobody suggested a landing at the spaceport. It must be in rebel hands; and those same rebels, in all probability, possessed at least a share of Earth-manufactured weapons and would be willing to use them against the Earthmen whose lackeys their rulers had been. Star Pioneer was armed, of course—but too active participation in other people's wars is frowned upon.

"You could land on the water," said Grimes. "To leeward of the island."

"I'm not a master mariner, Commodore," Farrell told him rather nastily. "But this is my ship, and I'm not hazarding her. We'll orbit about Esquel and send down a boat."

I hope that one boat will be enough, thought Grimes, not without sympathy. The mess isn't of your making, Jimmy boy, but you'll have to answer the "please explains." And as human beings we have some responsibility for the nongs and drongoes we've been propping up with Terran bayonets—or Terran credits, which have been used to purchase Terran bayonets or their present day equivalent.

"Whatever his shortcomings," commented Sonya, "High King Cabrarar used his brains. He knew that if the beacon ceased functioning there'd be an investigation . . ."

"And better us to make it," said Farrell, "than Dalby and his bunch of no hopers."

"Why?" asked Grimes coldly.

"We're disciplined, armed . . ."

"And if you'll take my advice, Commander, you'll not be in a hurry to use your arms. The top brass is apt to take a dim view of active intervention in outsiders' private squabbles."

"But Cabrarar . . ."

". . . was the Federation's blue-eyed boy. His kingdom now is limited to one, tiny island. I've no doubt that your lords and masters are already considering dickering with whatever new scum comes to the top."

"Sir . . ." One of the officers was trying to break into the conversation.

"Yes, Mr. Penrose?"

"A signal, sir, from Officer Commanding Lindisfarne Base . . ."

The young man crawled slowly and painfully to where his captain was stretched out on the acceleration couch, with a visible effort stretched out the hand holding the flimsy. Farrell took it, managed to maneuver it to where his eyes could focus on it.

After a long pause he read aloud, "Evacuate King Cabrarar and entourage. Otherwise do nothing, repeat nothing, to antagonize new regime on Esquel."

"As I've been saying," commented Grimes. "But at least they're exhibiting

some faint flickers of conscience."

Shortly thereafter Farrell ordered a half hour's reduction of acceleration to one G, a break necessary to allow personnel to do whatever they had to do essential to their comfort. Grimes and Sonya—she with some reluctance—left the control room and retired to their own quarters.

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Star Pioneer was in orbit about Esquel. Free fall, after the bone-crushing emergency acceleration, was a luxury—but it was not one that Commander Farrell and those making up the landing party were allowed to enjoy for long. Farrell had decided to send down only one boat—the pinnacle. There was insufficient level ground on the island for more than one craft to make a safe landing. He had learned from King Cabrarar that the rebels had control of the air, and that their aircraft were equipped with air-to-air missiles. An air-spacecraft hovering, awaiting its turn to land, would be a tempting target—and effective self-defense on its part could easily be the beginnings of a nasty incident.

The deposed monarch and his party comprised three hundred beings, in terms of mass equivalent to two hundred Earthmen. In addition to its crew the pinnacle could lift fifty men; so four rescue trips would be necessary. While the evacuation was in process a small party from the ship would remain on the island, deciding what in the way of stores, equipment and documents would be destroyed, what lifted off. Sonya had volunteered to be one of the party, pointing out that she was the only representative of the Intelligence Branch of the Survey Service in the ship, Reserve commission notwithstanding. Too, Esquelian was one of the many languages at her command; some years ago it had been intended that she visit Esquel, at the time of the installation of the Carlotti beacon, but these orders had been canceled when she was sent elsewhere on a more urgent mission. So, even though she had never set foot on the planet, she could make herself understood and—much more important—understand what was being said in her hearing.

Grimes insisted on accompanying his wife. He was an outsider, with no standing—but, as he pointed out to Farrell, this could prove advantageous. He would have more freedom of action than Star Pioneer's people, not being subject to the orders of the distant Flag Officer at Lindisfarne Base. Farrell was inclined to agree with him on this point, then said, "But it still doesn't let me off the hook, Commodore. Suppose you shoot somebody who, in the opinion of my lords and masters, shouldn't have been shot . . . And suppose I say, 'But, sir, it was Commodore Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, who did the shooting . . .' What do they say?"

"Why the bloody hell did you let him?" replied Grimes, laughing. "But I promise to restrain my trigger finger, James."

"He's made up his mind to come," Sonya said. "But not to worry. After all his playing at being a merchant sea captain he'll not know one end of a gun from the other . . ."

So, with the landing party aboard, the pinnacle broke out of its bay and

detached itself from the mother ship. The young lieutenant at the controls was a superb boat handler, driving the craft down to the first tenuous wisps of atmosphere, then decelerating before friction could overheat the skin. Drarg Island was in the sunlit hemisphere, the sky over which was unusually clear—so clear that there was no likelihood of mistaking the smoke from at least two burning cities for natural cloud. Navigation presented no problems. All that the officer had to do was to home on a continuous signal from the transmitter on the island. Grimes would have liked to have played with the bubble sextant and the ephemerides—produced by Star Pioneer's navigator just in case they would be needed—that were part of the boat's equipment, but when he suggested so doing Sonya gave him such a scornful look that he desisted.

