

THE GATEWAY TO NEVER

A. Bertram Chandler

I

Commodore John Grimes did not like Customs Officers; to his way of thinking they ranked with, but even below, Tax Collectors. The Tax Collector, however, is loved by nobody-with the possible exceptions of his wife and children-whereas the Customs Officer makes his impact only upon the traveling public, among whom professional spacemen are numbered.

Grimes was not at all pleased when his latest secretary, Miss Pahvani, told him that the Port Forlorn Chief of Customs wished to see him. It was not that he was especially busy; the only thing to occupy his attention was the Stores Requisition sent in by the Chief Officer to Rim Mandrake, through most of the items on which he had been happily running his blue pencil.

He looked up from his desk and said irritably, "Tell him I'm busy."

Miss Pahvani treated him to her impersonation of a frightened fawn. "But, sir, he says that it is important. And he is the Chief Collector."

"And I'm the Chief Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners. And the Officer allegedly Commanding the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve."

"But, sir, he is waiting."

"Mphm." Miss Pahvani's brother, Grimes recalled, was a Junior Customs Inspector. How did a pretty girl like this come to have a near relative in a profession like that? "All right," he said. "Show him in."

And what was it this time? Grimes wondered. There had been the flap when an overly zealous searcher had discovered that the Master of Rim Basilisk had no less than two bottles of duty-free gin over and above his allowance for personal consumption. There had been the unpleasantness about the undeclared Caribbean cigars in the cabin of Rim Gryphon's Third Officer. And what was he, Grimes, supposed to do about it? Send this-practice-must-cease-forthwith Circulars to all ships, that was what. . . . He imagined that he was a Rim Runners' Master (as he had been, before coming ashore) and mentally composed a letter to himself as Astronautical Superintendent. Dear Sir, Your Circular Number so-and-so is now before me. It will shortly be behind me. Yours faithfully. . . .

"Ah, Commodore," said Josiah Billinghamurst, the Chief Collector of Customs, breaking into his thoughts.

"Mr. Billinghamurst." Grimes got to his feet, with an outward show of cordiality. After all, he had to share the spaceport with this man. "Come in, come in. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

Billinghurst winced, as he was intended to do; Grimes knew very well that he hated the merest suggestion of coarse language. He lowered his bulk into one of the chairs on the other side of Grimes' big desk. He was a grossly fat man and his gold-braided uniform did not become him, and

neither did he become the uniform. Grimes wondered, as he had wondered many times before, what perverted genius had first thought of putting these enemies of mankind into naval dress.

"Coffee, Mr. Billinghamst?"

"If I may, Commodore."

Miss Pahvani brought in the tray, poured for the two men. One more smile like that, Grimes thought sourly, and our fat friend will make your brother a Chief Inspector. He said, when the girl was gone, "And what can I do you for?"

"Nothing, I hope." Billinghamst permitted himself an apology for a smile, then reverted at once to the appearance of a mournful overfed bloodhound. "But you might be able to do something for me."

"In which of my official capacities?" asked Grimes.

"Both, quite possibly." He sipped noisily from his cup. "This is good coffee."

"Imported. And the duty was paid on it."

"I have no doubt that it was. Frankly, Commodore, it wouldn't worry me much if it were out of ship's stores and not a cent of duty paid."

"You surprise me, Mr. Billinghamst."

Billinghamst sighed. "All you spacemen are the same. You regard us as your natural enemies. Do you think that I get any pleasure from finding one of your junior officers for minor smuggling?"

"That thought had flickered across my mind," said Grimes. "But tell me, who's been naughty now? Rim Mandrake's the only ship in port at the moment. I hadn't heard that any of her people had been guilty of the heinous crime of trying to take an undeclared bottle of Scotch ashore."

"None of them has, Commodore."

"So?"

"I don't make the laws, Commodore Grimes. All that I'm supposed to do is enforce them. The government decides what duty shall be paid on the various imported luxuries, and also what quantities of which commodities may be brought in, duty-free, by passengers and ships' crews. Regarding this latter, you know as well as I do that we are inclined to be lenient."

Reluctantly Grimes agreed.

"When something, such as liquor or tobacco, is intended for personal consumption only, we often turn a blind eye. When something is smuggled ashore to be sold at a profit, we pounce."

"Mphm."

"And then, Commodore, there are the prohibited imports. You have traveled widely; you know that on many worlds' drugs of all kinds are regarded as

we regard tobacco and alcohol, or tea and coffee, even."

"Francisco . . ." contributed Grimes.

"Yes, Francisco. A planet of which I have read, but which I have no desire ever to visit."

"An odd world," said Grimes. "Religion is the opium of about half of the people, and opium is the religion of the other half."

"Neatly put, Commodore. Now, I need hardly tell you that drugs, especially the hallucinogens, are banned on the Rim Worlds."

"We get along without them."

"You do, Commodore, and I do, but there are some who think that they cannot. And where there is a demand there will soon be a supply."

"Smuggling?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it is smuggling? How do you know that somebody miles from any spaceport hasn't a mushroom plot, or that somebody with more than a smattering of chemistry isn't cooking up his own LSD?"

"We are working closely with the police in this matter, Commodore. All the evidence indicates that drugs are being smuggled in."

"And what am I supposed to do about it? I'm neither a Customs Officer nor a policeman."

"You are in a position of authority. Your captains are in positions of authority. All that I ask is a measure of cooperation."

"It is already laid down in Company's Regulations," said Grimes, "that the penalty for smuggling is instant dismissal."

"The penalty for being caught smuggling," said Billinghamst.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"It's not, and you know it, Commodore."

"All right. I'll compose a Circular on the subject."

"I expected more from you than this, Commodore Grimes."

"What more can I do?" Then, "And how do you know it's our ships? Most of them are running the Eastern Circuit, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no drugs are grown or manufactured on Tharn, Mellise, Stree or Grollor, any more than they are on Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo or Thule."

"Rim Dingo," said the Chief Collector, "is engaged in the trade between Lorn and Elsinore. Drug addiction is no problem on that world, but ships from all over the Galaxy come in to the ports of the Shakespearean Sector. Rim Wombat runs mainly to Rob Roy, in the Empire of Waverley. As long as

the Waverleyans get their Scotch they don't want anything else-but the Waverley ports are open to Galactic trade."

"Mphm. But I still can't see why there should be all this fuss about mind-expanding chemicals that can be purchased openly on at least a thousand planets."

"Here," stated Billinghamurst, "their use is illegal."

"If people enjoy something," said Grimes, "make a law against it. Who was it who said that the law was an ass?"

"I don't like your attitude, Commodore Grimes," Billinghamurst said reprovingly.

"There are times when I thoroughly disapprove of myself," said Grimes, with mock penitence. "Anyhow, I'll get that Circular into production."

"Thank you," said Billinghamurst. "I'm sure that it will be a great help."

Sarcastic bastard! thought Grimes.

II

That evening he talked things over with his wife. He said, "That fat slob Billinghamurst was in to see me."

"What have you done now?" Sonya asked him.

"Nothing," replied Grimes, hurt.

"Then what have your captains and officers been doing?"

"Nothing, so far as I know."

"Our Mr. Billinghamurst," she said, "doesn't like you enough to drop in for a social chat."

"You can say that again." The Commodore's prominent ears reddened. "I don't like him, either. Or any of his breed."

"They have their uses," she said.

Grimes looked at Sonya in a rather hostile manner. He growled, "You would say that. After all, you are an Intelligence Officer, even if only on the Reserve List."

"Why rub it in?" she asked.

"I'm not rubbing anything in. I'm only making the point that Customs Officers and Intelligence Officers have a lot in common."

"Yes, we do, I suppose. To be in either trade you have to be something of a human ferret. And the Survey Service's Intelligence Branch has worked with the Customs authorities more than once."

"Has Billinghamurst asked you to work with him?" he demanded.

"No. Of course not. He represents the Government of the Confederacy, and my Reserve Officer's Commission is held, as well you know, in the Federation's Survey Service."

"You are a citizen of the Confederacy by marriage."

"Yes, but a private citizen. As far as the Rim Worlds are concerned I'm just a civilian. Of course, if I got orders from my bosses on Earth to work with Billinghamst-just as I've had orders in the past to work with you-I should do just that."

"Mphm. Well, I most sincerely hope that you don't."

"Suppose," she suggested, "that you tell me what all this is about. I know you don't like Billinghamst-but he's only doing the job that he's paid to do."

"Why should the taxpayers be forced to pay for the upkeep of their natural enemies?" asked Grimes rhetorically.

"It always has been so," she told him. "It's just one of the prices one pays for civilization. But suppose you put me in the picture insofar as you and Mr. Billinghamst are concerned."

"All right. As you know very well the Rim Worlds are far less permissive than Earth and the older colonies. By comparison with them, we're practically puritanical."

"Are we? I haven't noticed anybody suffering agonies of repression."

"Perhaps not. But just compare our attitude towards the commoner drugs with that of, say, Earth. On the home planet marijuana can be purchased as openly as tobacco. Here, on the Rim, it is banned. There the more potent hallucinogens can be bought by those who have a license to use them-even that Dew of Paradise they distill on Arrid. Here, they are banned. I could go on . . ."

"Don't bother. So somebody's been drug running, and Billinghamst thinks that it's your boys. Right?"

"Right."

"And he wants you to do something about it. Right?"

"Right."

"And what are you doing about it?"

"I've already done it. I've composed a this-practice-must-cease-forthwith Circular, addressed to all Masters and Chief Officers, drawing their attention to Rule No. 73 in Rim Runners' Regulations-the instant dismissal if caught smuggling one."

"And do you think that will be enough?" she asked.

"That's the least of my worries," he said.

"At times-and this is one of them-I find your attitude towards things in

general rather hard to understand." Her slender face was set in severe lines, her green eyes stared at him in what could have been accusation.

Grimes squirmed slightly. He said firmly, "I am not, repeat not, a Customs Officer-and for that I thank all the Odd Gods of the Galaxy. Furthermore, ever since man came down from the trees he has needed an assortment of drugs-tea, coffee, alcohol, tobacco, the juice of sacred mushrooms, the smoke from burning Indian hemp-to take the rough edge off things in general. Most-all, probably-of these things are dangerous if taken in excess. So are plenty of non-drugs. After all, you can kill yourself overeating."

"Talking of that," she said sweetly, "you could stand to lose a pound or three . . . or four . . . or five."

He ignored this. "What Billinghamurst is doing is interfering with the most sacred freedom of mankind."

"Which is?"

"Freedom to go to hell your own way. The odd part is that in any culture where this freedom is an undeniable right very few people take advantage of it. But once the law, in its wisdom, says, "You must be good," it's a different story. You will recall that Atlantia, only a few years ago, tried to ban the consumption of alcohol. As a result non-drinkers became drinkers, moderate drinkers became heavy drinkers, and those who had been heavy drinkers drank themselves into early graves. And the rum runners made their fortunes."

"Yes," she said, "the rum runners made their fortunes. People like Drongo Kane, who has always ranked high on your list of pet dislikes. And now that some genius has discovered that there's an ideal market for drugs out on the Rim there'll be more fortunes made, and all by the dregs of humanity. Tell me, John, if you knew that Drongo Kane was among the runners would you be content to do no more than write one of those Circulars that nobody ever reads anyhow?"

He grinned. "I'll have to toss a coin before I can answer that one. Much as I dislike Drongo Kane I'd hate to be on the same side as Billinghamurst!"

III

When Grimes arrived at Port Last, on Ultimo, he was not in a good temper. The matter calling him away from Port Forlorn had been too urgent for him to wait for a regular sailing, so he had pressed the Deep Space tug Rim Malemute into service. She was an enormously powerful little brute, designed to go a long way in a short time. She was an assemblage of highly specialized machinery packed into a tin can, with no waste space whatsoever.

Williams, her skipper, brought her in as spectacularly as usual, applying the thrust of her inertial drive only when it seemed inevitable that the Malemute and her people would be smeared over the landing apron. Grimes, who was a guest in the control room, remarked coldly, "I almost lost my last meal. Not that it would have been much loss."

The tug skipper laughed cheerfully. He and Grimes were old friends and shipmates, and he had often served as the Commodore's second in command in Faraway Quest. He said, "You wanted to get here in a hurry, Skipper, and I got you here in a hurry. As for the tucker-this little bitch isn't an Alpha Class liner."

"Isn't she? You surprise me, Williams."

Grimes watched, through the viewport, the ground car that was coming out to the Malemute. Through the transparent canopy he could see two men. One was Giles, the Port Captain, the other was Dunbar, Rim Runners' Local Astronautical Superintendent. As the tug was in from another Rim Worlds port there were no Customs, Health, or Immigration officials. He said, "I'd better go to start sorting things out. I'll let you know where to send my baggage."

"Aren't you living aboard, Skipper?"

"If I'm a sardine in my next incarnation I'll think about it-but not until then."

Grimes went down to the airlock, the doors of which opened as he reached them, and walked down the ramp while it was still being extruded. As he was doing so the ground car came to a halt and Giles and Dunbar, both tall skinny men, got out. Giles was in uniform and saluted. Dunbar bowed stiffly. Grimes bowed in return.

"Glad to see you here, Commodore," said Dunbar.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Perhaps some refreshment before we get down to business. . . ."

"Thank you, but no. We adjusted our clocks to your local time for the last week of the voyage and I had breakfast before we landed." He looked at his watch. "0930 I make it."

"That is correct, sir."

Grimes got into the front of the car with Dunbar. Giles said that he was going aboard Rim Malemute to see Williams to handle the arrival formalities. Dunbar drove off, wasting no time.

Grimes looked with interest at the berthed ships as they passed them-Rim Cougar, Rim Panther, the Shakespearean Line's Othello, the Waverley Royal Mail's freighter Countess of Ayrshire. It could have been Port Forlorn, but for the weather. The sky overhead was blue, with a very few white clouds, not a dismal gray overcast-mainly natural, but contributed to by the smoke from the towering stacks of Lorn's heavy industry. Ahead, once they were through the main gates, was the city of Port Last, and beyond the white and red buildings towered the snowcapped pinnacles of the Ultimate Range. The road ran straight as an arrow through fields of wheat, some still green and some already golden. In these latter the harvesters, looking like huge mechanical insects, were busily working.

Ultimo, thought Grimes. The Granary of the Rim Worlds. A planet of

farmers. A world where anything, anything at all, is welcome as long as it breaks the deadly monotony. Like Elsinore, another farming world, but dairy products rather than grain, where compulsive gambling is the main social problem. . . .

He asked Dunbar, "Where have they got young Pleshoff?"

"In the Central Jail, Commodore. I could have got him out on bail, but thought that if I did he'd be getting into more trouble."

"What are the charges, exactly?"

"As far as we're concerned, mutiny. As far as the civil authorities are concerned, drug addiction. I should have liked to have held Captain Gaynes and his Chief Officer as witnesses-but, as you know, Rim Caribou was already behind schedule and it would have taken too much time to get reliefs for them. But they left affidavits."

"Mphm. What do you think, Captain?"

"What can I think? The young fool was in the control room, testing gear an hour before lift-off, while Gaynes was in my office and the Chief Officer was seeing the ship buttoned up for space. The engineers had been doing last minute maintenance on the inertial drive, had made a test run on one twentieth power and then, with departure time so close, had left it on Stand By. Pleshoff slammed it into maximum thrust and the old Caribou went up like a rocket. Gaynes and I saw it from my office window. It shook us, I can tell you. Then Pleshoff thought he'd try his hand at a few lateral maneuvers. He wiped the radio mast off the top of the spaceport control tower. He buzzed the market place in Port Last-and it was market day, too, just to improve matters. By this time the Chief and Second Officers had managed to break into the control room. They overpowered him and got the ship back into her berth-just as the entire police force came screaming in through the spaceport gates."

"And what does he say?"

"That it seemed a good idea at the time."

"Mphm. I suppose that all of us, as junior officers, have wanted to become instant captains. This drug addiction charge . . . do you think it will stick?"