There was the island: a slowly expanding speck in the white-flecked sea. And there, a long way to the westward, were two airships, ungainly dirigible balloons. They must have seen the pinnacle on her way down, but they made no attempt to intercept; a blimp is not an ideal aircraft in which to practice the kamikaze technique. But, remarked Farrell, they would be reporting this Terran intervention to their base. The radio operator found their working frequency and Sonya was able to translate the high-pitched squeakings and gibberings.

"As near as I can render it," she reported, "they're saying, 'The bastard king's bastard friends have come . . .' In the original it's much more picturesque." The operator turned up the gain to get the reply. "'Keep the bastards under observation,' " said Sonya. Then, "'Use Code 17A . . .'"

"They can use any code they please," commented Farrell. "With what weaponry there is on this world, the island's impregnable. It'll be more impregnable still after we've landed a few of our toys."

"Never underrate primitive peoples," Grimes told him. He dredged up a maritime historical snippet from his capacious memory. "In one of the wars on Earth—the Sino-Japanese War in the first half of the twentieth century—a modern Japanese destroyer was sent to the bottom by the fire of a concealed battery of primitive muzzle-loading cannon, loaded with old nails, broken bottles and horseshoes for luck . . ."

"Fascinating, Commodore, fascinating," said Farrell. "If you see any muzzle-loaders pointed our way, let me know, will you?"

Sonya laughed unkindly.

Grimes, who had brought two pipes with him, took out and filled and lit the one most badly in need of a clean.

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They dropped down almost vertically on to the island, the lieutenant in charge of the pinnacle making due allowance for drift. As they got lower they could see that the elliptical Mobius strip that was the antenna of the Carlotti beacon was still, was not rotating about its long axis. Draped around it were rags of fabric streaming to leeward in the stiff breeze. It looked, at first, as though somebody had improvised a wind sock for the benefit of the landing party—and then it was obvious that the fluttering

tatters were the remains of a gasbag. A little to one side of the machinery house was a crumpled tangle of wickerwork and more fabric, the wreckage of the gondola of the crashed airship. Some, at least, of the refugees on the island must have come by air.

Landing would have been easy if the Esquelians had bothered to clear away the wreckage. The lieutenant suggested setting the pinnacle down on top of it, but Farrell stopped him. Perhaps he was remembering Grimes's story about that thin-skinned Japanese destroyer. He said, "There's metal there, Mr. Smith—the engine, and weapons, perhaps, and other odds and ends. We don't want to go punching holes in ourselves . . ."

So the pinnacle hovered for a while, vibrating to the noisy, irregular throb of her inertial drive, while the spidery, purple-furred humanoids on the ground capered and gesticulated. Finally, after Sonya had screamed orders at them through the ship's loudhailer, a party of them dragged the wreckage to the edge of the cliff, succeeded in pushing it over. It plunged untidily down to the rocks far below. There was a brilliant orange flash, a billowing of dirty white brown smoke, a shock wave that rocked the pinnacle dangerously. There must have been ammunition of some kind in that heap of debris.

Farrell said nothing. But if looks could have killed, the King, standing aloof from his loyal subjects, distinguishable by the elaborate basketwork of gold and jewels on his little, round head, would have died. Somebody muttered, "Slovenly bastards . . ." Grimes wondered if the rebels were any more efficient than the ruling class they had deposed, decided that they almost certainly must be. It was such a familiar historical pattern.

The pinnacle grounded. The noise of the inertial drive faded to an irritable mumble, then ceased. Farrell unbuckled his seat belt, then put on his cap, then got up. Sonya—who was also wearing a uniform for the occasion—did likewise. Somehow, the pair of them conveyed the impression that Grimes had not been invited to the party, but he followed them to the airlock, trying to look like a duly accredited observer from the Rim Worlds Confederacy. The airlock doors, inner and outer, opened. The Commodore sniffed appreciatively the breeze that gusted in, the harsh tang of salt water that is the same on all oceanic worlds. His second sniff was not such a deep one; the air of the island was tainted with the effluvium of too many people cooped up in far too small a space.

The ramp extended. Farrell walked slowly down it, followed by Sonya, followed by Grimes, followed by two ratings with machine pistols at the ready. The King stood a few yards away, watching them, surrounded by his own officers, monkeylike beings on the purple fur of whose bodies gleamed the golden ornaments that were badges of rank.

Stiffly (reluctantly?) Farrell saluted.

Limply the King half raised a six-fingered hand in acknowledgment. The rings on his long fingers sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. He turned to one of the staff, gibbering.

The being faced Farrell, baring yellow teeth as he spoke. "His Majesty say, why you no come earlier?"

"We came as soon as we were able," said Farrell.

There was more gibbering, unintelligible to all save Sonya. Then—"His Majesty say, where big ship? When you start bomb cities, kill rebels?"

Farrell turned to face his own people. He said, "Take over, please, Commander Verrill. You know the language. You might be able to explain things more diplomatically than me. You know the orders."

"I know the orders, Commander Farrell," said Sonya. She stepped forward to face the King, speaking fluently and rapidly. Even when delivered by her voice, thought Grimes, this Esquelian language was still ugly, but she took the curse off it.

The King replied to her directly. He was literally hopping from one splayed foot to the other with rage. Spittle sprayed from between his jagged, yellow teeth. The elaborate crown on his head was grotesquely awry. He raised a long, thin arm as though to strike the woman.

Grimes pulled from his pocket the deadly little Minetti automatic that was his favorite firearm. Viciously, Farrell knocked his hand down, whispering, "Hold it, Commodore! Don't forget that we represent the Federation . . ."

"You might," snarled Grimes.

But the King had seen the show of weapons; Grimes learned later that the two spacemen had also made threatening gestures with their machine pistols. He let his arm fall to his side. His clawed fingers slowly straightened. At last he spoke again—and the unpleasant gibbering was less high-pitched, less hysterical.

Sonya translated. "His Majesty is . . . disappointed. He feels that he has been . . . betrayed."

"Tell his Majesty," said Farrell, "that my own rulers forbid me to take part in this civil war. But His Majesty and those loyal to him will be transported to a suitable world, where they will want for nothing."

Grimes tried to read the expression on the King's face. Resignation? Misery? It could have been either, or both. Then his attention was attracted by the glint of metal evident in the crowd behind the deposed monarch. He saw that most of the Esquelians were armed, some with vicious-looking swords, others with projectile weapons, archaic in design, but probably effective enough. He doubted if any of the natives would be able to fly the pinnace—but a human pilot might do what he was told with a knife at his throat.

Farrell spoke again. "Tell His Majesty, Commander Verrill, that if he has any ideas about seizing my pinnace he'd better forget 'em. Tell him that those odd-looking antennae poking out from their turrets are laser cannon, and that at the first sign of trouble this plateau will be one big, beautiful barbecue. Tell him to look at that bird, there . . ." he pointed . . . "over to the eastward." He raised his wrist to his mouth, snapped an order into the microphone.



After Sonya finished her translation, everybody looked at the bird—if bird it was. It was a flying creature of some kind, big, with a wide wing span. It was a carrion eater, perhaps, hovering to leeward of the island in the hope of a meal. It died suddenly in a flare of flame, a gout of greasy smoke. A sparse sprinkling of smoldering fragments drifted down to the surface of the sea.

There was an outburst of squealing and gibbering. The Esquelians, with quite advanced armaments of their own at the time of Man's first landing on their world, had never, until now, been treated to a demonstration of the more sophisticated Terran weaponry. But they were people who knew that it is not the bang of a firearm that kills.

"His Majesty," said Sonya, "demands that he and his people be taken off this island, as soon as possible, if not before." She grinned. "That last is a rather rough translation, but it conveys the essential meaning."

"I am happy to obey," replied Farrell. "But he and his people will have to leave all weapons behind."

There was more argument, and another demonstration of the pinnacle's firepower, and then the evacuation was gotten under way.

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It had been intended, when the beacon was established on Drarg Island, that the island itself should serve as a base for some future survey party. The rock was honeycombed with chambers and tunnels, providing accommodation, should it be required, for several hundred humans. At the lowest level of all was the power station, fully automated, generating electricity for lights and fans as well as for the Carlotti beacon. The refugees had been able to live there in reasonable comfort—and in considerable squalor. Grimes decided that, as soon as things quietened down, he would get Sonya to inquire as to whether or not the flush toilet had been invented on Esquel. In spite of the excellent ventilation system, the stench was appalling.

But it was necessary for Sonya, at least, to go down into those noisome passages. In spite of the King's protests, Farrell had ordered that no property be lifted from the island; his orders were to save life, and life only. There were tons, literally, of gold and precious stones. There were tons of documents. These latter were, of course, of interest, and Sonya was the only member of Star Pioneer's party able to read them. And so, accompanied by Grimes and two junior officers, she went into the room in which the papers had been stacked, skimmed through them, committing those that she thought might be important to microfilm. Now and again, for the benefit of her helpers, she translated. "This," she told them, "seems to be the wages sheet, for the palace staff . . . No less than fourteen cooks, and then fifty odd scullions and such . . . And a food taster . . . And a wine taster . . . And, last of all, and the most highly paid of the lot, a torturer. He got twice what the executioner did . . ." She passed the sheet to the Ensign who was acting as photographer, picked up the next one. "H'm. Interesting. This is the pay list for the Royal Guard. The Kardonar—roughly equivalent to Colonel—got less than the Third Cook . . ."

"This could be just yet another Colonels' Revolt," commented Grimes. He looked at his watch, which had been adjusted to local time. "Midnight. Time we had a break. This stink is getting me down."

"You can say that again, sir," agreed one of the Ensigns.

"All right," said Sonya at last. "I think we've skimmed the cream down here."

"Cream?" asked Grimes sardonically.