"It'll stick, all right. Pleshoff was running around with a very unsavoury bunch of kids of his own age, bearded boys and shaven-headed girls. The Blossom People, they call themselves."

"There are Blossom People on Francisco. I suppose they modeled themselves on these originals."

"Probably. The gang that he was mixed up in seem to have a source of supply for-what do they call the muck?-dreamy weed. Ugh!"

"They smoke it?"

"Yes. In long, porcelain pipes. They claim that it's not habit forming. They claim that it's no worse than alcohol, that its effects are far less injurious.

They even have a religion based on it."

"Is this . . . this dreamy weed grown locally?"

Dunbar laughed. "On Ultimo? You must be joking, Commodore. Every square inch of soil on this planet has to nourish the sacred grain. It's smuggled in, from somewhere. The Police and the Customs are running around in small circles trying to get their paws onto the runners. But even the pushers are too smart for them."

The car had entered the city now, was running through a wide street on either side of which were low, graceful stone houses. The houses gave way to shops, to office buildings, taller and taller as the vehicle approached the centre. And then they were in the great square, with the fountains and the statue of some Ancient Greek-looking lady proudly holding a sheaf of wheat. Surrounding the square were the official buildings-Town Hall, City Library, State Church, Aero-Space Authority, Police Headquarters, and Prison. The jail was a cylindrical tower, windowless except at ground level. It was well proportioned, graceful even-but it looked grim.

Dunbar said, "I've warned them that we're coming. They'll let us in."

"As long as they let us out," said Grimes.

IV

The police lieutenant in charge of the ground floor office eyed Grimes and Dunbar as though they were candidates for admission. "Yes?" he barked.

"I am Captain Dunbar," said the Local Astronautical Superintendent. "This gentleman is Commodore Grimes."

The policeman's manner softened very slightly. He asked, "And what can I do for you gentlemen?"

"We wish to see Mr. Pleshoff. Colonel Warden said that it would be in order."

"Oh, yes. Pleshoff." The swarthy and burly young man leafed through a book on his desk. "We still have him."

Pleshoff, thought Grimes. With no "Mister." But if you get on the wrong side of the law you soon lose your rank and status.

"Cell 729," muttered the lieutenant. He raised an imperious hand and a constable obeyed the summons. "Bamberger, take these visitors to see the prisoner Pleshoff."

"It is a work period, sir."

"I know that. But I think that the sovereign state of Ultimo can afford to dispense with his services for half an hour, or even longer."

"Follow me, please, gentlemen," said the brawny Bamberger. He led the way to a bank of elevator doors. He addressed a grille set in the nearest one, said. "Constable Bamberger, No. 325252, with two visitors,

Commodore Grimes and Captain Dunbar." Then, to his charges, "Stand beside me, please. One on either side of me." And again to the grille, "Constable Bamberger and party positioned."

There was a flash of intense light, lasting for the briefest fraction of a second. Grimes allowed himself to wonder how he would look in the instantaneous photograph. The door slid open to reveal an empty cage. There was no control panel. The door silently shut as soon as they were all inside. Bamberger said, "Level 33." There was only the slightest tug of acceleration to indicate that they were being slowly carried upwards.

Grimes said, "I take it that your various robots are programmed to obey only the voices of the prison staff."

"I cannot answer that question, sir."

"Mphm. And I suppose, too, that the elevators move very slowly unless some key word or phrase is used, so that any prisoner attempting to escape from an upper level in one cage would find that those on the ground floor had been given ample time to prepare for his reception."

"I cannot answer that question, sir."

"If the machinery running the elevators obeys only the voices of the guards," said Dunbar, "how could a prisoner persuade it to work for him?"

"In the history of penology," said Grimes, "there are many instances of prisoners persuading guards to help them to escape. And not only with a knife or gun in the back."

"I'm afraid that I can't see Pleshoff doing any bribery," said Dunbar. "Not on Rim Runners' Third Officer's salary. I couldn't do it on mine."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes, and Bamberger looked relieved at the change of subject.

"What work do the prisoners do?" asked Grimes.

"Pleshoff, sir," said the constable, "is in the workroom where playmaster components are assembled. All the convicts receive full Award rates for whatever work they are doing. In the case of a prisoner not yet tried and convicted, even when undeniably guilty of the offense with which he is charged, he is allowed to keep the money he earns after the cost of his keep has been deducted. After conviction, of course, all his earnings revert to Consolidated Revenue."

"Mphm." Grimes turned to Dunbar. "I'm surprised that our Mr. Pleshoff hasn't been up before the Beak yet."

"He's had to take his place in the queue, Commodore."

"So they're keeping you busy," said Grimes to Bamberger.

The constable's wooden face at last betrayed some emotion. "It's these Blossom People, sir. They get a lungful of dreamy weed and the things they get up to aren't at all funny. We never have the same trouble with proper

criminals."

"I suppose not. A proper criminal you just regard as one of the family."

Bamberger gave Grimes a very nasty look, then lapsed into sulky silence.

"But they are becoming a menace," said Dunbar. "The Blossom People, I mean."

"I suppose they are," said Grimes. Performing aerobatics in a 3,000 ton spaceship certainly could be classed as being a menace.

"Floor 33," announced Bamberger. He led the way out through the opening door.

Most of Floor 33 was occupied by the workroom. Through the space ran long, slow-moving conveyor belts. Industriously engaged at these were about a hundred men, each of whom was dressed in drab gray coveralls, each of whom had his number stenciled on to the chest and back of his garment. Blue-and-silver uniformed guards strolled watchfully along the lines, and other guards stood behind mounted guns of some kind in inward-facing balconies. Those screwdrivers, thought Grimes with a twinge of apprehension, could be used as weapons. And the soldering irons. . . . But how long would a prisoner who tried to attack a guard last? Not long. He transferred his attention to an almost completed playmaster that was sliding past him. He wondered if the machine in his own home had been assembled in a place like this.

One of the guards who had more silver braid on his sleeves than the others came to meet them. He said, "Commodore Grimes? Captain Dunbar? You wish to see Pleshoff, Number 729. You may use the refreshment room. It will not be required for general use until the next smoke, forty five minutes from now. Take these gentlemen there, Bamberger."

"Yes, Sergeant."

The refreshment room was grim, gray, cheerless. It contained an ice-water dispenser and dispensers for tea and coffee. Bamberger asked if they wanted a drink. Dunbar refused one. The constable drew paper cups of coffee for Grimes and himself. The fluid was lukewarm, black, and bitter and could have been an infusion of anything at all but what it was called.

Escorted by two guards Pleshoff came in. Grimes remembered the young man, had interviewed him when he applied for a position in Rim Runners. He had been a junior officer in Trans-Galactic Clippers and had met a girl from Faraway when his ship had carried a number of Rim Worlds passengers on a cruise. He seemed to remember that Pleshoff had married the girl-yes, he had applied for an extension of leave during his honeymoon. And hadn't Pleshoff's captain mentioned to him, not so long ago, that the marriage had broken up?

There are some men who look like spacemen, like officers, no matter what they are wearing. Pleshoff was not one of them. Out of uniform-or in the wrong uniform-he looked like a very ordinary, very frightened young man. At least he didn't look like a criminal, thought Grimes.

The Commodore said to the guards, "Do you think that you could leave us alone with the . . . er . . . prisoner?"

Bamberger said, "These gentlemen were vouched for by Colonel Warden."

One of the other men asked, "Aren't you Commodore Grimes, sir? The Commodore Grimes?"

"There's only one of me as far as I know," said Grimes. "On this Continuum."

Bamberger was puzzled by this remark and said doubtfully, "We have to ask the Sergeant."

But the Sergeant was agreeable, and after a few minutes Grimes, Dunbar, and Pleshoff had the refreshment room to themselves, the two superintendents seated on a hard wooden bench and the young officer facing them, perched on a chair that looked even harder than their own seat.

V

"And now, Mr. Pleshoff," said Grimes sternly, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"I suppose it's no good my saying that I'm sorry, sir."

"It's not," Grimes told him. But, he thought, I'm sorry. I'm sorry to see a youngster ruin his career.

"I suppose, sir, that I'm finished with Rim Runners."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Pleshoff, that you're finished in space. After what you did, your Certificate of Competency will have to be dealt with. There's no way out of it. But I don't think that we shall be pressing the mutiny charge."

"Thank you, sir."

"You haven't much to thank me for, Mr. Pleshoff. You're on the beach. You still have to face the drug charges. But I shall instruct our legal people to do what they can for you."

"Thank you, sir."

"And you might do something for me."

"Anything I can, sir." Pleshoff was pitifully eager.

"I'll be frank with you. Until now I've never taken this drug business seriously. I've thought, if people want to blow their minds, let 'em. It just never occurred to me that anybody in a position of trust, of responsibility, would get . . . hooked? Is that the right word?"

"But I'm not hooked, sir. I tried the dreamy weed only once, and they told me that its effects would be for that night only."

"And who," demanded Grimes sharply, "are they?"

Pleshoff's immature features set into a mask of stubbornness. He muttered, "Keep them out of it. They're my friends."

"You mean," said Grimes, "that she's your friend."

"Yes," admitted the young man. And then the words poured out. "I've been very lonely, sir. Ever since Sheila and I broke up. Then I met this girl, here, in Port Last. It was in the park. I'd been given the afternoon off and had gone for a walk. You know how it is, sir. You meet somebody and you sort of click. She's like the girls I used to know at home. You know-more free in her talk than the girls out here on the Rim Worlds, more way out in her dress. I took her to dinner that evening. She decided on the place. A little restaurant. Intimate. Candles on the tables, and all that. The menu on a blackboard. I didn't know until then that there were such places out here. That was just the first night, of course. There were Other nights. We . . . we became friendly. And with the ship on a regular trade, coming in to Port Last every three weeks or so, I . . ." he grinned weakly, "I had it made."

"She had other friends, of course. All in the same age group. One night she asked me round to a party at one of their places. There was music, of course, and plenty to drink, and things to nibble on, and we were all dancing some of the time, and talking some of the time. You know."

"And then the chap who was throwing the party got up and said, 'Quiet, everybody! Silence in Court! I have an announcement!' Then he went on to say that the pusher had come good at last, and that the gateway to never was open. This didn't make any sense to me. He started passing out long, pretty, porcelain pipes, and then brought out from somewhere a can of what looked like a greenish tobacco. 'What is it?' I asked my girl. 'Where were you dragged up?' she asked me. After all we mean to each other, don't tell me that you're a block.' "

"A block?" asked Grimes.

"It's what they call stiff and stodgy and conventional people, sir. Well, I told her that I wasn't a block. Then she said that I must be, otherwise I'd recognize dreamy weed when I saw it. Well, I'd heard about dreamy weed, of course, but you never see it in the Academy, although when I was there, for my pre-Space training, two senior cadets were booted out for smoking it. And there's something in TG Clippers' Company's Regulations about it not being allowed aboard their ships. So I wasn't keen on trying it and said that we were lifting off the next day."

"She told me that I'd be right as rain in the morning. She told me, too, that to get the full benefit of it you had to smoke it with somebody, somebody towards whom you felt affectionate. If I wouldn't smoke with her, she was going to smoke with . . . the name doesn't matter."

"You know what it's like, sir. How a girl can make you do things you wouldn't do ordinarily."

" 'Lord,' " quoted Grimes, " 'the woman tempted me, and I fell.' "

"Who said that, sir?"

"A man called Adam. Rather before your time, and even mine. But go on."

"It was odd, sir. The smoke, I mean. She and I shared the pipe, passing it back and forth between us. It seemed that I was inhaling something of her, and that she was inhaling something of me. And it was like breathing in a fluid, a liquid, rather than a gas. A warm, sweet, very smooth liquid. And then, somehow, as we smoked we were . . . doing other things." Pleshoff blushed in embarrassment. "The people round us were . . . doing the same. But it wasn't always boys with girls. There were some boys with boys, and there were girls together. And the lights were dim, and dimmer all the time, and redder, and redder, like blood. But it wasn't frightening. It was all . . . warm, and . . . cozy. And there was a pulsing sound like a giant heartbeat. It must have been my own heart that I was hearing, or her heart, or the hearts of all of us. And we were very close, the two of us, all of us. And. . .

"And we reached our climax. It's the usual way of putting it, sir, and the words are the right words, but . . . can you imagine an orgasm that's an implosion rather than an explosion? And after that there was the slow, slow falling into a deep velvety darkness, a warm darkness. . . .

"And. . . .

"And then it was morning. Most of the others were waking up too. It should have all looked very sordid in the first light, naked bodies sprawled everywhere, but it didn't. And I felt fine, just fine, as fine as everybody looked, as fine as I knew that I looked myself. Somebody had made coffee, and I'd never tasted coffee as good before. It tasted the way that coffee smells when it's being ground. And my cigarette tasted the way that somebody else's cigar usually smells. I'd have liked to have stayed for breakfast with the others, but I had to be getting back to the ship. After all, it was sailing day. So I got back to the ship. I was still feeling fine-on top of the world, on top of all the worlds. I just breezed through all the things I had to do."

"Including testing the gear," remarked Grimes.

Pleshoff's face lost its animation. "Yes, sir. The gear. I was there, by myself, in the control room. I saw that the inertial drive was already on Stand By. And then, quite suddenly, the thought came to me, 'Why shouldn't I show the old bastard-sorry, sir, the Old Man I mean-that he's not the only one who can handle a ship?' I knew that he was still in Captain Dunbar's office, and I thought it'd be a fine joke if he saw his precious Caribou lifting off without him."

"Mphm. A very fine joke," commented Grimes. "You may consider yourself highly fortunate that nobody was hurt or killed. Mphm. I suggest that you tell the authorities the name of your host on that unfortunate evening-although no doubt the local detective force is quite capable of finding it out for themselves. The real villain, of course, is the pusher. If you could name him you'd probably get off with a light sentence."

"I can't," said Pleshoff dully. "And if I could, I wouldn't."

Grimes shook his head sadly. "I don't know what trade you'll be entering

after the authorities turn you loose-but whatever it is, you'll find that schoolboy code of honor a disadvantage." He got to his feet. "Well, Mr. Pleshoff, we'll do our best for you. We pride ourselves that we look after our own. But I'm afraid that you won't be one of our own for very much longer."

VI

"I don't know what today's young people are coming to," complained Captain Dunbar as he and Grimes left the jail. "Drugs. Orgies."

"I've never taken part in an orgy," said Grimes rather wistfully. "Have you?"

"Of course not!" snapped Dunbar, looking at his superior in a rather dubious manner. Then, apparently having decided that the Commodore must have been joking, he went on, "Until now we've been clear of all this sort of thing on the Rim Worlds. I always said that it was a big mistake to open these planets to intergalactic trade."

"Mphm. Where am I staying, by the way?"

"We've booked you into the Rimrock House, Commodore."

Grimes sighed. There was a Rimrock House at Port Forlorn, on Lorn, another one at Port Farewell, on Faraway, yet another at Port Edgell, on Thule. From time to time he had stayed at them all. They were the most expensive hotels on the Rim Worlds-but by no means the best. He would have preferred some place with a less pretentious menu but far better food, with the staff not rigged out like Galactic High Admirals, but with far better service. But it would be only for a few days, until he had this Rim Caribou mess sorted out.

The Rimrock House was one of the huge buildings fronting on to the Central Square. Dunbar drove Grimes the short distance, although he would rather have walked, and promised that he would have the Commodore's gear picked up from Rim Malemute and sent out to the hotel.

Grimes left the car, walked over the sidewalk to the big doorway, through the force field that prevented the atmosphere of the hotel from being tainted by the excellent fresh air outside. On a world such as Lorn there would have been some point to it, but on Ultimo it was merely a very expensive absurdity. He nodded to the gorgeously uniformed doorman who had saluted him as though he were at least the Federation's First Space Lord. He went to the huge desk behind which a half dozen very pretty girls were chirping to each other like colorful inmates of an aviary. Eventually one of them condescended to notice him.