They made their way up the winding ramps, through the tunnels with their walls of fused rock, came at last to the surface. The plateau was brightly illumined by the floodlights that Farrell's men had set up. The pinnacle was away on a shuttle trip, and only a handful of natives remained, huddling together for warmth in the lee of the beacon machinery house. The King, Grimes noted sardonically, was not among them; obviously he was not one of those captains who are last to leave the sinking ship. He was quite content to let Farrell be his stand in.

The Commander walked slowly to Grimes and Sonya. "How's it going, Commander Verrill?" he asked.

"Well enough," she replied. "We've enough evidence to show that this was a thoroughly corrupt regime."

"Physically, as well as in all the other ways," added Grimes. "This fresh air tastes good! How are you off for deodorants aboard Star Pioneer, Commander Farrell?"

"Not as well as I'd like to be, Commodore. But I'll put the bulk of the passengers in deep freeze, so it shouldn't be too bad." He looked up at the sky. "It'll be a while before the pinnacle is back. Perhaps, sir, you might like a look at some of the surface craft that these people came out to the island in. There's a half dozen of them at the jetty; rather odd-looking contraptions . . ."

"I'd like to," said Grimes.

Farrell led the way to the edge of the plateau, to a stairway, railed at the seaward edge, running down the cliff face to a sheltered inlet in which was a short pier. Moored untidily alongside this were six sizable boats, and there was enough light from the floods at the cliff top for Grimes to make out details before he and the others commenced their descent.

"Yes, I'd like a closer look," he said. "Steam, I'd say, with those funnels. Paddle steamers. Stern-wheelers. Efficient in smooth water, but not in a seaway . . ."

He led the way down the stairs, his feet clattering on the iron treads. He said, "I'd like a trip in one of those, just to see how they handle . . ."

"Out of the question, Commodore," laughed Farrell.

"I know," said Grimes; as Sonya sneered, "You and your bloody seamanship!"

They stepped from the stairway on to the concrete apron, walked across it to the foot of the jetty. Grimes stopped suddenly, said, "Look!"

"At what?" demanded Sonya.

"At that craft with the red funnel . . . That's smoke, and a wisp of steam . . . She's got steam up . . ."

Farrell's laser pistol was out of its holster, and so was Sonya's. Grimes pulled his own Minetti out of his pocket. Cautiously they advanced along the pier, trying to make as little noise as possible. But the natives who erupted from the tunnel at the base of the cliff were completely noiseless on their broad, bare feet and, without having a chance to use their weapons, to utter more than a strangled shout, the three Terrans went down under a wave of evil-smelling, furry bodies.

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Grimes recovered slowly. Something hard had hit him behind the right ear, and he was suffering from a splitting headache. He was, he realized, propped in a sitting posture, his back against a wall of some kind. No, not a wall—a bulkhead. The deck under his buttocks had a gentle rolling motion, and—his head was throbbing in synchronization—there was the steady chunk, chunk, chunk of a paddle wheel. Grimes tried to lift his hands to his aching head, discovered that his wrists were bound. So were his ankles.

He heard a familiar voice. "You and your bloody boats!"

He opened his eyes. He turned his head, saw that Sonya was propped up beside him. Her face, in the light of the flickering oil lamp, was pale and drawn. She muttered sardonically, "Welcome aboard, Commodore." Beyond her was Farrell, trussed as were the other two. Nonetheless, he was able to say severely, "This is no time for humor, Commander Verrill."

"But it is, James," she told him sweetly.

"What. . . what happened?" asked Grimes.

"We were jumped, that's what. It seems that a bunch of the loyalists—quote and unquote—suffered a change of mind. They'd sooner take their chances with the rebels than on some strange and terrifying planet . . ."

"Better the devil you know . . ." said Grimes.

"Precisely."

"But where do we come in?" asked the Commodore.

"They had to stop us from stopping them from making their getaway," explained Farrell, as though to a mentally retarded child.

"There's more to it than that, James," Sonya told him. "There's a radio telephone of some kind in the compartment forward of this. Battery powered, I suppose. Not that it matters. Our friends have been arranging a

rendezvous with a rebel patrol craft. They've made it plain that they're willing to buy their freedom, their lives. And the price is . . ."

"Us," completed Grimes. "What's the current market value of a full Commander in the Survey Service these days, Farrell? I've no doubt that the rebels will wish to show a profit on the deal."

"And how many laser cannon, complete with instruction manuals, is the Confederacy willing to pay for you, Commodore?" asked Commander Farrell.

"Shut up!" snapped Sonya.

The cabin was silent again, save for the creaking of timbers, the faint thudding of the engines, the chunk, chunk, chunk of the paddle. And then, audible in spite of the intervening bulkhead, there was the high-pitched gibbering, in bursts, that, in spite of the strange language, carried the sense of "over," "roger" and all the rest of the standard radio telephone procedure.

Sonya whispered, "As far as I can gather, hearing only one end of the conversation, the patrol craft has sighted this tub that we're in. We've been told to heave to, to await the boarding party . . ." As she spoke, the engines and the paddle wheel slowed, stopped.

There was comparative silence again. Grimes strained his ears for the noise of an approaching stern-wheeler, but in vain. There was, he realized, a new mechanical sound, but it came from overhead. Then it, too, ceased. He was about to speak when there was a loud thud from the deck outside, another, and another . . . There was an outbreak of excited gibbering. Shockingly, there were screams, almost human, and three startlingly loud reports.

Abruptly the cabin door slammed open. Two Esquelians came in. There was dark, glistening blood on the fur of one of them, but it did not seem to be his own. They grabbed Grimes by the upper arms, dragged him roughly out on deck, jarring his lower spine painfully on the low sill of the door. They left him there, went back in for Sonya, and then Farrell.

Grimes lay where they had dropped him, looking upward. There were lights there, dim, but bright against the black sky, the sparse, faint stars. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could make out the great, baggy shape of the dirigible balloon, the comparative rigidity of the gondola slung under it. While he was trying to distinguish more details a rope was slipped about his body and he was hoisted aloft, like a sack of potatoes, by a creakingly complaining hand winch.

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"And what now, Commodore? What now?" asked Farrell. By his tone of voice he implied, You've been in far more irregular situations than me . . .

Grimes chuckled. "To begin with, we thank all the odd gods of the galaxy that real life so very often copies fiction . . ."

Sonya snarled, "What the hell are you nattering about?"

Grimes chuckled again. "How often, in thrillers, have the baddies tied up

the goodies and then carelessly left them with something sharp or abrasive to rub their bonds against. . . ?"

"You aren't kidding?" she asked. Then—"And since when have you been a goodie?"

"You'd be surprised . . ." Grimes swore then, briefly and vividly. The sharp edge in the wickerwork of which the airship's car was constructed had nicked his wrist quite painfully. He grunted, "But in fiction it's usually much easier . . ."

He worked on, sawing away with his bound hands, even though his wrists were slippery with blood. He was afraid that one of the airship's crew would come into the cabin to look at the prisoners, but the four Esquelians in the control room at the forward end of the gondola seemed fully occupied with navigation and, presumably, the two who were aft were devoting all their time to the engine of the thing.

Hell! That rope was tough—tougher than the edge against which he was rubbing it, tougher than his skin. Not being able to see what he was doing made it worse. He began to wonder if the first result that he would achieve would be the slitting of an artery. He had never heard of that happening to a fictional hero; but there has to be a first time for everything. Sonya whispered, very real concern in her voice, "John! You're only hurting yourself! Stop it, before you do yourself some real damage!"

"It's dogged as does it!" he replied.

"John! It's not as though they're going to kill us. We're more value to them alive than dead!"

"Could be," he admitted. "But I've heard too many stories about samples from the bodies of kidnap victims being sent to their potential ransomers to speed up negotiations. Our furry friends strike me as being just the kind of businessmen who'd stoop to such a practice!"

"After the way in which they slaughtered the crew of the steamboat," put in Farrell, "I'm inclined to agree with the Commodore."

"The vote is two against one," said Grimes. And then the rope parted.

He brought his hands slowly round in front of him. There was a lamp in the cabin, a dim, incandescent bulb, and by its feeble light he could see that his wrists were in a mess. But the blood was dripping slowly, not spurting. He was in no immediate danger of bleeding to death. And he could work his fingers, although it seemed a long time before repeated flexings and wriggings rendered them capable of use.

He started on the rope about his ankles then. He muttered something about Chinese bowlines, Portuguese pig knots and unseamanlike bastards in general. He complained, "I can't find an end to work on." Then, with an attempt at humor, "Somebody must have cut it off!"

"Talking of cutting . . ." Sonya's voice had a sharp edge to it. "Talking of cutting, if you can get your paws on to the heel of one of my shoes . . ."

Yes, of course, thought Grimes. Sonya was in uniform, and the uniform of a Survey Service officer contained quite a few concealed weapons. Sophisticated captors would soon have found these, but the Esquelians, to whom clothing was strange, had yet to learn the strange uses to which it could be put. Without overmuch contortion Grimes was able to get his hand around the heel of his wife's left shoe. He twisted, pulled—and was armed with a short but useful knife. To slash through his remaining bonds was a matter of seconds.

The Esquelian came through into the cabin from forward just as Grimes was getting shakily to his feet. He was wearing a belt, and from this belt depended a holster. He was quick neither on the draw nor the uptake, but the Commodore was half crippled by impeded circulation to his ankles and feet. The native got his pistol—a clumsy revolver—out before Grimes was on him. He fired two shots, each of them too close for comfort, one of them almost parting the Commodore's close-cropped hair.

Grimes's intention—he told himself afterward—had been to disable only, to disarm. It was unfortunate, perhaps, that the airship at that moment dived steeply. The Earthman plunged forward in a staggering run, the knife held before him, stabbing deep into the furry chest. The Esquelian screamed shrilly as a disgustingly warm fluid gushed from his body over Grimes's hands, tumbled to the deck. As he fell, Grimes snatched the pistol. He was more at home with firearms than with bladed weapons.