"Sir?"

"My name is Grimes. I am booked in here."

"Would that be Commodore Grimes, sir?" asked the tall blonde, statuesque in her form-revealing trouser suit of crimson dermitex.

"Yes."

"There is a Carlottigram for you, sir. It came in only a few minutes ago." She handed Grimes the dark blue envelope.

What now? he wondered as he ran a fingernail along the seal fine. What now? The envelope tidily fell apart. He looked at the message it had contained.

From: Officer Commanding Rim Worlds Navy

To: Commodore Grimes, D.S.M., O.C., F.H.S.C., R.W.N.R.

Copies: c/o Rimrock House, Fort Last, Ultimo

c/o Tug, Rim Malemute, at Fort Last, Ultimo

c/o Dock Office, Rim Runners, Port Last, Ultimo

Text: As and from date of origination you are to consider yourself called to Active Service, Rim Worlds Navy, Pay and Allowances as for Commodore First Class, Expenses as requisite. You are to cooperate with Police, Customs and other authorities in investigation of drug smuggling. Indefinite leave of absence from Rim Runners arranged.

(Signed) Kravitz.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes thoughtfully. He could imagine what had been happening. High-up politicians must have been getting concerned about the general deterioration of Rim Worlds morals, and some of them must have demanded that the Navy do something about the smuggling in of drugs. And Admiral Kravitz-Grimes could just picture him-must have said, "We'll put Commodore Grimes on the job. Anything at all off-beat is right up his alley." And if Grimes were successful in stopping the traffic the Navy would take the credit. If he made a mess of things, it would be pointed out that, after all, he was only a Reserve Officer, not Navy proper. On past occasions Sonya had worked with him-but that had been when the Federation and the Confederacy had been acting in concert. On this occasion they would not be. The majority of Federated Planets approved the permissive society. The Rim Worlds did not, repeat not.

Oh, well, thought Grimes, I suppose I'd better do something about something. For a start, I'd better organize transport for myself. Billy Williams is a Reserve Commander, and Rim Malemute is rated as a naval auxiliary vessel. And the Navy has a yard here, at Port Last, and an armory. It's time I did some telephoning. It's just as well that the Admiralty will be footing the bills.

A smartly uniformed boy took him up to his suite. Once there Grimes called Rim Malemute, by now hooked into the planetary telephone service, and told Williams to come out to see him as soon as possible. Then he spoke to Rim Runners' Port Last Manager, telling him that he, Grimes, had been called to Active Service. He dictated a Priority Carlottigram to be sent to Admiral Kravitz, requesting the services of the Malemute and her personnel. He rang the O.I.C. Port Last Base, introducing himself and warning the officer that probably he would require some modifications made to the tug. He sent another Carlottigram, this one to Sonya, saying, Involved in fun

and games. See if you can get yourself asked to the party. He caught Captain Dunbar at his office, and told him what was happening. Finally he rang the Port Last Chief Collector of Customs.

"Grimes here. Commodore Grimes. I've been instructed to work with you people on this drug running business."

"Oh, yes, Commodore. The Navy told us that they were putting a senior officer on to it. Hang on a moment, will you? There's a friend of yours here would like a word with you."

A friend? thought Grimes. If I had any friends on this world they wouldn't be in the Customs Department.

But he recognized the face that appeared in the little screen of the telephone. It was Billinghamurst, who said, "A very good day to you, Commodore. I suppose you came here over the Rim Caribou affair. I was here when it happened. There's been a conference of all the senior Customs Officers of the Rim Worlds. Yes, about this drug business." He laughed fatly. "I think you'll admit, now, that sending out Circulars isn't quite good enough!"

VII

In the days that followed Grimes was busy. The modifications to Rim Malemute-mainly the fitting of weaponry-he left in Williams' capable hands, concerning himself with setting up some kind of an organization and with reading all the official reports that were made available to him. Pleshoff, he learned, had been very unlucky. In the vast majority of cases those who smoked dreamy weed functioned normally on awakening. He learned, too, that the drug was not one on which one became hooked, although those who had participated in a dream time, as it was called, wished to repeat the experience as soon as possible. But, as far as he could determine, the stuff was no more dangerous than alcohol, and its over-all effects were far less damaging. Still, he had been ordered to help stamp out the traffic-and, as Sonya had said, there were far too many utterly unworthy people making far too big profits from it.

For much of the time he was having to work with Billinghamurst who, even though Port Forlorn was his own bailiwick, had been put in general charge of the investigation by his Department. Grimes acquired a grudging respect for the man's capabilities although it was still impossible to like him. Billinghamurst, however, insisted on treating Grimes as an old friend. His attitude was, we're both Lorners. We have to stand together against these Ultimo hicks.

He said, "We'll not be able to rely too much on the police, Commodore. They're like all policemen, everywhere. When it comes to dealing with members of the criminal classes they're quite efficient, but when they tangle with students, or spheres, they go all hysterical."

"Spheres?" asked Grimes.

"You should study the jargon. They call themselves spheres. They call people like us blocks. We block the spheres from rolling."

"And just how do the . . . er . . . spheres roll, Mr. Billinghurst?"

"Doing anything tonight, Commodore? There's a roll around at the Dominey Hall. You and I will have to wear false beards and dress the part; spheres come in all ages and sizes. Young Pahvani-his sister is in your office-will be with us. He's been growing his own beard so he can play the part of a sphere if necessary. He'll tell you what to wear, and all the rest of it."

Grimes changed into his sphere outfit in Pahvani's room, in the unpretentious hotel in which the young Customs Officer was living. He surveyed himself rather dubiously in the full-length mirror. Black leather shorts-but that part of it wasn't so bad, he was used to wearing shorts with uniform. Bare legs-well, at least he maintained a good tan. Ornate, metal-studded sandals, looking like the sort of footwear that Roman legionaries must have worn. A short shirt, worn outside the shorts, basically dark green but liberally decorated with improbable scarlet and orange blossoms. A string of glass beads, each one a different shade of blue, and each one perfectly spherical. And the beard . . . it matched the hair of his head perfectly, but that was all that could be said in its favour. It was not the sort of beard that Grimes would ever have grown. It was too long, too untidy, untrimmed, uncombed.

There was one consolation; Billinghurst, who did not have the build for this sort of rig, looked even worse than Grimes, his spindly legs uglily incongruous under the gross bulk of his body. Sub-Inspector Pahvani looked quite good. His beard suited him. He could have been an old-time Indian mystic.

It was only a short walk from the hotel to the Dominey Hall, which was situated in the Old Town suburb of Port Last, differing from the ancient sheet metal buildings around it only in size. It was a huge barn of a place with no pretensions to architectural style. Projected into the air above it, in huge, shimmering letters of blue fire, were the words:

TONITE! TONITE!

ROLL-AROUND

TONITE!

Already there were crowds converging on the hall-men, of all ages, dressed as Grimes and his companions were dressed, girls and women, shaven-headed, most of them, similarly attired, although their shorts were much shorter and many of the shirts were practically transparent.

There were police, too, obvious in their blue and silver uniforms. One of them, when Grimes stopped to stare at the crowd, poked him quite painfully with his club, snarling, "Move along there, you bearded wonder! Move along!" Grimes decided to move along. Billinghurst chuckled and murmured, "You see what I mean about the Police Force, John."

"I see, Joe. And I feel it!"

They reached the door, where Pahvani paid the admission for all three of them. There were no seats in the hall. There was a platform in the centre

of the floor, as yet unoccupied. The glaring lights overhead were red and green, blue and yellow. The air was hot and already heavy with the odour of perspiring and not overly clean humanity. Many of the women had already removed their shirts and a few of the men had done so.

"What band tonight, Francis?" asked Billinghurst casually.

"The Music of the Spheres, sir."

"Watch it!" snarled Billinghurst.

"The Music of the Spheres, Joe."

"Appropriate, I suppose," commented Grimes. He saw that a circle of flooring in the centre of the platform was sinking, was vanishing from sight. Some sort of elevator, he supposed. It would have been impossible for the bandsmen to struggle to their places through this crowd.

Yes, it was an elevator. It brought up the instrumentalists—three bearded men with electric guitars, three more with small drums, one seated at a piano, and an enormously fat blonde girl who was holding a microphone.

They started almost at once—the guitars snarling, the drums thudding, the piano holding the tune together. The fat girl yelled into the microphone and her voice, vastly amplified, came at them from all corners of the hall.

"Driftin'

"An' dreamin',

"No lyin',

"No schemin'

"Just you, an' me,

"An' he, an' she,

"Just we,

"Ain't yer gonna drift an' dream some time with me?"

So it went on, for quite some time. Grimes was not enjoying himself much. He suspected that Billinghurst was not either. But young Pahvani was reveling in the music with its odd, broken rhythm—like an inertial drive unit slightly on the blink, thought Grimes nastily—as were most of the others in the crowd. But the real Roll Around had not yet started.

When it did there was, at last, some rhythm in the music—unsubtle, compelling. As though stirred by a giant spoon the crowd began to move, clockwise, around the hall, marching in step to the insistent drums, stepping high, bringing feet thudding down on the reverberant floor. It was impossible not to join in, physically as well as psychologically. To the snarling guitars and growling drums they marched, to the amplified bass beat of the flogged piano, to the words that the fat woman was belting out in an almost baritone.

"Rolling free, rolling free!

"Give a shock to the blocks-One, two, three!

"Oh, we'll roll the bastards under

"And we'll break them all asunder,

"Rolling free, rolling free, rolling free!"

Grimes was singing as loudly as anybody. So was Pahvani. Billinghurst was merely muttering the words, without enthusiasm.

Round, and round, and round again. Pahvani had got his shirt off somehow. Grimes, sweating profusely, would have liked to have done the same, but in this crush it was impossible. He saw that some of the women had, with fantastic agility, contrived to strip themselves stark naked.

"Over land, over sea, we go rolling, rolling free,

"And we'll always go rolling along!

"Over hill, over dale, you will see our dusty trail,

"As we always go rolling along."

Round, and round, and round again. Tramp, stamp, tramp, stamp! Overhead the lights were swinging to the percussive heat of the music.

"An all you blocks stop growlin',

"Or this is what we'll do!

"The spheres was made for rollin',

"They'll roll right over you!"

"I was hoping," gasped Billinghurst, contriving to whisper and pant simultaneously, "to pick something up here."

"That one looks quite nice," suggested Grimes, who had got his second wind. "A bit sweaty, but aren't we all?"

"No . . . not . . . that! Information."

"A rolling sphere gathers no moss," Grimes told him.

Round, and round, and round again. Tramp, tramp, tramp! Stamp, stamp, stamp!

"When the spheres come rolling in,

"When the spheres come rolling in,

"We're gonna be in that number

"When the spheres come rolling in!"

To Grimes' right there was a skinny, half naked, almost breastless girl who had been edging closer and closer to him with every circuit of the floor. He was beginning to wonder if a pick-up were intended, was trying to work out ways and means of achieving a painless brush-off. She just wasn't his type. And then he saw that a plump, copiously perspiring young man had joined her in this dance that was more like a march. He heard him whisper to her, "0200 hours at the Fitzroy Crossing. Pass it on!" His message delivered, he vanished into the mass of dancers.

Somehow the skinny girl had inserted herself between Grimes and the almost exhausted Billinghamurst. She was singing softly, in time to the music,

"When the weed comes dropping in,

"When the weed comes dropping in,

"Oh two hundred, Fitzroy Crossing,

"When the weed comes dropping in!"

The music changed, but she went on singing,

"Dreamy free, dreamy free,

"Dreamy weed, dreamy weed, dreamy free . . ."

She made a face at Billinghamurst, flashed a smile at Grimes, and wriggled away through the crowd.

Round, and round, and round-but with every circuit edging closer to the exit.

"Oh, we'll roll, away up yonder!

"Oh, we'll roll, away up yonder!

"Oh, we'll roll, away up yonder!

"When they roll away up yonder we'll be there!"

And Billinghamurst, getting his wind back, sang the final "We'll be there!" with great emphasis.

VIII

But they almost weren't there.

There was a minor riot outside the Dominey Hall. Accounts as to its cause differed. One morning paper said that a crowd, singing, "We'll roll the bastards under!" had charged a group of policemen. The other paper said that the police had charged a small group of people from the Roll-Around who were going their ways quite peacefully.

Actually it had been Grimes' fault. Those noisy songs, with their primitive rhythm, had carried him back in time, to when he was a young and normally rowdy cadet in the Federation's Survey Service. He had remembered something that he and his shipmates had been fond of singing whenever

there was a minion of the law within earshot. He had insisted on teaching the words to Billinghurst-who was not amused-to Pahvani-who was-and to a half dozen young men and girls who were going the same way as themselves.

"There's a policeman on his beat,

"Over there, over there!

"There's a policeman on his beat,

"Over there!

"There's a policeman on his beat,

"I can smell his sweaty feet,

"There's a policeman on his beat,

"Over there!"

During the third, noisy rendition of this ditty a dozen policemen tried to silence the songsters. Punches were thrown. Stunguns were used, set so as to inflict the maximum pain without causing unconsciousness. A large body of revelers rushed to the aid of Grimes and his companions. Police air cars clattered overhead, dropping arrest-meshes, wire nets that ignored the specially treated police uniforms but that clung to everything else in a tight grip. The air cars ranged over the street like seine net fishermen over a school of fish. Their catch, dangling under the aircraft, was hauled ignominiously to the station house. Grimes, Billinghurst, and Pahvani would have spent the night in cells had not Pahvani, who had been acting as liaison officer between Police and Customs, been recognized by the lieutenant in charge. He had the three Lorners hustled away from the other prisoners, ostensibly for interrogation. Shouts of sympathy and encouragement followed them.

As soon as he could safely do so Billinghurst snarled, "You almost ruined everything, Commodore!"

"When among spheres-roll!" replied the unrepentant Grimes.

"You, Lieutenant whatever-your-name-is," snapped Billinghurst to the police officer. "I am the Chief Collector of Customs for Port Forlorn, in over-all charge of this drug investigation. This is Commodore Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Navy, who's working with me." He glared at the Commodore. "Or against me, to judge by tonight's little effort. Sub-Inspector Pahvani you already know."

"And what can I do for you, sir?"

"I want vehicles, and I want men. Armed men."

"And a map," contributed Grimes. "And all the geographical information you can give us." He waited for Billinghurst to say something, then added, "It seems that there's to be a drop at Fitzroy Crossing. At 0200 hours tomorrow."

"There's a wall map in the Captain's office," said the lieutenant. "Follow me, please."

The map was a large scale topographical one, covering Port Last and the surrounding countryside to a distance of 50 kilometres from the City Centre. "The Fitzroy Crossing is not far from here," said the police officer, jabbing with his finger. "There's a bridge, as you see, both road and monorail. On the north side of the bridge there's Davidsham village-with one Senior Constable who, by this time, will be tucked up warm and snug in his little bed." He laughed. "I was stationed there myself before I was promoted to Sergeant. Nothing ever happens in Davidsham. Even so, I should hardly think that the drop will be to the north of the Crossing.

"Now, on the south side we have the wheatfields. And," his finger jabbed again, "here we have the racecourse. I hope you gentlemen can manage to be here for the Ultimo Cup Week-it's really something."

"Landing facilities?" asked Grimes, who was not at all interested in horses.

"You could set a cruiser down there, Commodore. And a couple of destroyers. No G.C.A. of course. Ha, ha."

"There probably will be," said Grimes. "A small beacon, mounted on a car. Mphm. Now, Mr. Billingham, if we go charging out there in police vehicles we'll scare off the reception committee-and whoever's making the delivery. I suggest that we land somewhere to the north of the racecourse, well away from the road, and make our way to the landing site on foot. We shall want a guide. Do any of your men know the district, Lieutenant?"

"I do, sir."

"Good. And have you any quiet cars? Inertial drive kicks up one helluva racket, especially on a still night like this."

"We have the blimps, sir. They have been developed especially for police use on this planet."

"They should do." And Grimes thought, Once again the airship comes back into service. He said, "But I thought you had no really serious crime on Ultimo."

"There are gambling schools, sir, very often meeting out in the country. They play a game of chance, tossing two coins. When it comes to catching the gamblers red-handed we find the silent approach technique very useful. The blimps are propeller driven, with almost noiseless electric motors."

"Make it blimps, then."

"Very good, sir. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll ring the Precinct Captain and start getting things organized."

"Before you do, Lieutenant, is there a washroom handy? I'd like to get this artificial foliage off my face. I'd just hate to get it wound round a blimp's propeller."

IX

Airships had always fascinated Grimes. Now and again, on worlds lagging in technological development, and on planets whose people had a commonsense attitude towards unnecessary power consumption, he had been a passenger in such craft. The Shaara, for example, could build spaceships at least as good as anything built by Man, but for atmospheric flights they favored lighter-than-air machines.

The blimps of the Ultimo Police were well conceived, well designed, well constructed. They were semirigid ships rather than true blimps, however. They had heating coils inside their balloons to give the helium additional lift, and there was an arrangement of bands and nets whereby the lift could be reduced by compression of the gas. Water ballast was carried, but except in emergencies there would be no need for any valving of helium or dumping of ballast. Below the rigid spines were slung the gondolas, one to each ship, and each with a single pusher screw.

Grimes, Billinghamurst, and Pahvani rode in the leading ship, the one piloted by the police lieutenant. With them were four constables. Grimes sat with the pilot in the little control cab at the fore end of the gondola, watching everything with interest. Mooring lines were cast off by the ground crew, but the ship still sat stolidly on its skids, although above the gondola the gas bags, enclosed in their sausage-shaped integument, were swaying and creaking. The lieutenant's hand went to a switch on the control panel and almost immediately there was the subdued hum of an electric motor. Decompression? wondered Grimes. But apart from the mechanical noise, which soon stopped, nothing at all seemed to be happening.

The lieutenant swore under his breath. Then he called back into the main cabin, "Excuse me, Mr. Billinghamurst, how much do you weigh?"

"I . . . I haven't checked lately, Lieutenant."

"Then it's time you did!" muttered the young man.

There was a fresh sound, the splashing of water on to the concrete of the blimpyard. Now the ship was rising, smoothly, silently, up past the lighted windows of the police barracks, up, up, until, a checkered pattern of crisscrossing street lights, Port Last lay below her. Grimes poked his head out of an open side window, looked astern. One by one, great dark shapes, their black bulks in silhouette against the glow of the city lights, the other five airships were swimming upwards.

The lieutenant started his motor then. It was almost silent, and only a faint swishing sound came from the propeller. Slowly he brought the ship round to her heading, explaining, "We have to be careful how we handle these things. They're just a little flimsy." Gradually the lights of the city, of the scattered outer suburbs, drifted astern.

It was a fine night, clear, almost windless. The single moon of Ultimo, named Ceres, was hanging high in the black sky, the empty sky of the Rim Worlds. It was just past its full but did not give much light; satellites so large as to be almost sister planets are rare throughout the Galaxy. Nonetheless, the surface of the Fitzroy River reflected what little illumination there was, a faintly gleaming silver ribbon winding through

formless masses of darkness. On the horizon was the dim cluster of yellow lights that was Davidsham.

Silently the squadron flew on, invisible from the ground now that it was clear of the glare from the city, keeping the river to starboard, the distant village fine on the starboard bow. Grimes borrowed the pilot's night glasses. He could see, now, the straight black line that cut the silver ribbon. The bridge. . . . He looked more to his left, trying to pick out the racecourse, but without success.

"You'll not find it, sir," laughed the Lieutenant, "unless you've eyes like a cat. But you see the horseshoe bend, just this side of the village?"

"Mphm. Yes."

"There's a field there that's been harvested. That's where we're landing."

"And then we get out and walk."

"Yes. Then we get out and walk."

The airship was losing altitude as the pilot applied negative dynamic lift. Grimes could make out features on the ground below now, as long as they were not too far distant. He could see the paleness of the fields that were yet to be harvested, the darkness of those where reaping had already taken place. Another electric motor started up, and from above came a faint creaking as the gas bags were compressed. The ground seemed very close now, and seemed to be rushing past at a fantastic speed. Grimes started to worry about tall trees and the like, but told himself that the lieutenant knew what he was doing. In any case, it would be unlikely that there would be any trees in the wheatlands to rob the precious grain of its nutriment.

The pilot snapped rapid orders to the other ships on his radio, then stopped the main motor, restarting it almost at once in reverse. The ground below slowly lost its retrograde progression relative to the ship, but was coming up to meet her as the buoyancy was squeezed out of her balloons. There was a dry crackling from under the gondola as the skids brushed the stubble. Then, with all motors stopped, she landed. Men jumped from the side doors, quickly and efficiently moored her with screw pegs.

"All ashore!" ordered the lieutenant cheerfully.

Grimes jumped down from the gondola to the ground, cursing to himself as the stubble scratched his bare calves and shins. He should have changed out of this absurd rig; getting rid of that insanitary beard had been a step in the right direction, but not far enough. It was fortunate that the correct footwear for a Roll-Around consisted of very heavy sandals. He was joined by Billingham and Pahvani. He stood with them to watch the other airships coming in. He wondered how those landing managed to avoid those already down, and was told by the Lieutenant that on occasions such as this dim lights were shown on the tops of the gas bags.

There was a very cautious flashing of down-pointed, shielded torches. The lieutenant detailed a man to stay with each ship, then said to Grimes, "You and the other two had better stay close to me, Commodore. We'll walk to

the racecourse from here, making as little noise as possible. Before we get there we'll spread out to surround the position-just in case there's anybody there. If there's not-some of us will wait in the Owners' Stand, some by the Saddling Paddock and the rest by the Tote. That'll give us a good coverage."

"And good odds?" asked Grimes.

He did not much enjoy the walk over the fields. There was enough moonlight to make the going not too difficult, but the sharp spiny stubble was drawing blood with almost every step. And the air, despite the lack of wind, was decidedly chilly. And things were rustling in the dry stalks. He had visions of venomous reptiles, insects or the like, and was only slightly reassured when his guide whispered to him that it was only cats-of Terran origin-hunting a small and harmless (apart from its appetite for grain) indigenous rodent.

Behind him, despite his bulk, Billinghamurst was moving silently, as was Pahvani, and as far as noise was concerned the policemen might not have been there at all. Grimes murmured something complimentary to the Lieutenant and was told that this was the Gaming Squad, used to creeping up on parties of gamblers. He asked if the fines collected from such desperate criminals sufficed to pay for the airships and other equipment, and was answered by a pained silence.

Whispered orders were passed back and the policemen spread out to surround the racecourse. Grimes could just hear the faint voices from the Lieutenant's wrist radio as the members of his force reached their assigned positions. Then the order was given to advance, with caution. Ahead, rails glimmered whitely in the faint moonlight. Grimes, following the leader, ducked under them and on to the track. There were vague shapes in front of them, moving towards them-but it was only the men who had entered the course by the Owners' Stand and who were now on their way to the Tote. They reported briefly to their officer that they had seen nobody, and that nothing larger than a cat had registered on their biodetectors.

Grimes looked at his watch. An hour to wait. Probably the receivers would not be here until just before the drop was due-assuming, of course, that this was the drop site.

He hoped that the benches in the stand would be padded.

They were-but the padding had long since lost any softness it had ever possessed.

X

It was a long wait, in the cold and the dark, while the little moon, now past the meridian, slowly slipped down the starless sky. The policemen-and, to an only slightly lesser degree, Billinghamurst and Pahvani-were used to vigils beside yet-to-be-sprung traps; Grimes was not. He wanted to be doing something. Finding that the lieutenant had a pass key that fitted the lock of the toilets under the stand he borrowed it, although what he really wanted was a smoke. His battered, stinking pipe was very comforting after he got it going and he was in no hurry to rejoin his comrades. Then, looking

at his watch, he decided that he had better. The time was 0155 hours.

As soon as he was back outside he heard the noise. Something was approaching from the direction of the city, something in the sky. The irregular stuttering of a small inertial drive unit was unmistakable. He looked up, in the direction from which the sound was coming, but saw nothing. But it was not likely that the smugglers' aircraft would be showing running lights.

It was visible at last, but only when it dropped to a landing in the centre of the ellipsoid formed by the track. It just sat there, but nobody came out of it. Its crew was waiting, just as the police were waiting.

Grimes looked at his watch again. 0201 . . . 0202

"Here it comes!" whispered the lieutenant.

Here it came.

At first it was no more than a barely audible, irritable muttering drifting down from the zenith. It became louder, but not much louder. The machine that finally dropped into sight was no more than a toy, no more than a model of a ship's boat. It might have accommodated the infant child of midget parents who had bred true, but nobody larger. But it could carry quite a few kilos of dreamy weed.

The police had their stunguns ready, trained on the smugglers' aircraft and on the robot, which were covered from three points—from the Owners' Stand, from the Saddling Paddock, from the Totalizator. The lieutenant had stationed his men well; whoever had come to pick up the consignment would be inside the effective range of the weapons, but each police party would be just outside the range of the guns of the others.

Somebody was coming out of the aircraft at last, walking slowly and cautiously towards the grounded robot spaceboat, hunkering down on the grass beside the thing.

"Fire," said the lieutenant in a conversational tone of voice, speaking into his wrist transceiver.

The air was alive with the vicious buzzing of the stunguns. The smuggler was frozen in his squatting posture, paralyzed, unable to stir so much as a finger. But the robot moved. Its drive unit hammered shockingly and unrhythmically and it shot straight upwards. Beams from hastily switched on police searchlights swept the sky like the antennae of disturbed insects—then caught it, held it, a tiny bright star in a firmament that had never known any stars. At least four machine rifles were hammering, and an incandescent tracer arched upwards with deceptive slowness. The lieutenant had drawn his laser pistol and the purple beam slashed across the darkness, power wasting and desperate. Some hapless night-flying creature caught by the sword of lethal light exploded smokily.

It might have been the machine rifles that found their mark, it might have been the laser pistol. Nobody ever knew. But the broken beat of the inertial drive ceased abruptly and the robot was falling, faster and faster, still held

in the searchlight beams. It hit the ground almost exactly at the point of its initial landing.

It hit the ground-and, "Down!" shouted somebody. "Get down!"

It hit the ground, and where it struck an instantaneous flower of intolerable flame burgeoned, followed by a crack! that sounded as though the very planet were being split in two. The blast hit the grandstand, which went over like a capsizing windjammer-but, freakishly, the structure remained intact. Had it not done so there would have been serious injuries, at least to those upon it. Dazed, deafened, Grimes struggled to his feet, crept cautiously along the back of the bench upon which he had been sitting. Lights were flashing as men helped each other from the wreckage.

Billinghurst got clear of the stand before Grimes. He had found a torch and was running clumsily across the grass to the still smoking crater. The Commodore followed him. He gagged as the Customs Officer's light fell on the tangle of broken limbs and spilled entrails that had been the smuggler who had come out from the air car. The head was missing. After a cursory glance Billinghurst ignored the dead man, carried on to the wrecked vehicle, which had been blown on to its side. He shone his light in through the open door. The girl inside appeared to be uninjured, but she was very still. A strand of hair glowed greenly across her white face. Her hair? Grimes could see the beam of the torch reflected from her shaven, polished scalp. The fat man stooped, lifted the hank of green fibre, twisted it between his thick fingers, sniffed it.

"Dreamy weed," he said flatly. Then, "The poor little bitch got what she came for. It's the very last thing that she did get." He shifted the beam of his torch and Grimes saw that the girl's body, below the waist, was no more than a crimson pulp.

The Commodore looked away hastily, up to the empty blackness of the sky. Somewhere up there was a ship. Somewhere up there was somebody who had killed, ruthlessly, to destroy all evidence that could be used to stop his profitable racket.

"Losing your neutrality, Commodore Grimes?" asked Billinghurst.

XI

Peter Fellini, Student.

Aged 19.75 Years, Local, 18.25 Years, Standard.

Inga Telfer, Artist.

Aged 25.50 Years, Local, 23.05 Years, Standard.

The identification of the bodies had presented no problems. Ultimo is one of those worlds where everybody is fingerprinted, where a record is made of everybody's retinal patterns and where coded information, including allergies and blood group, is tattooed in everybody's armpits.

The two victims were known to have been Blossom People. Fellini had been brilliant in his studies. Inga Telfer's swirling abstracts had been in great

demand and had fetched good prices. Their deaths had been remarkably pointless; they had suffered the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The identification of the ship that had made the drop was also easy. Immediately on return to Port Last Grimes and Billinghamurst had gone to Aerospace Control. The Duty Officer had at first been uncooperative-as far as he was concerned here were two spheres, albeit beardless ones, invading his office. But once credentials were produced he was very helpful.

Yes, the Tanagerine tramp Ditmar was at present in orbit about Ultimo, having signalled her intention of landing at first light. Her Master, one Captain Reneck, did not like pilotage in the dark. He had brought his ship into Port Last on quite a few occasions, but always during daylight hours. Yes, Ditmar was on a regular run between Ultimo and Eblis. She was chartered to bring shipments of minerals from the so-called Hell Planet, and to carry assorted foodstuffs back to the holiday resort in Inferno Valley. And where was she relative to Port Last, to the Fitzroy Crossing, shortly after 0200 hours? To judge by the elements of her orbit, constantly checked by ground radar, she must have been on the other side of the planet.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes doubtfully on learning this. At the time of the attempted escape of the robot, at the time of its destruction, line of sight communication between it and the mother ship would have been impossible. But there was no reason why Ditmar should not have left at least one relay station in orbit. If this were so, then she ran to a line of highly sophisticated electronic gadgetry not usually, if ever, found aboard a merchant vessel, a tramp freighter at that.

And Tanager. . . .

It was one of the older colonies, having been settled during the Second Expansion. It was a Federated Planet, but rather peculiarly situated, being only world with a human population in a sector of space that had been colonised by the Shaara. There was a Federation Survey Service Base on Tanager, a base that could be of vital strategic importance should Man and Shaara ever fall out again. The Tanagerines knew this, and every now and again talked of the economic advantages that would accrue if their world became part of the Shaara Empire-so the Federation went to great pains to try to keep them happy. And for many years now the foreign policy of the Rim Worlds Confederacy had been geared to that of the Interstellar Federation.

Don't let's be nasty to the Tanagerines, thought Grimes. But if Ditmar's Master had broken Rim Worlds laws he must expect some nastiness.

* * *

Grimes and Billinghamurst were out at the spaceport at dawn to see Ditmar come in. The battered tramp dropped down carefully, with a caution that would not have been amiss in a vessel ten times her size. Although she was from one of the other Rim Worlds she was a foreign ship, so officials from Port Health, Immigration, and Customs were waiting for her. The Customs Officers were, in fact, out in force.

Ditmar bumbled in hesitantly, at last hovering a few feet over the beacons that marked her berth. Her inertial drive unit was a particularly noisy one. When at last it was stopped the short-lived silence was deafening-and broken by the tinny crash as the ship's tripod landing gear hit the concrete. There was a long delay, and then the after-airlock door opened slowly and the ramp extruded. Billinghurst pushed himself to the head of the group of waiting officials, tramped heavily aboard. Grimes followed him.

Ditmar's Mate, a burly, swarthy young man in shabby uniform, received them. He mumbled, "You'll find all the papers in the Purser's Office, as usual."

"Take us to the Captain," snapped Billinghurst.

"This . . . This isn't usual."

"I know it's not usual." Billinghurst turned to give orders to his officers. "Spread out through the ship. Living quarters, control room, engine-room, everywhere."

"But, look, Mister. We're in from Eblis. Eblis. That's one of your bloody Rim Worlds, isn't it?"

"Take us to the Captain," repeated Billinghurst.