Surprisingly it fitted his hand as though made for him—but there is parallel evolution of artifacts as well as of life forms. Holding it, almost stumbling over the body of the dead native, Grimes continued his forward progress, coming into the control cabin. It was light in there, wide windows admitting the morning twilight. Gibbering, the three Esquelians deserted their controls. One of them had a pistol, the other two snatched knives from a handy rack. Grimes fired, coldly and deliberately. The one with the revolver was his first target, then the nearer of the knife wielders, then his mate. At this range, even with an unfamiliar weapon with a stiff action, a man who in his younger days had been a small arms specialist could hardly miss. Grimes did not, even though he had to shoot one of the airmen twice, even though the last convulsive stab of a broad-bladed knife missed his foot by a millimeter.

He did not know whether or not the gun that he had been using was empty; he did not bother to check. Stooping, he quickly snatched up the one dropped by the dead pilot. It had never been fired. He turned, ran back into the cabin. He was just in time. One of the engineers was just about to bring a heavy spanner crashing down on Sonya's head but was thrown back by the heavy slug that smashed his own skull.

Saying nothing, Grimes carried on aft. The other engineer was dead already, killed by the first wild shot of the encounter. Grimes thought at first that the loud dripping noise was being made by his blood. But it was not. It came from the fuel tank, which had been pierced by a stray bullet. Before Grimes could do anything about it, the steam turbine ground to a halt.

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The sun was up. It was a fine morning, calm insofar as those in the disabled airship were concerned, although the whitecaps on the sea were evidence of a strong breeze. To port was the coastline: rugged cliffs, orange beaches, blue green vegetation inland, a sizable city far to the south'ard. It was receding quite rapidly as the aircraft, broadside on to the offshore wind, scudded to leeward.

The bodies of the airmen had been dragged into the cabin in which the Terrans had been imprisoned. Farrell and Sonya had wanted to throw them overside, but Grimes had talked them out of it. From his historical researches he knew something—not much, but something—about the handling of lighter-than-air flying machines. Until he had familiarized himself with the controls of this brute, he had no intention of dumping ballast.

He had succeeded in fixing the ship's position. In the control room there was a binnacle, and there were sight vanes on the compass. There were charts, and presumably the one that had been in use at the time of the escape was the one that covered this section of coast. The compass was strange; it was divided into 400 degrees, not 360. The latitude and longitude divisions on the chart were strange, too, but it wasn't hard to work out that the Esquelians worked on 100 minutes to a degree, 100 degrees to a right angle. There was a certain lack of logic involved—human beings, with their five-fingered hands, have a passion for reckoning things in twelves. The Esquelians, six-fingered, seemed to prefer reckoning by tens. Even so, compass, sight vanes and charts were a fine example of the parallel evolution of artifacts.

There was the compass rose, showing the variation (Grimes assumed) between True North and Magnetic North. There was that city to the south. There were two prominent mountain peaks, the mountains being shown by what were obviously contour lines. Grimes laid off his cross bearings, using a roller, ruler and a crayon. The cocked hat was a very small one. After fifteen minutes he did it again. The line between the two fixes coincided with the estimated wind direction. And where would that take them?

Transferring the position to a small scale chart presented no problems. Neither did extending the course line. The only trouble was that it missed the fly speck that represented Drarg Island by at least twenty miles, regarding one minute on the latitude scale as being a mile. Sonya, recruited in her linguistic capacity, confirmed that the (to Grimes) meaningless squiggles alongside the dot on the chart did translate to "Drarg."

The trouble was that the unlucky shot that had immobilized the airship's engines had also immobilized her generator. There were batteries—but they were flat. (During a revolution quite important matters tend to be neglected.) The radio telephone was, in consequence, quite useless. Had there been power it would have been possible to raise the party on the island, to get them to send the pinnacle to pick them up when the aircraft was ditched, or, even, to tow them in.

"At least we're drifting away from the land," said Farrell, looking on the bright side. "I don't think that we should be too popular if we came down ashore." He added, rather petulantly, "Apart from anything else, my orders

were that there was to be no intervention . . ." He implied that all the killing had been quite unnecessary.

"Self-defense," Grimes told him. "Not intervention. But if you ever make it back to Lindisfame Base, James, you can tell the Admiral that it was the wicked Rim Worlders who played hell with a big stick."

"We're all in this, Commodore," said Farrell stiffly. "And this expedition is under my command, after all."

"This is no time for inessentials," snapped Sonya. She straightened up from the chart, which she had been studying. "As I see it, they'll sight us from the island, and assume that we're just one of the rebel patrol craft. They might try to intercept us, trying to find out what's happened to us. On the other hand . . ."

"On the other hand," contributed Farrell, "my bright Exec does everything by the book. He'll insist on getting direct orders from Lindisfarne before he does anything."

"How does this thing work?" asked Sonya. "Can you do anything, John? The way that you were talking earlier you conveyed the impression that you knew something about airships."

Grimes prowled through the control compartment like a big cat in a small cupboard. He complained, "If I had power, I could get someplace. This wheel here, abaft the binnacle, is obviously for steering. This other wheel, with what looks like a crude altimeter above it, will be for the altitude coxswain. The first actuates a vertical steering surface, the rudder. The second actuates the horizontal control surfaces, for aerodynamic lift. . ."

"I thought that in an airship you dumped ballast or valved gas if you wanted to go up or down," said Sonya.