"Oh, all right, all right. You'll have to use the stairway, though, the elevator's on the blink."

Grimes and Billinghurst followed the officer up the internal spiral staircase. It didn't worry Grimes much, but by the time they got up to the Captain's flat the fat man was soaked with sweat, his face purple. The Mate knocked at the open door, said, "Two Customs Officers to see you, sir." Grimes glared at him. Admittedly his uniform, which he had put on for the occasion, was similar to Billinghurst's, but if this young oaf could not distinguish between different cap badges it was time that he started to learn.

"Come in, come in." Captain Reneck looked up from his desk. "The cargo manifest and the store sheets are in the Purser's office. I don't have them here."

"I am the Chief Collector of Customs at Port Forlorn," began Billinghurst.

"Haven't you got your ports mixed?"

"And I am in over-all charge of an investigation. This gentleman with me is Commodore Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Navy."

"Indeed?" Captain Reneck's bushy black eyebrows, the only noticeable feature of his pale, smooth face, lifted. "Indeed? A Customs Officer and a Commodore of the Rim Worlds Navy. Please be seated, gentlemen."

"Captain Reneck," said Billinghurst, "I'll waste no words. At approximately 0200 hours this morning, Port Last time, a powered container of dreamy weed-a powered, booby-trapped container of dreamy weed-made a landing at the Fitzroy Crossing."

"So? But at 0200 hours this morning I was not over Port Last, or the Fitzroy Crossing."

"Does your ship carry probes?" demanded Grimes. "Robot probes, remote-controlled? Is she fitted with the equipment to launch and guide and recover such probes?"

Reneck grinned. His ugly teeth showed yellow in his white face. "As a matter of fact she does, and she is. Tanager is a poor world and cannot afford specialized survey craft. All of our merchant ships-all of them tramps like this vessel-are so fitted as to be able to carry out survey work if required."

"Two people were killed this morning," said Billinghamurst. "A young man and a young woman."

"I am very sorry to hear that," said Reneck, neither looking nor sounding sorry.

"What do you know about the container of dreamy weed that was dropped?" blustered Billinghamurst.

"What should I know?"

"It must have come from your ship," said Grimes.

"How could it have done so? I was nowhere near the scene of the alleged smuggling."

"And murder."

"Murder, Commodore? Strong words. How could I, a law-abiding shipmaster, be implicated in murder? A naval officer like yourself, maybe, but not a merchant spaceman." He sighed. "Murder. . . ."

"Who's paying you?" snapped Billinghamurst suddenly.

"The TSSL, of course. The Tanager State Shipping Line." He grinned with another display of discolored teeth. "Between ourselves, gentlemen, they could pay much better than they do."

"So something a little extra, over and above your salary, tax free," suggested Grimes.

"Really, Commodore . . . you wouldn't suggest that, surely."

"How many robot probes do you carry?"

"Three. You will find that number shown on my store sheets, and you will find that number in the launching bay."

Billinghamurst lumbered to his feet. "Let's get out of here, Commodore Grimes." He turned to Reneck. "My men are taking the ship apart. If they find so much as one strand of dreamy weed, may all the Odd Gods of the Galaxy help you. Nobody else will."

The Odd Gods of the Galaxy did not have their peace disturbed. Ditmar was a clean ship-clean, that is, from a Custom Officer's viewpoint, although not necessarily from that of a spaceman. She was far scruffier than the generality of tramps. Painted surfaces were not only crying out for a fresh coat of paint but for the washing of what had been applied sometime in the distant past. The ghosts of every meal that had been cooked in her galley since her maiden voyage still haunted her accommodation; the dirt of unnumbered worlds was trodden into her deck coverings.

But she was clean. There was not even any pornography in her officers' cabins. Nobody had a drop of liquor or a fraction of an ounce of tobacco over and above the permitted duty-free allowance. Her papers were in impeccable order. She was so clean, in fact, as to invite suspicion.

From the viewpoint of the authorities it was unfortunate that she was of Tanagerine registry. Had she been under any other flag it would have been possible to clap some of her personnel into jail on some trumped-up charge or another. A fight in a bar, started by a provocateur. . . . The imprisonment of all participants and, if necessary, innocent bystanders. The administration of "blabberjuice" in food or water. . . . Oh, it could have been done, but little, otherwise unimportant Tanager was a pet of the United Planets Organization. Billinghurst and the Port Last Chief of Police would have liked to have done it regardless, but orders were given to them to handle Ditmar with kid gloves before they could give orders of their own to their undercover agents.

Bugs, of course, were planted in the places of entertainment and refreshment frequented by Ditmar's crew. They picked up nothing of interest. The Tanagerines seemed to be enthusiastic amateur meteorologists to a man and discussed practically nothing except the weather. Bugs were planted aboard the ship herself-a Customs Searcher, of course, knows all the good hiding places aboard a vessel. The only sound that they recorded was a continuous, monotonous whirrup, whirrup, whirrup.

All that could be done was to delay the ship's departure on her return voyage to Eblis. At Grimes's suggestion the Port Last Department of Navigation Surveyor checked up on Ditmar's lifesaving equipment. One of her lifeboats was not airtight, and was condemned, and the stores in one of the others were long overdue for renewal. The faulty boat could have been repaired, of course, but the Surveyor's word was law. And, oddly enough, lifeboat stores were practically unprocurable at Port Last and would have to be shipped from Port Forlorn. So it went on. The Master of a merchant vessel is peculiarly helpless when the Authorities of any port take a dislike to him.

Meanwhile, Rim Malemute, her armament fitted, was almost ready for space. Grimes was taking her to Eblis. Officially he was visiting that world to inspect port facilities, as the Rim Worlds Navy was thinking of opening a base there. Billinghurst wanted to come with him, saying that he wished to make arrangements for the setting up of a Customs Office at Inferno Valley. Grimes told him that this would look too suspicious, both of them leaving Port Last in the same ship. This was true, of course, but the real reason for the Commodore's refusal to cooperate was that he did not wish to share the cramped quarters aboard the little Malemute with a man of

Billingshurst's bulk. Alternative transport was available, although not at once. TG Clippers' cruise liner, Macedon, was due shortly at Port Last, and Inferno Valley was her next port of call.

"Eblis," said Billy Williams, when he and Grimes were discussing matters prior to departure. "I've never been there, Skipper. What's it like?"

"Its name suits it, Commander Williams, very well indeed. It's mainly red desert, with rocks eroded by wind and sand into all sorts of fantastic shapes. It has volcanoes-big ones and little ones-like other worlds have trees. The atmosphere is practically straight sulphur dioxide. The inhabitants look like the demons of Terran mythology-horns and tails and all-but they're quite harmless, actually. Earth tremors are more common than showers of rain on normal worlds. The odd part about it is that as long as you keep away from the really dangerous areas you're as safe there as you are anywhere in the Galaxy. The planet is like a huge amusement park with all sorts of hair-raising rides; you get the illusion of risk with no real risk at all. That's why it's such a popular holiday resort."

"Inferno Valley . . . isn't that owned by a retired space captain?"

"Yes. Captain Clavering. He came out to the Rim quite some years ago, Owner/Master of a ship called Sally Ann. She was-of all things!-an obsolescent Beta Class liner. Far too big and expensive in upkeep for a little, one ship company. He'd been getting by somehow, just making ends meet, but when I met him he'd come to the end of the line. I was able to put a charter in his way; the Rim Worlds Universities were sending a scientific expedition to Eblis and we, Rim Runners, hadn't any ships either handy or suitable.

"So he went to Eblis. He and his wife, he told me later, quite fell in love with the valley in which the expedition set up its main camp. There are these quite fertile valleys all over the planet, actually, not too hot and the air quite breathable if you don't mind the occasional whiff of brimstone. But what gave him the idea of a holiday resort was a remark that he'd heard somebody-it may have been me-make: 'Anybody who comes out to the Rim to earn a living would go to hell for a pastime!'

"That was his start. He had people living in tents at first, with quite primitive facilities. He used his own Sally Ann to carry holidaymakers from the Rim Worlds to this amusement park inferno. Then TG Clippers, when they started cruising, got into the act. Then the Waverley Royal Mail. Even the Dog Star Line. And Clavering never looked back.

"His old Sally Ann is still there, I believe. He doesn't use her himself-he's too busy being a resort manager. And I don't think he's sufficiently sentimental to hang on to her for old times' sake-it's just that the market for secondhand ships of that size is a very limited one."

Grimes carefully filled and lit his pipe. When it was going he said, "I rather liked Clavering, and I'm pleased that he's done so well. I only hope that he's not mixed up in this dreamy weed business."

"I don't see why he should be, Skipper. He must be coining money in his legitimate business."

"Nobody is so rich that he can't use a few extra credits-especially when they're tax free. Too, very few people from the Inner Worlds would consider the possession, use, or even peddling of a drug like dreamy weed a crime. I'm not at all sure that I do myself. It's when the racketeers get mixed up in the trade that it's bad. It's when two young people get blown into messy tatters by the bastards they're working for."

"And it's when people make a religion out of what is, after all, just a pleasure," said Williams, who had his puritanical moments.

"If all religions had been like that," Grimes told him, "they'd have done far less harm over the ages."

Williams was not convinced.

XIII

Williams piled on the lumes all the way from Ultimo to Eblis. Grimes was in a hurry; he wanted to get there before Reneck's principal was fully advised as to what had been happening at Port Last. Ditmar, of course, could not legally use her Deep Space radio while in port, so any Carlottigrams originated by her Master would have to be handled by the Port Last G.P.O. And the Port Last post office telegraphists were on strike. Grimes did not know how much Billinghamurst had to do with this, but suspected that it was plenty. The cause of the stoppage had been the quite justifiable dismissal of a shop steward for insolence. Who was Billinghamurst's under cover man-the shop steward or the overseer who had fired him? Perhaps they were both Customs agents. Perhaps-but this was unlikely-the strike was coincidental.

The more Grimes thought about it the more sure he became that Ebbs was the source of dreamy weed shipments to the other Rim Worlds. Inferno Valley was not a Rim Worlds Port of Entry, therefore there was no Customs Office on Eblis. In theory any ship bound for Eblis was supposed first to land on one of the worlds from which she could be entered inwards. Ditmar, for example, when she had first come out to the Rim had arrived at Port Edgell, on Thule, with a cargo of cheese from Elsinore. She had then loaded general cargo for Inferno Valley, and thereafter had shuttled between Eblis and the other Rim Worlds, mainly Ultimo, with regularity. As a foreign ship she had been liable to Customs inspection every time in, but as she was not from a foreign port the inspection, until this last time, had been a mere formality. And as her contraband was always dropped before she entered the atmosphere even a rigorous going over, as on this last occasion, would have revealed nothing.

Insofar as Eblis was concerned, you could land a battle fleet unobserved as long as it was well away from any of the widely spaced centres of population. There was Aero-Space Control, of a sort, but it had no radar and talked only when talked to.

The dreamy weed was grown and processed on quite a few of the Inner Worlds, the Federated Planets. As far as the Federation was concerned anybody could smoke the stuff who wished. It was regarded as a rather superior marihuana, the use of which had been legalized, for centuries, on

practically every planet of the Federation. If any world government, inside or outside the Federation, cared to make its use illegal it was up to that government to enforce its own laws. The Federation couldn't care less, one way or the other, as long as it received whatever taxes and duties were due.

Grimes had his plan of campaign, such as it was, mapped out. He would land at Inferno Valley. He would tell Clavering, who had been made, some time ago, Planetary Commissioner on Eblis, that he was conducting a survey prior to the possible establishment of a naval base on the Hell Planet. He would use Rim Malemute for his excursions-she was a handy little brute and suitable for work inside an atmosphere-or, if necessary, he would hire air or ground transport. If Clavering were among the smugglers he would be liable to betray himself; if he were not he would afford every possible assistance to Grimes. The owner of a pleasure resort would profit rather than otherwise by the presence of recreation-hungry naval officers and ratings.

A subjective week after her lift-off from Port Last Rim Malemute was in orbit about Eblis. She circled the fiery world, her people gazing down in wonderment at the cloud envelope of black and brown and yellow smoke that, now and again, was riven by hurricane force winds to uncover the fire-belching volcanoes on the surface. The night side was even more spectacular, in a frightening sort of way, than the day side. It seemed that life-as-we-know-it could not possibly survive in that caldron of incandescent gases.

Williams asked wryly, "Sure we've come to the right place, Skipper?"

"Quite sure, Commander Williams," Grimes told him. "Call Aero-Space Control, will you?"

"Rim Malemute to Aero-Space Control. Rim Malemute to Aero-Space Control. Do you read me? Over."

After the seventh call the Inferno Valley duty officer came through.

"Eblis Aero-Space Control here. Vessel calling, say again your name, please. Over."

"Rim Malemute. Repeat, Rim Malemute. Over."

"Rim Malemute? Aren't you the tug? Over."

Grimes took the microphone from Williams. "This is the Rim Worlds Naval Auxiliary Rim Malemute, requesting berthing instructions. Over."

"Have you been here before, Rim Malemute? The spaceport's at the eastern end of Inferno Valley." There was a long pause. "Latitude one three degrees, four five minutes north. Longitude oh, oh, oh degrees east or west. We reckon from the Inferno Valley meridian. The time here is 1149 hours, coming up for Mean Noon. Equation of Time zero as near as dammit. That any help to you? Over."

"Yes, thank you. Now, if you'll switch your beacon on. . . ."

"Give me time, man, give me time. Nobody was expecting you. On now."

"Rim Malemute to Aero-Space Control. Beacon signal coming in. We are almost directly above you. Have you any further instructions for us? Over."

"Yes. Listen carefully. Berth Number One-that's the pad furthest to the east-has Sally Ann. She's our ship. Berth Number Three-that's the one furthest to the west-has Trans-Galactic Clipper's cruise liner Sobraon. You should be able to get into Berth Number Two. I suppose you are the tug and not some dirty great battle cruiser with the same name? Over."

"Yes, we are the tug. Over."

"Watch the wind, Rim Malemute. In the Valley it is calm, but overhead we have west at seventy knots. Over."

"Thank you, Aero-Space Control. We are coming in. Over."

"We're coming in," repeated Williams. He cut the inertial drive and the little ship fell like a stone, applied vertical thrust to slow her descent only when her hull began to heat as she plunged into the outer atmosphere. He explained. "Have ter make it fast, Skipper. With all these bloody winds at umpteen knots we'll be all over the place unless we get downstairs in a hurry."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes, who had almost swallowed his pipe.

They were into the first cloud layer now, rolling black vapor slashed by dazzling lightning flashes. They were through it, and dropping through a stratum of clear air-and through turbulence that shook the tug like a terrier shaking a rat. Below them a cloudscape of fantastic castles in black and brown and yellow rushed up to meet them. Williams had no eye for the scenery; he was watching his radar altimeter and the shifting blip of the beacon signal. The ship shuddered as he applied lateral thrust to compensate for the fast drift to leeward.

They were under the cloud ceiling at last. Inferno Valley lay almost directly beneath them, a rift in the red rocks, a canyon, but one formed by geological upheaval than by erosion. To the north and to the south towered the volcanoes, classical cones, the smoke and steam from their craters streaming out almost horizontally. At the eastern end of the valley stood a great monolith, a fantastic needle of rock. The spaceport must be to the west of this formation.

Lower dropped Rim Malemute and lower, with Williams fighting to keep her in position relative to her landing site, with his officers calling out instrument readings in voices that, for all their studied calmness, betrayed fear. The nearer of the volcanoes emitted a great burst of smoke and incandescent molten matter and the dull boom! was felt and heard through the insulated hull. A shift of wind blew the Malemute away from the valley, at right angles to the rift-and once again she shuddered and complained in every member as lateral thrust drove her back on to her planned line of descent.

Then, quite suddenly, she was below the rim of the canyon. Below, deep,

deep below, there was a silvery ribbon of water, the dark green of vegetation, the pastel colours of buildings. Below, looking from this altitude to be right alongside each other, were the metallic spires that were Sally Ann and Sobraon.

But there was room enough, and in this windless valley maneuvering was easy. Neatly, with no fuss and bother at all, Williams dropped Rim Malemute between the other two ships, in the exact centre of the triangle of brilliant red lights that marked his berth.

XIV

"Aero-Space Control to Rim Malemute. Leave your inertial drive on Stand By until your stays have been rigged and set up. Over."

"Stays?" asked Williams. "Stays?"

"Yes," Grimes told him. "Stays. Lengths of heavy wire rope, with bottle screws and springs. Necessary in case there's an exceptionally heavy earth tremor."

"And I suppose if there is one, before I've been tethered down, I have to get upstairs in a hurry."

"That's the drill."

Grimes, Williams, and Rim Malemute's officers looked out through the control room viewports. A man had come on to the apron, dressed in white shirt and shorts that were like a uniform, although they were not. He was giving orders to a squad of about a dozen natives. These looked as though they should have been carrying the traditional pitchforks instead of spikes and spanners. In appearance they were more like kangaroos than dinosaurs-but scaled kangaroos, with almost human heads. Almost human-their goatlike horns and the gleaming yellow tusks protruding from their mouths made it quite obvious that they were not. They wore no clothing, and their reptilian hides ranged in colour from a brown that was almost black to a yellow that was almost white. Three of them climbed up the Malemute's smooth sides, using the sucker pads on their hands and feet, carrying the ends of the wire cables after them with their prehensile tails. Swiftly, efficiently, they shackled these ends to conveniently situated towing lugs. Then they scampered down to join their mates on the ground. The stays were stretched, set up taut. From the transceiver came the voice of Aero-Space Control, "Rim Malemute, you may shut down your engines and leave your ship at your discretion."

Grimes had been using binoculars to study the face of the man who had directed mooring operations. "Yes," he said at last. "That's Clavering. He's put on weight, lost that lean and hungry look, but he hasn't changed much."

He led the way down from the control room, followed by Williams. He was first down the still extruding ramp. Clavering came to meet him, threw him a sort of half salute. "Welcome to Inferno Valley, sir," he said not very enthusiastically. Then recognition dawned on his face. "Why, it's Commodore Grimes!" Then, with an attractive grin, "I'd have expected you

to be in command of something bigger than this!"

"I'm not in command of Rim Malemute," Grimes told him. "I'm just a passenger. This is Commander Williams, Captain Clavering, who had the dubious pleasure of bringing me here."

There was handshaking all round, then Clavering said, "Come to my office, and tell me what I can do for you."

Grimes and Williams looked about them curiously during their walk from the spaceport. It should have been gloomy in the deep ravine, with the murky yellow sky no more than a thin ribbon directly overhead, but it was not. The canyon walls—red, orange, banded with gold and silver—seemed to collect all the light that there was and to throw it back. Here and there on the sheer cliff faces vegetation had taken hold, static explosions of emerald green in which glowed sparks of blue and violet. Similar bushes grew from the firm, red sand that was the valley floor.

Two natives passed them, bound on some errand. They waved to Clavering, grinning hideously. He waved back. He said, "You get used to their horrendous appearance. They're good, cheerful workers. They like to be paid in kind rather than cash, in all the little luxuries that cannot be produced on this planet. Candy, they love. And they've acquired the taste for the more sickly varieties of lolly-water. Which reminds me—you are in from Port Last, aren't you? Did you see anything there of Ditmar? She brings my supplies in, and takes back the chemicals produced at my plant on the Bitter Sea, not far from here."

"I'm afraid she's going to be late," said Grimes. "She ran into all sorts of trouble with the Department of Navigation. Safety equipment was in a shocking state."

"I'm not surprised, Commodore. But you can't blame Captain Reneck entirely. His Owners seem to be a bunch of cheeseparing bastards. Still, he might have let me know he was delayed."

"You can't blame him for that, either," said Grimes. "The Post Office boys on Ultimo are playing up."

"Oh. And I shall have a strike on my hands if I try to pay my devils in cash instead of kind. Still, if worst comes to the worst I shall be able to do a deal of some kind with Sobraon's Catering Officer. Now, this is the Devil's Stew Pot that we're coming to. Between ourselves the story that the waters have marvellous rejuvenating properties is just a story—but a good soak and a good sweat never did anybody any harm."

The heat from the huge, circular, natural pool was almost overpowering even though they passed several meters from its rim. The people in it were not engaged in any violent physical activities. They just lay there in the shallows, only their faces, the breasts of the women and the protuberant bellies of both sexes appearing above the steaming surface.

"There are times," said Clavering, "when I wish, most sincerely, that young people could afford to come on these TG cruises."

"That one's not bad," said Grimes, nodding towards a woman who had just emerged from the water and who was walking slowly towards the next pool.

"Not bad at all," agreed Clavering. "She's old Silas Demarest's secretary, quote and unquote. You know-Demarest, the boss cocky of Galactic Metals. Now, this next bath, the Purgatorial Plunge, is not natural. Quite a few of my . . . er . . . customers give it a miss after they've sweated all the sin out of themselves. But it's amazing the extremes of cold that the human body can take after it's been well and truly heated."

"Mphm." Grimes watched with appreciation as the naked girl dived into the clear, blue-green, icy water and propelled herself to the other side with swift, smooth strokes.

"And after the Purgatorial Pool you have the choice of swimming back to the Lucifer Arms-that's my hotel-in the River Styx, or walking along its banks. Or, if you're really keen, jogging along its banks. The temperature of the Styx is normal, by the way, what we refer to as pee-warm."

The girl, Grimes saw, was swimming back, which was rather a pity, especially as she was a fast swimmer.

"Just around this bend you'll see the Lucifer Arms and the other buildings. Or 'inflations.' I had an architect staying here who tried to convince me that 'inflation' was a more correct word. This is earthquake country-this is an earthquake planet-and any normal construction wouldn't last long."

And there, on the north bank of the Styx, was the Lucifer Arms. Imagine an igloo. Color it. Put another one beside it and color that, being careful to avoid a clash. Put another one beside the first two. Put one on top of the triangular base. And so on, and so on, and so on. . . .

Dome upon dome upon dome, and every one a bubble of tough, stiffened plastic, its double skin filled with pressurized gas. It was as though some giant had emptied tons of detergent into the sluggishly flowing river and then stirred it violently so that the iridescent froth was flung up on to the bank. The edifice should have been an architectural nightmare-but, fantastically, it was not. Those soft-hued demispheres should have been in violent contrast to the harsh, red, towering walls of rock on either side of the rift valley-but in some weird way they matched the awe-inspiring scenery, enhanced it, even as did the ghost gums that Clavering had planted along the banks of the river, raised from saplings brought all the way from distant Earth. (But the management of TG Clippers, of course, had probably charged only nominal freight on them.)

The ex-Captain led the way to the hotel's main entrance, through the force screen into the airconditioned interior. It was only then that Grimes realized how sulphurous the hot air outside had been. It was a matter of contrasts. After the atmosphere of Rim Malemute, far too small a ship for any sort of voyage, even the natural air of Eblis had smelled and tasted good.

Clavering took Grimes and Williams to his office, itself a dome within the assemblage of domes. The three men seated themselves in very comfortable chairs that, too, were inflated plastic. A grinning devil, his

scales highly polished, came to take their orders for drinks. Save for a tendency to hiss his sibilants his Galactic-English was very good.

Clavering sat back in his chair, which molded itself to the contours of his body. Save for his almost white hair he had aged very little since Grimes had seen him last-how many years ago? He was as smooth and as smug as a well-fed cat-in that, he had changed.

After the native had brought the tray of drinks, in tall glasses misted with condensation, he asked, "And now, Commodore Grimes, just what can I do for you?"

XV

"I thought you knew," said Grimes innocently.

"How the hell could I know?" countered Clavering. "I'm not a telepath."

"Didn't you get the letter, Captain?"

"What letter?"

"From the Admiralty."

"No. Was there supposed to be one?"

"Yes. I was shown a copy. But the mail services are getting worse than ever these days. The original will probably be in the mail brought by Ditmar, when she finally lifts off Ultimo."

"And just what is this famous letter about?"

"The base."

"What base?"

"Sorry, I was forgetting that you don't know. I'll put you in the picture. The Space Lords of the Confederacy, with a surplus of the taxpayers' money to play with, have decided that it might be a good idea to establish a naval base on Eblis."

"What in the Universe for? It would have no strategic value whatsoever."

"Just what I tried to tell them, Captain Clavering. But ours not to reason why, and all the rest of it."

"I suppose not." Then, "I'm glad to see you again after all these years, Commodore Grimes, but you might have let me know that you were coming. An ETA would have been useful. As it was, you just appeared out of nowhere and, between ourselves, young Lingard who's supposed to be in charge of Aero-Space Control isn't the brightest. He should have told you to stay in orbit until sunset or dawn, when there's always an hour or so of flat calm. He should have asked you if you wanted a pilot in. I do the piloting, as a matter of fact. I go up in one of Sally Ann's boats and board outside the atmosphere."

"Keeping your hand in. . . ."

"Yes." Then Clavering returned to his original complaint. "I know that the Navy always does as it damn' well pleases, but an ETA would have been useful."

"You'd have got one," lied Grimes, with a warning glance at Williams, "if the Carlotti gear hadn't gone on the blink. I'm afraid that the poor little Malemute's showing her age. If it's not one thing broken down, it's something else." Then, as a sop to Rim Malemute's skipper, "Of course, she's very hardworking."

"But this base, Commodore," said Clavering. "The idea's crazy. Eblis is absolutely unsuitable. There's a shortage of suitable landing sites, and the climate is quite impossible, and. . . ."

"You made out all right, Captain." Grimes smiled. "And look at the trade that you'd be doing, as owner of the only recreational facilities on the planet."

"And look at the headaches I'd be getting! The natives spoiled by the big money, or its equivalent, splashed around by a spendthrift government. Brawls in my bars. . . ."

"Come, come. I'll not say that our officers and ratings are fit and proper personnel for a Sunday School Treat-but they are quite well behaved."

"They may be, Commodore, but are the tourists? I can just imagine it. Mr. Silas Q. Moneybags is staying here with his latest blonde secretary. A handsome young lieutenant, all prettied up in his go-ashore uniform, does a line with the blonde. Mr. Moneybags, after a drink or three too many, takes a swing at the lieutenant. Oh, no, Commodore. That sort of carry on is not for me if I can possibly avoid it."

"Mphm. I see your point, Captain. But I was sent here to make a survey, and a survey I have to make. To begin with, I suppose you have Eblis pretty well charted?"

"Of course. I was a navigator before I became a hotel manager. Suppose you and Commander Williams come with me to my map room."

"Thank you," said Grimes.

XVI

The map room was in another of the plastic bubbles. It contained a mounted globe, a huge table upon which flat charts could be spread, a projector, and a wall screen.

Clavering went first to the sphere, sent it spinning with a touch of a finger, slowed its rotation with another touch, stopped it. "Here," he said, "is Inferno Valley. A typical rift formation, as you will already have realized. To the north we have the Great Smokies, and to the south the Erebus Alps. North of the Smokies you find the Painted Badlands-and the sandstorms there can strip even one of my armorplated devils to bare bones in minutes. South of the Alps there's mountain range after mountain range-the Devil's Torches, the Infernal Beacons, the Lucifers. . . ." He rotated the globe

twenty degrees. "To the west of Inferno Valley there's the Bitter Sea. Our chemical extraction plant is there. Even if the tourist trade died on us-and it shows no signs of ever doing so-we'd get by. And to the north we still have the Smokies, and to the south the Torches, the Beacons and the Lucifers." The globe rotated again. "And here there's a quite remarkable formation, stretching practically from pole to pole. The Satan's Barrier Range. Worth visiting just to see the fantastic rock formations, such as the Valley of the Winds and the Devil's Organ Pipes. When conditions are right you'd swear that some supernatural being was playing a gigantic organ-a little light music for Walpurgis Nacht.

"West of the Barrier there're the Fire Forests and the Burning Pits. The Fire Forests are . . . clumps of young, new volcanoes, and their number grows every year. The Burning Pits are just what their name implies. Further west still, and we begin to pick up the foothills of the east-west ranges-the Great Smokies, the Torches and all the rest of them. There are, of course, valleys like this one, but smaller. There's nothing that could accommodate a Base, with its barracks and workshops and repair yards."

"Mphm. Quite a world you have here, Captain Clavering. I suppose you run tours from Inferno Valley for your customers?"

"Yes. Unluckily the Organ Pipes tour was a couple of days ago, and my air cars are now undergoing maintenance. You will appreciate that the abrasive winds make this essential after every outing. I'll not be running another tour until Macedon comes in. Sobraon, of course, lifts off first thing tomorrow morning."

"Taking her out?"

"Yes. Her Master's newly appointed and would like to see the Eblis pilotage both ways, arrival and departure, before he makes a stab at it himself. And now you really must excuse me. There's always something to be done around a place like this. But you'll have dinner with us tonight, of course. Sally Ann will be wanting to see you again. You too, of course, Commander Williams, are invited." He paused. "Come to that, why don't you and all Rim Malemute's people stay at the Lucifer Arms? I've plenty of accommodation."

"And I'm entitled to reasonable expenses," said Grimes.

Clavering laughed. "I should have made it clear that I want you as non-paying guests. But I'm not averse to taking the government's money."

"And I'm not averse," said Grimes, "to having some small percentage of what I pay in income tax and customs duty spent of my comfort."

And had a flicker of apprehension showed on Clavering's face when Grimes used the words "customs duty"?

Damn it all! thought the Commodore, I'm neither a policeman nor a customs officer.

Then he remembered young Pleshoff, whose career had been ruined, and Peter Fellini and Inga Telfer, who were dead.

XVII

The dining room of the Lucifer Arms was yet another plastic hemisphere, but a huge one. Clavering and Sally, his wife, had their table in the exact centre of the circular floor. It was on a low dais, raised above the level of the others so that the ex-Captain could oversee everything that was going on. Not that his supervision was really necessary; his devils, looking more than ever like refugees from a black humor cartoon in their stiff white shirts, black ties and black jackets, were superbly trained, attentive without being obtrusive. And there were three human headwaiters, circulating slowly among the diners, watching everything.

Grimes enjoyed his meal. For almost as long as he could remember he had liked highly spiced, exotic foods, and every item on the menu was either deviled or flambéd-or both. Williams, who preferred good plain cooking, was not so happy-but to judge by his rate of consumption he found nothing at all wrong with the excellent chilled hock. Neither did Captain Gillings of Sobraon who, with his Chief Officer Mr. Tait, made up the party. So far he was showing no effects, but-Any moment now! thought Grimes. And-It's none of my business.

Yet when Gillings put his hand firmly over the top of his empty glass, saying, "I lift off at dawn," Clavering persuaded him to accept a refill, remarking, "I'm taking your ship up for you, Captain. As long as I'm on the ball in the morning." Mrs. Clavering, a tall, very attractive blonde, looked as though she were about to interfere, especially when she saw that her husband's glass was also being refilled. She asked Grimes rather pointedly, "What are the rules about drinking in the Navy, Commodore?"

Grimes said, "It all depends. Sometimes you know that you can afford to relax, at other times you know that you can't. Mphm. But drink is not the major problem. You can always tell if a man is under the influence. With other drugs you can't tell if a man's judgment has been seriously impaired. Not so long ago-in my civilian capacity as Rim Runners' Chief Astronautical Superintendent-I had to try to sort out a most distressing business. The Third Officer of one of our ships had been among those involved in a dreamy weed orgy. The next morning, apparently quite normal, he was testing the gear prior to his vessel's lift off from Port Last. The inertial drive, which had been given a trial run by the engineers after maintenance, was on Stand By. The officer noticed this-and thought it would be a good idea to take the ship up, himself, for a joyride."

"And what happened?" asked Sally Clavering.