"You can do that, too." Grimes indicated toggled cords that ran down into the control room from above. "These, I think, open valves if you pull them. So we can come down." He added grimly, "And we've plenty of ballast to throw out if we want to get upstairs in a hurry."

"Then what's all the bellyaching about?" asked Farrell. "We can control our altitude by either of two ways, and we can steer. If the rudder's not working we can soon fix it."

Grimes looked at him coldly. "Commander Farrell," he said at last, "there is one helluva difference between a free balloon and a dirigible balloon. This brute, with no propulsive power, is a free balloon." He paused while he sought for and found an analogy. "She's like a surface ship, broken down, drifting wherever wind and current take her. The surface ship is part of the current if she has neither sails nor engines. A balloon is part of the wind. We can wiggle our rudder as much as we like and it will have no effect whatsoever . . ." Once again he tried to find a seamanlike analogy—and found something more important. He whispered, "Riverhead . . ."

"Riverhead?" echoed Farrell. "What's that, Commodore?"



"Shut up, James," murmured Sonya. "Let the man think."

Grimes was thinking, and remembering. During his spell of command of Sonya Winneck, on Aquarius, he had been faced with an occasional knotty problem. One such had been the delivery of a consignment of earth-moving machinery to Riverhead, a new port miles inland—equipment which was to be used for the excavation of a swinging basin off the wharfage. The channel was deep enough—but at its upper end it was not as wide as Sonya Winneck was long. However, everything had been arranged nicely. Grimes was to come alongside, discharge his cargo and then, with the aid of a tug, proceed stern first down river until he had room to swing in Carradine's Reach. Unfortunately the tug had suffered a major breakdown so that Sonya Winneck, if she waited for the repairs to be completed, would be at least ten days, idle, alongside at the new wharf.

Grimes had decided not to wait and had successfully dredged down river on the ebb.

He said slowly, "Yes, I think we could dredge . . ."

"Dredge?" asked Farrell.

Grimes decided that he would explain. People obey orders much more cheerfully when they know that what they are being told to do makes sense. He said, "Yes, I've done it before, but in a surface ship. I had to proceed five miles down a narrow channel, stern first. . ."

"But you had engines?"

"Yes, I had engines, but I didn't use them. I couldn't use them. Very few surface ships, only specialized vessels, will steer when going astern. The rudder, you see, must be in the screw race. Y'ou must have that motion of water past and around the rudder from forward to aft . . ."

"The dredging technique is simple enough. You put an anchor on the bottom, not enough chain out so that it holds, but just enough so that it acts as a drag, keeping your head up into the current. You're still drifting with the current, of course, but not as fast. So the water is sliding past your rudder in the right direction, from forward, so you can steer after a fashion."

"It works?"

"Yes," said Sonya. "It works all right But with all the ear bashing I got before and after I was inclined to think that John was the only man who'd ever made it work."

"You can do it here?" asked Farrell.

"I think so. It's worth trying."

\* \* \*

The hand winch was aft, in the engine compartment. To dismount it would have taken too much time, so Grimes had the rope fall run off it, brought forward and coiled down in the control room. To its end he made fast four

large canvas buckets; what they had been used for he did not know, nor ever did know, but they formed an ideal drogue. Farrell, using the spanner that had been the dead engineer's weapon, smashed outward the forward window. It was glass, and not heavy enough to offer much resistance. Grimes told him to make sure that there were no jagged pieces left on the sill to cut the dragline. Then, carefully, he lowered his cluster of buckets down toward the water. The line was not long enough to reach.

Carefully Grimes belayed it to the base of the binnacle, which fitting seemed to be securely mounted. He went back forward, looked out and down. He called back, over his shoulder, "We have to valve gas . . ."

"Which control?" asked Sonya.

"Oh, the middle one, I suppose . . ."

That made sense, he thought. One of the others might have an effect on the airship's trim, or give it a heavy list to port or starboard. And so, he told himself, might this one.

He was aware of a hissing noise coming from overhead. The airship was dropping rapidly, too rapidly. "That will do!" he ordered sharply.

"The bloody thing's stuck!" he heard Sonya call. Then, "I've got it clear!"

The airship was still falling, and the drogue made its first contact with the waves—close now, too close below—skipping over them. The line tightened with a jerk and the flimsy structure of the gondola creaked in protest. The ship came round head to wind, and an icy gale swept through the broken window. The ship bounced upward and there was a brief period of relative calm, sagged, and once again was subjected to the atmospheric turbulence.

"Ballast!" gasped Grimes, clinging desperately to the sill. It seemed a long time before anything happened, and then the ship soared, lifting the drogue well clear of the water.

"Got rid . . . of one . . . of our late friends . . ." gasped Farrell.

"Justifiable, in the circumstances," conceded Grimes grudgingly. "But before we go any further we have to rig a windscreen . . . I saw some canvas, or what looks like canvas, aft . . ."

"How will you keep a lookout?" asked Farrell.

"The lookout will be kept astern, from the engine compartment. That's the way that we shall be going. Now give me a hand to get this hole plugged."