"General alarm and despondency. Luckily there was nobody hurt, and no serious damage. The young man, I'm afraid, will have to serve a jail term-the Rim Confederacy takes a very dim view of drugs in general. And his spacegoing career is ruined."

"If your government," said the TG Clipper captain, "weren't so many years behind the times that sort of thing wouldn't happen. In the Federated Planets we accept the consciousness-expanding drugs. We know that there are some people affected more strongly than others, just as there are some people more strongly affected by alcohol than others. On Austral-my home

planet-a smoker has to take out a license and is subjected to various physical and psychological tests. He knows just what effect marihuana, dreamy weed or anything similar will have on him, and regulates his activities accordingly. In my own case, for example, I know that if I were enjoying a pipe instead of Captain Clavering's excellent wine I should be, no more than two standard hours after the last inhalation, perfectly capable of taking my ship into or out of any spaceport in the Galaxy-more capable, in fact, than if I had not smoked. This Third Officer of yours was unlucky."

"You can say that again, Captain Gillings," agreed Grimes. He looked casually around the table. Sally Clavering was showing interest in the conversation. So was Mr. Tait, Gillings' Chief Officer. Williams looked as though he were interested only in the wine. And Clavering was suddenly taking great interest in a party of rather noisy revellers six tables away.

He said, "I hope those people don't carry on like that aboard your ship, Captain Gillings."

"Not all the time, Captain Clavering. They're usually quite quiet at breakfast."

"Black coffee and two aspirins, I suppose. Talking of coffee, shall we adjourn to the Grotto? I've some rather decent Altairian Dragon's Blood that we could have as a liqueur."

He got up from the table and, as soon as his wife and his guests were on their feet, led the way from the dining room, pausing slightly now and again to exchange salutations with the people at the other tables.

A short tunnel led to the Grotto, its walls coloured and shaped in the likenesses of rough granite. Grimes had to put his hand out to convince himself that they were not granite and was almost surprised by the soft spongy texture under his fingers. In the Grotto itself amazingly realistic stalactites hung from the high ceiling, and stalagmites grew upwards from the floor. But if there should be an earth tremor there would be no danger of frail human flesh being crushed and torn by falling masses of jagged limestone. Should, by any chance, a stalactite be shaken adrift from its overhead anchorage it would float gently downwards like the plastic balloon that in actuality, it was. Nonetheless, the effect was convincing, enhanced by the dim green and blue lighting, by musical trickling of water somewhere in the background.

They sat around a table that could have been a slab of waterworn limestone, on surprisingly comfortable chairs simulating the same material. A devil brought a tray with coffee pot and cups, another devil the teardrop decanter and the slim glasses. Sally Clavering poured the coffee, her husband the liqueur.

"Here's to crime," said Grimes, raising his glass.

"An odd toast, Commodore," said Clavering.

"A very old one, Captain."

"It all depends," said Captain Gillings, whose speech was becoming a little

slurred, "on what you mean by crime."

"Too," said Williams, who enjoyed an occasional philosophical argument, "one has to distinguish between crime and sin."

"Smuggling, for example," said Grimes, "is a crime, but is it a sin?"

"Depends on what you smuggle," said Gillings.

"Too right," agreed Williams.

"Take gambling," said Clavering a little desperately. "It's a crime-I mean, it's classed as a crime-when the State doesn't get its rake-off. But as long as the government gets its cut it's perfectly all right."

"I 'member once on Elshinore . . ." began Gillings. "Ticket in Shtate Lottery . . . only sheventeen off million creditsh. . . ."

"I always think," said Grimes, "that the people of these very agricultural planets, like Elsinore and Ultimo, need such outlets as gambling and, perhaps, drug-taking. The essentially rural worlds tend to be more-sinful, shall we say?-more sinful than the heavily industrialized ones."

"Who shaid gambling wash a shin, Commodore?" asked Gillings.

"It's only a sin," said Clavering thoughtfully, "if somebody else, somebody apart from the gambler himself, is hurt. That can be said about most crimes, so-called."

"Take forgery," contributed Williams. (Blast you! thought Grimes. Why must you go changing the subject?) "Take forgery. S'pose I print a million Ten Credit notes. S'pose they're all perfect. Undetectable. I win. But who loses?"

"I'll go into partnership with you, Cmander Williamsh," said Gillings. "When d' we shtart?"

"Time we started getting back to the ship, sir," said Mr. Tait, looking pointedly at his watch.

"A nightcap, Captain Gillings?" asked Clavering.

"Thank you, Captain Clavering. I will take jusht one li'l hair o' the dog thash bitin' me. After all, it'sh a long worm that hash no turning. Thank you. Thank you. Your very good health, shir. An' yoursh, Mishess Clavering. An' yoursh, Commodore Grimesh. An' yoursh, Commander Williamsh. An' . . . an'. . . . Shorry, Mishter Tait. Glash's empty. Musta 'vaporated. Very dry climate here. Very dry. . . ."

Somehow Tait got his captain out of the Grotto. Mrs. Clavering looked at her husband angrily. "You know he can't take it. That Dragon's Blood on top of what he had before and with dinner." She looked at Grimes. "I'm sorry, Commodore. But this sort of thing makes me angry."

"It's not as though he were taking his ship up himself," said Clavering.

"It makes no difference. As you were always telling me, before you came ashore, the Master is always responsible for his ship. You should have known better than to encourage him."

"He'll be all right in the morning, Sally." He yawned. "Time I was getting some shut-eye myself. And I'm sure that you and Commander Williams must be tired, Commodore. I'll show you to your rooms."

"Thank you, Captain. Oh, I'd rather like to see you take Sobraon up tomorrow. Both of us would, in fact. Do you think you could have us called in time?"

"Surely. You can come along for the ride, in fact. I put her in orbit, then my boat will pick us up and bring us back. I'll tell the devil in charge of your level to call you in good time. What do you want with your morning trays? Tea? Coffee? Or whatever?"

"Coffee," said Grimes and "Tea," said Williams.

Clavering took them to a lift shaft that was one of the very few really rigid structural members in the hotel, accompanied them to their levels, and then took them to their rooms. Williams, who was not quite sober, looked at the inside of his hemispherical sleeping compartment and said that he wanted Eskimo Nell to keep his bed warm. Clavering told him that the devils who looked after the bedrooms were female devils. Williams said that, on second thoughts, he would prefer to sleep alone. He vanished through the circular doorway.

Grimes said goodnight to Clavering then went into his own bedroom. It looked to be very comfortable, with an inflated bed and matching chair, a shower and toilet recess and-the only solid furnishing-a refrigerator. Suddenly he felt thirsty. He looked in the refrigerator, found fruit and several bottles of mineral water, together with plastic tumblers. He opened one of the bottles, poured himself a drink. But he only half finished it. It was deliciously cold but, after the first few swallows, its flavor was . . . wrong. The water from the tap in the shower recess was lukewarm and tasted of sulphur, but it was better. Grimes drank copiously-the dinner had been conducive to thirst-then undressed and got into the soft, resilient bed.

No sooner had his head hit the pillow than there was an earth tremor, not severe but quite noticeable. He grinned to himself and muttered, "I don't need rocking." Nor did he.

XVIII

Like most men who are or who have been in active command Grimes possessed a built-in alarm clock. This woke him promptly at 0500 hours Local, the time at which the domestic devil was supposed to be calling him, with coffee. Although Grimes had awakened he was in a rather confused state and it took him many seconds to work out where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. He was on Eblis. He was shut up in a pneumatic plastic igloo. He was supposed to be aboard Sobraon before she lifted off at 0600 hours. He wanted his coffee. Even when there had been no night before the morning after he wanted his coffee to start the day with. He

thought about coffee the way that it should be-hot as hell, black as sin and strong as the devil. Talking about devils-where the hell was the lazy devil who should have called him?

Grimes found a bell push among the inflated padding that backed the bed. He pushed it. He pushed it again. He pushed it a third time. Eventually the plug-like door opened and the chambermaid, if you could call her that, came in. The white frilly cap looked utterly absurd perched on top of her horns. She asked in a well modulated voice, with only the merest hint of croak or hiss, "You rang, sir?"

"No. My physiotherapist told me that I should exercise my right thumb more."

"My apologies for the intrusion, sir." She turned to go. The long claws of her kangaroo-like feet indented the padded floor.

"Wait. I was joking. Word was left for me to be called at five, with coffee. It is now 0515."

"Nobody told me, sir. Do you wish coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Black, sir, or white? With sugar or without? Or with mintsweet, or lemonsweet, or honey? And do you wish toast, sir, or a hot roll? With butter, or with one or more of our delicious preserves? Or with butter and preserves?"

"Just coffee. In a pot. A big one. Better bring a cup as well. Sugar. No milk. Nothing to eat."

"Are you sure that you would not care for the full breakfast, sir? Fruit, a variety of cereals, eggs to order, ham or bacon or sausages. . . ."

"No!" He softened this to "No, thank you." After all, the demon-girl was doing her best. "Just coffee. Oh, and you might look in the room next door to see if Commander Williams is up. He wanted tea, I think."

Grimes showered hastily, depilated, then dressed. While he was doing this latter the coffee arrived. It was good coffee. After he had finished his first cup he thought he had better see how Williams was getting on.

The tray, with its teapot and accessories, was on the, Commander's bedside table. The Commander was still in the bed. He was snoring loudly and unmusically.

"Commander Williams!" said Grimes. "Commander Williams!" snapped Grimes. "Commander Williams!" roared Grimes.

In any Service it is an unwritten law that an officer must not be touched in any way to awaken him-even when the toucher is superior in rank to the touchee. Grimes knew this-but he wanted Williams on his feet, now. He took hold of the other man's muscular shoulder, shook it. Williams interrupted his snoring briefly and that was all. Grimes hammered on the headboard of Williams' bed-but it, like everything else except the

refrigerator, was pneumatically resilient, emitted no more than a soft, slapping sound.

Grimes thought of hammering the refrigerator door with something hard and heavy and had his right shoe half off before he thought of a better idea. Presumably this cold box, like the one in his room, would contain a few bottles of mineral water.

It did. There were six bottles, and five of them were empty, put back after they were finished by Williams, who had a small ship man's necessary tidiness. Grimes pulled the seal of the sixth bottle, inverted it over the Commander's head. The icy fluid gurgled out, splashed over hair and face and bare chest and shoulders.

Williams' eyes opened. He said, slowly and distinctly, "Mr. Timmins, you will fix the thermostat at once. This is a ship, Mr. Timmins, a ship-not an orbital home for superannuated polar bears. I want her warm as a busty blonde's bottom, not cold as the Commodore's heart."

"Williams, wake up, damn you!"

"Brragh."

It was hopeless. And Williams' sleep was far deeper than could be accounted for by the previous night's drinking. He had taken nothing like as much as Captain Gillings-and, presumably, he was up. Those bottles of mineral water, only one of which Grimes had no more than tasted, five of which Williams had quaffed. . . .

But who. . . ?

And why. . . ?

Grimes looked at his watch. If he hurried he would get to the spaceport before Sobraon lifted. He tried to hurry, but considerable local knowledge was required to find a quick way out of the vast honeycomb that the Lucifer Arms resembled. At last he was clear of the building and running along the path of coarse red sand beside the Styx. It was dark still, it would be some time before Inferno Valley received the benefit of the rising sun. But there was light enough from the luminescent lichenous growths that grew, here and there, on the granite cliffs. Past the Purgatorial Pool he ran, past the Devil's Stewpot, blundering through the white, acrid fog that, at this hour of the morning, shrouded its surface.

And there were the ships at last-Clavering's Sally Ann in the background, dwarfed by the towering Devil's Phallus, and Sobraon, hiding with her bulk the little Rim Malemute. The TG Clipper's atmosphere running lights were on, and at the very tip of her needle-pointed stem an intensely bright red light was winking, the signal that she was ready for lift off. Loud in the morning calm was the irritable warming-up mumble of her inertial drive. Well clear of her vaned landing gear the mooring gang-the unmooring gang-was standing in little groups. The last airlock door was shut, the boarding ramp in.

The note of the liner's inertial drive deepened, became throbbingly

insistent. A siren howled eerily. Then she was lifting, slowly, carefully. She was lifting, and her drive sounded like the hammers of hell as it dragged her massive tonnage up to the distant ribbon of yellow that was the sky.

She lifted-then suddenly checked, but there was no change in the beat of her engines, no diminution of the volume of noise. Yet she hung there, motionless, and those on the ground, human and native, started to run along the valley toward Grimes.

There was a sound like that of a breaking fiddle string-a fiddle string inches in diameter plucked to destruction by a giant, a ship-sized giant, a ship. . . . Sobraon, suddenly freed, surged upwards, and astern of her the broken ends of the mooring cable that had fouled one of her vanes lashed out like whips, striking sparks from the granite rocks.

And Rim Malemute, whose mooring wire it was that had been snagged, teetered for long seconds on two feet of her tripod landing gear, teetered-and toppled.

"Cor!" muttered somebody, "they haven't half made a mess of the poor little bitch."

Grimes looked at him. It was Rim Malemute's ship-keeping officer, who had turned out to watch the big TG Clipper's lift off.

The Commodore said, "You're a witness. Come with me to the control tower and we'll slap a complaint on the Duty Controller's desk before he has time to think of suing us for having our lines too close to Sobraon's stern vanes."

"But he can't, sir. The Port Captain himself saw the moorings set up."

"Port Captains," Grimes told him, "are like the kings in olden days. They can do no wrong."

XIX

The Control Tower was a shack on stilts and had little in the way of electronic equipment-just a normal space-time transceiver, a Carlotti transceiver and, logically enough for this planet, a seismograph. The Duty Aerospace Control Officer was little more than a boy, and a badly frightened boy at that. He looked around with a start as Grimes and the Malemute's Third Engineer burst in. He said, in a shaken voice, "Did you see that, sir? Did you see that?"

"Too right I saw it!" Grimes told him. "Stick a piece of paper in your typewriter and take this down. Ready? I, John Grimes, Commodore, Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, senior officer of the Rim Worlds Navy on Eblis, hereby lodge a complaint, as follows. Got all that? At 0600 hours this morning-put the date in, will you?-the cruise liner Sobraon, under the pilotage of Captain Clavering, Port Captain, Inferno Valley, fouled the moorings of the Rim Worlds Naval Auxiliary Vessel Rim Malemute, as a result of which Rim Malemute sustained severe damage, the extent of which has yet to be determined. I, Commodore John Grimes, hold the Inferno Valley port authorities responsible for this accident. That's all. Give it to me, and I'll sign it. Take copies and let me have three."

"But, sir, it was an accident. I saw it too. When Sobraon's vane fouled Rim Malemute's moorings Captain Clavering had to keep on going. The ship was off balance. If he'd tried to land there'd have been a shocking disaster."

"I said it was an accident," stated Grimes. "But that has no bearing at all on the question of legal liability. Somebody will have to pay for the repairs to the Malemute. I suppose that it will be Lloyd's, as usual."

But was it an accident? Grimes asked himself. This Sobraon was practically a sister ship to Clavering's own Sally Ann, his last space-going command. Too, Clavering had piloted Sobraon inwards. He would know the second/foot/tons developed by her inertial drive. As Port Captain he would know, too, the breaking strain of Rim Malemute's moorings. His motive? Plain enough. He didn't want Grimes ranging far and wide over the surface of Eblis, ostensibly conducting a survey. Deliberately, knowing Gillings' weakness, he had got the TG Clipper's Master drunk the night before lift off. And Gillings, knowing that he was morally as well as legally to blame for the alleged accident, would tend to back up Clavering in any story that did not show him and his pilot in a bad light. After all, insofar as his owners were concerned he was there, and they were not.

Just then Clavering came through on the transceiver. His face, in the little screen, was surprisingly calm. Behind him, Gillings seemed to have aged years in as many minutes. "Sobraon to Eblis Aero-Space Control . . . I don't think we sustained any damage, but I'm putting the ship in orbit until we're sure. Expect me when you see me. Over."