They got the canvas over the empty window frame, lashed it and, with a hammer and nails from the engineroom tool kit, tacked it into place. Grimes hoped that it would hold. He discovered that he could see the surface of the sea quite well from the side windows, so had no worries on that score. Before doing anything else he retrieved the crumpled chart from the corner into which it had blown, spread it out on the desk, made an estimation of the drift since the last observed position, laid off a course for Drarg Island. Once he had the ship under control he would steer a reciprocal of this course, send Sonya right aft to keep a lookout astern, with Farrell stationed

amidships to relay information and orders. First of all, however, there was more juggling to be done with gas and ballast.

Grimes descended cautiously, calling instructions to Sonya as he watched the white-crested waves coming up to meet him. The drogue touched surface—and still the ship fell, jerkily, until the buckets bit and held, sinking as they filled. There was a vile draft in the control room as the wind whistled through chinks in the makeshift windshield.

"All right," ordered Grimes. "Man the lookout!"

The others scrambled aft, while the Commodore took the wheel. He knew that he would have to keep the lubber's line steady on a figure that looked like a misshapen, convoluted 7, saw that the ship's head was all of twenty degrees to starboard off this heading. He applied port rudder, was surprised as well as pleased when she came round easily. He risked a sidewise glance at the altimeter. The needle was steady enough—but it could not possibly drop much lower. The instrument had not been designed for wave hopping.

He yelled, hoping that Farrell would be able to hear him, "If you think we're getting too low, dump some more ballast!"

"Will do!" came the reply.

He concentrated on his steering. It was not as easy as he thought it would be. Now and again he had taken the wheel of Sonya Winneck, just to get the feel of her—but her wheel could be put over with one finger, all the real work being done by the powerful steering motors aft. Here it was a case of Armstrong Patent.

But he kept the lubber's line on the course, his arms aching, his legs trembling, his clothing soaked with perspiration in spite of the freezing draft. He wished that he knew what speed the airship was making. He wanted a drink, badly, and thought longingly of ice-cold water. He wanted a smoke, and was tempted. He thought that the airship was helium filled, was almost certain that she was helium filled, but dared take no risks. But the stem of his cold, empty pipe between his teeth was some small comfort.

Faintly he heard Sonya call out something.

Farrell echoed her. "Land, ho!"

"Where away?" yelled Grimes over his shoulder, his pipe clattering unheeded to the deck.

"Astern! To port! About fifteen degrees!"

Carefully, Grimes brought the ship round to the new course. She held it, almost without attention on his part. There must, he thought, have been a shift of wind.

"As she goes!" came the hail. "Steady as she goes!"

"Steady," grunted Grimes. "Steady . . ."

How much longer? He concentrated on his steering, on the swaying compass card, on the outlandish numerals that seemed to writhe as he watched them, How much longer?

He heard Sonya scream, "We're coming in fast! Too low! The cliffs!"

"Ballast!" yelled Grimes.

Farrell had not waited for the order, already had the trap in the cabin deck open, was pushing out another of the dead Esquelians, then another. The deck lifted under Grimes's feet, lifted and tilted, throwing him forward onto his now useless wheel. A violent jerk flung him aft, breaking his grip on the spokes.

After what seemed a very long time he tried to get to his feet. Suddenly Sonya was with him, helping him up, supporting him in his uphill scramble toward the stern of the ship, over decking that canted and swayed uneasily. They stumbled over the dead bodies, skirting the open hatch. Grimes was surprised to see bare rock only a foot or so below the aperture. They came to the engineroom, jumped down through the door to the ground. It was only a short drop.

"We were lucky," said Grimes, assessing the situation. The airship had barely cleared the cliff edge, had been brought up short by its dragline a few feet short of the Carlotti beacon.

"Bloody lucky!" Farrell said. "Some Execs would have opened fire first and waited for orders afterward . . ."

His Executive Officer flushed. "Well, sir, I thought it might be you." He added, tactlessly, "After all, we've heard so many stories about Commodore Grimes . . ."

Farrell was generous. He said, "Excellent airmanship, Commodore."

"Seamanship," corrected Grimes huffily.

Sonya laughed—but it was with him, not at him.

\* \* \*

The voyage between Esquel and Tallis, where the King and his entourage were disembarked, was not a pleasant one. Insofar as the Terrans were concerned, the Esquelians stank. Insofar as the Esquelians were concerned, the Terrans stank—and that verb could be used both literally and metaphorically. Commander Farrell thought, oddly enough, that the King should be humbly grateful. The King, not so oddly, was of the opinion that he had been let down, badly, by his allies. Grimes, on one occasion when he allowed himself to be drawn into an argument, made himself unpopular with both sides by saying that the universe would be a far happier place if people did not permit political expediency to influence their choice of friends.

But at last, and none too soon, Star Pioneer dropped gently down to her berth between the marker beacons at Tallisport, and the ramp was extended, and, gibbering dejectedly, the Esquelians filed down it to be

received by the Terran High Commissioner.

Farrell, watching from a control room viewport, turned to Grimes and Sonya. He said thankfully, "My first order will be 'Clean ship.' And there'll be no shore leave for anybody until it's done."

"And don't economize on the disinfectant, Jimmy," Sonya told him.