"Commodore Grimes is here, sir."

"Put him on, will you? Good morning, Commodore. I'm afraid we damaged your Malemute. I saw her come a clanger in the rear vision screen. I'm sorry about that."

"So am I," Grimes said.

"I'm Lloyd's Agent on Eblis. I'll survey Malemute as soon as I get back."

"That's uncommonly decent of you," said Grimes.

"Don't take it so hard, Commodore. Excuse me, please. I've some pilotage to do. Over and out."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. After this unsatisfactory conversational exchange he could continue with his thoughts. There was the failure, the deliberate failure, he was sure, to have Grimes and Williams called so that they could be in Sobraon's control room during lift off. There were the bottles of drugged mineral water-very tempting after a thirst inducing meal-in the bedroom refrigerators. Of course, he did not know that the mineral water had been drugged, but it certainly looked that way. He should have kept a sample-but what good would that have been? On this world there were no police, no forensic laboratories. Clavering was the law-such as it was.

Clavering came back on the NST transceiver. "In orbit," he announced. "The Chief Officer's making an inspection now. Is Commodore Grimes still with you?"

"Grimes here."

"For your report, Commodore, the wind caught us just as we were lifting."

"There wasn't any wind, Captain Clavering. I saw the whole thing happen."

"Oh, there wouldn't be any wind at ground level. But there are some odd eddies in the higher levels of the canyon."

"As low as only one hundred meters up?"

"Yes."

And you're the expert on this bloody world, thought Grimes. Your word'd be better than mine if I tried to raise any kind of a stink.

"For the remainder of your stay on Eblis," went on Clavering, "you and your people must stay free of charge at my hotel. I cannot help feeling that I'm to blame for what happened."

Too right you are, thought Grimes.

"We'll talk things over as soon as I get back."

We'll do just that, thought Grimes.

"I'll be seeing you, then."

"I'll be seeing you, Captain Clavering," said Grimes, trying to inject the slightest touch of menace into his voice. If he got Clavering worried he might start making mistakes.

And-Damn it all, thought Grimes, I'm not a policeman!

He said to the Duty Officer, "Ring the hotel, please, and see if Commander Williams is available."

Commander Williams, it seemed, was not. When he finally did wake up, thought Grimes, he'd be sorry that he hadn't stayed asleep. He loved his little Malemute as other men loved a woman.

XX

Late in the morning Williams broke surface. When he heard what had happened to his ship he snapped from a muzzy semiconsciousness to a state of energetic alertness with amazing rapidity. As soon as he was dressed he hurried to the spaceport to assess the damage.

Grimes waited for him in the spacious lounge of the Lucifer Arms that now, after the cruise liner's departure, was almost deserted. Sally Clavering found him there. She sat down, facing him over the small table with its coffee service, said. "I heard what happened, Commodore."

"You probably heard it happen," said Grimes, who was in a bad mood. "There was quite a crash."

"But Ian's such a good shiphandler."

Grimes relented slightly. He had always found it hard to speak unkindly to really attractive women. He said, "The best of us have our off days. And, sooner or later, accidents just have to happen."

"Do you think it was an accident?" she asked.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes noncommittally.

She said, "I'm worried, Commodore. I've a feeling-it's more than just a feeling-that Ian's got himself into some sort of trouble. Over the past year or so he's . . . changed. I've asked him, more than once, what it is, but he just laughs it off."

"Money trouble?" asked Grimes.

She laughed. "That's the least of our worries. I was, as you know, Sally Ann's Purser-and now I'm ashore I carry on pursering. I keep the books for the hotel and all the rest of it. I hope you don't think that I'm boasting when I say that we're doing very nicely."

"Income Tax?"

"No. Really, Commodore, we have it made. Eblis is one of the Rim Worlds, and legally speaking is part of the Confederacy, but we, Sally Ann's crew, were the first settlers, the only permanent settlers. How did our lawyer put it? 'You're of, but not in, the Confederacy.' Sooner or later the Grand Council of the Confederacy will get around to passing laws to bring us in properly, so we have to pay taxes, and duty on everything we import. What's holding up such legislation is the squabbling over which of the Rim Worlds shall take us under its wing-Lorn or Faraway, Ultimo or Thule. Another complicating factor, which we shall drag in if we have to, is that Sally Ann, still in commission, is under Federation registration, and all of us, Sally Ann's original crew, are still Federation citizens."

"Complicated," admitted Grimes.

"Yes, isn't it? Of course, if the Navy decides that it must have a base here there's not much that we can do about it." She smiled. "But we have reduced rates at the hotel for legislators. That should help."

"You shouldn't have told me that."

"Everybody knows. Everybody knows, too, that a holiday here would be impossibly expensive if our profits were eaten away by taxes. Our guests from the Rim Worlds aren't in the same financial brackets as those in the cruise liners, from the Federation's planets. The next cruise ship in will be Macedon. While she's still here Ian will be taking Sally Ann to Ultimo to pick up a large party of Rim Worlders. A religious convention, as a matter of fact."

"Odd," commented Grimes. "This is hardly the sort of world to inspire the fear of hell fire."

"It is in parts, Commodore, make no mistake about that. But these people who're coming don't belong to any of the old religions. They're members of some new cult or faith or whatever. What do they call themselves? The

Gateway? Something like that."

"All religions are gateways, I suppose, or make out that they're gateways-gateways to . . . something." He tried to steer the conversation back on to its original track. "With all this trade I can't see how you or Captain Clavering have anything to worry about."

"That's it, Commodore. We shouldn't have any worries. But Ian's been . . . odd lately. Forgive me for suggesting it, but I thought that you, as a fellow shipmaster, might be able to pull him out of it. He'll tell you things that he wouldn't tell me."

Is there a Marriage Guidance Counsellor in the house? thought Grimes. He said, "Just a phase, probably. All marriages pass through them. There are times when Sonya-you must meet her some time-when Sonya and I are hardly on speaking terms. But we get over it." Another woman? he asked himself. Or . . . ?

She read his thoughts, partially at least. She said, "It's not another woman. He has his opportunities, running a resort like this. He may have taken an occasional opportunity. But his . . . his secrecy is worse between ships, at times like this when the hotel is empty. There's something on his mind. He hardly slept at all last night, and when he did sleep he was muttering to himself. And it wasn't a woman's name, either. It was, I think, just technicalities. 'Thrust' came into it. And 'breaking strain'."

"Mphm. Just a technician's nightmare. I get 'em myself sometimes." He remembered the dream that Williams must have experienced when he, Grimes, tried in vain to awaken him. "So do other people. Oh, by the way, do you bottle your own mineral water?"

She looked surprised at the abrupt change of subject, then said, "Yes. As a matter of fact we do. We have a small plant on the bank of the river, the only river, running into the Bitter Sea. Its water's not quite as rich in assorted chemicals as the Sea itself. Rather an acquired taste, actually, although it's supposed to have all sorts of medicinal qualities. The tourists drink it religiously. We import soft drinks too-but they're mainly for the devils, who enjoy anything as long as it's really sweet."

"I had some of your own mineral water last night, when I turned in. I thought it tasted a bit . . . odd."

"It most certainly does, Commodore. I never touch it myself. But the bottling plant is one of Ian's hobbies." She lapsed into a short, brooding silence. "If ever a man should be happy, it's him."

"Men are unwise and curiously planned," quoted Grimes.

"You can say that again, Commodore. But here comes your Commander Williams. He looks as though he has real worries. I'll leave you to him."

* * *

Williams dropped into the chair vacated by Sally Clavering, so heavily that Grimes feared that he would burst it. He said, "She's had it. She's really

had it, Skipper. The inertial drive unit sheared its holding-down bolts. The Mannschenn Drive looks like one of those mobile sculptures-an' about as much bloody use! Even the boats are in a mess-the inertial drive units again. The work boat is the least badly damaged."

"Radio gear?"

"We can fix the NST transceiver, I think, but not the Carlotti. We haven't the spares. But the Malemute herself . . . we have to get her sitting up properly before we can start any major repairs, an' there's no heavy lifting gear on the bloody planet. We could do it by using a tug-but Rim Malemute is the only tug we have in commission-had in commission-on the whole bloody Rim. Oh, yes, there's Rim Husky, but she's been laid up for so long that she's just part of the Port Edgell scenery-an' at her best she couldn't pull a soldier off her sisters!"

"We can ask Captain Clavering to hook on to the Malemute when he takes his Sally Ann out."

"Yes, we can, I suppose. He's very good at towing, isn't he? Ha, ha! An' when'll that be, Skipper?"

"Not until Macedon's arrived here. Mphm. I doubt if he'll come at it. Too much chance of damaging Macedon."

"He didn't mind damaging Sobraon. Although I did hear, from that young puppy in Aero-Space Control, that she got away with no worse than a few scratches an' some dented fairing. Clavering's on his way back down from orbit now, an' Captain Gillings, the pride of TG Clippers, is on his way rejoicing. What a pair! What a bloody pair! He an' Clavering. . . ."

"You weren't too bright yourself this morning."

Williams grinned ruefully. "No, I wasn't, was I? Do you know what I think it was?" He obviously did not expect that his story would be believed. "I had one helluva thirst when I turned in, and all that was in the 'fridge was a half dozen bottles of lolly water. It tasted like it'd been drunk before, but it was cold and wet. You know, Skipper, I think it must have gone bad."

"You could be right," said Grimes, "although not in the way you mean."

XXI

Clavering came in from orbit. As soon as his boat had landed he sought out Grimes. He said, "I'm afraid I made a mess of your Rim Malemute."

"You did just that, Captain Clavering. I take it you've seen my letter on the subject?"

"I have, Commodore. Don't you think it was rather unnecessary?"

"No. I represent the Rim Worlds Navy, and when one of their ships is damaged I have to make sure that the person responsible, or his insurance company, foots the bill for repairs."

Clavering grinned without mirth. "I suppose you read the copy of Inferno

Valley Port Regulations I had put aboard your Malemute? One of the rules is that anybody who lands on this planet does so at his own risk. But we're both of us spacemen, Commodore. Suppose you enjoy your holiday here, and let the lawyers argue about who pays whom for what." His grin was friendly now. "I'm sure that you and Commander Williams will join me in a drink to show that there's no hard feelings."

"Smoke the pipe of peace," said Grimes.

Clavering looked at him, hard, but Grimes kept his face expressionless, thinking, I shouldn't mind betting that he could produce a pipe of dreamy weed if it were called for.

A devil brought cold drinks. The Commodore sipped his, then said, "I'm not sure that I should be having this. And I'm sure that Williams should lay off the grog after his effort last night. We both of us slept in. Of course, if we'd been called on time. . . ."

Clavering flushed-guiltily? He said, "I seem to be doing nothing else but apologize. It was my fault. I should have seen to it personally that your level devil understood the instructions. I should have checked up on you before I left the hotel. But I overslept myself, and had to rush down to the ship almost as soon as I was out of bed. With these big brutes the only safe time to lift off or land is during the dawn or sunset lull."

"And even then it's not all that bloody safe," remarked Williams.

"Nothing is safe, Commander, ever. You should know that by this time."

"If anything can go wrong, it will," contributed Grimes.

"You said it, Commodore. It's really surprising that things don't go wrong more often."

"Mphm. And now, Captain Clavering, much as we're enjoying your hospitality I have to remind you that we're here on business."

"Business?" Was there a flicker of fear in Clavering's eyes?

"Yes. This survey for the projected base. Had you forgotten? I was wondering if we could hire transport from you."

Clavering did his best to look apologetic. "Normally I'd be only too pleased to let you have something suitable, Commodore. But this request of yours comes at an awkward time. Apart from Sally Ann's boats I have only two heavy-duty atmosphere craft. They were both used extensively for tours during Sobraon's stay on Eblis, and with maintenance staff working flat out they'll be ready for use again just when Macedon comes in."

"What about Sally Ann's boats?"

"Once again, out of the question. I've just finished getting them up to the required standard for my charter trip. You know as well as I do-better than I do, probably-what sticklers for regulations the Department of Navigation Surveyors are at Port Last, and that's where I shall be going. I don't want to be held up the same as Ditmar has been."

"I suppose not. How about ground cars?"

"We don't have any-not for passenger transport. We have the trucks bringing chemicals from our plant on the Bitter Sea."

"And bottles of mineral water."

"Yes. Have you tried our Bitter Soda yet? You should. A universal panacea for all the ills afflicting Man."

"Including insomnia?"

"Possibly. I don't drink the muck myself."

"You just make it."

"Yes."

"I often wonder what the vintners make," quoted Grimes, "one half so precious as the stuff they sell. Or should it be 'buy,' not make'? No matter."

"What are you driving at, Commodore?" demanded Clavering.

"I'm not sure myself, Captain. Just thinking out loud. Sort of doodling without pen or paper. And as I can't be getting on with my survey I shall be doing a lot of thinking, just to pass the time. Call me Cassius."

"Cassius?" asked Williams, breaking the silence.

"Yes. He had a lean and hungry look. He thought too much. He was dangerous."

"You'll be able to go on the tours when Macedon comes in," said Clavering. "The Painted Badlands. The Valley of the Winds and the Organ Pipes. The Fire Forest. . . ."

"From what I've already learned," said Grimes, "none of them at all suitable sites for a naval base."

"There just aren't any suitable sites. Period."

"Looks as though I was wasting my time coming here, doesn't it?"

"Sally Ann will be empty on the run from here to Port Last," said Clavering a little too eagerly. "I'll be pleased to give passage to you and Commander Williams and the rest of Rim Malemute's officers."

"Thank you, Captain. But we can't accept. Traditions of the Service, and all that. Don't give up the ship. She's our responsibility. I'm afraid we're stuck here until she's repaired."

"I suppose I might tow her back to Port Last for you," suggested Clavering doubtfully.

Grimes went through the motions of considering this. Then, "Too risky. Deep space towing's a very specialized job, as Williams, here, will tell you. And the most awkward part would be getting the Malemute off the ground."

You've damn all room to play within your spaceport at the best of times, and when your Sally Ann lifts off you'll have Macedon cluttering up the apron, with mooring wires every which way. No. Not worth the risk."

"At least," said Clavering, "I shall be having the pleasure of your company for quite some time." He was obviously trying to convey the impression that the prospect was a pleasurable one. He essayed a smile. "So, gentlemen, make yourselves at home. This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

The literal minded Williams looked around him, at the pneumatic furniture, the inflated walls. He grinned, "If you did have a cat you would be calling him a bastard, or worse, I can just imagine one racing around in here, digging his claws into everything."

Clavering smiled, genuinely this time. He said, "This plastic is tougher than it looks. It has to be, as the devils just refuse to cut their toenails. But it is a nightmare I have sometimes, the skins of the bubbles pricked and the whole damn' place just collapsing on itself like a punctured balloon. But it can't ever happen."

"Famous last words," said Grimes cheerfully. "It can't happen here."

"It can't," Clavering told him forcefully.

XXII

Grimes was far from happy and was wishing, most sincerely, that the Navy had assigned somebody else to work with the Customs in this drug-running investigation. What put him off the job more than anything else was being obliged to accept Clavering's hospitality-it was impossible to live aboard Rim Malemute until such time as she was righted. He had insisted that the ex-Captain send the bills for himself and the tug's officers to the Rim Worlds Admiralty, but there were still the rounds of drinks on the house and, with Williams, dining every night at Clavering's table. He was more than ever sure that he was not cut out to be a policeman. But the memories of those three young people-two dead and one with his career ruined-persisted.

He talked matters over with Williams while the two of them paced slowly along the left bank of the Styx. The tug skipper was but a poor substitute for Sonya on such an occasion, but he was the only one in whom Grimes could confide.

He said, "I don't like it, Commander Williams."

"Frankly, Skipper, neither do I. Clavering ain't all that bad a bastard, an' his wife's a piece of all right, an' here we are, sleepin' in his beds, eatin' his tucker an' slurpin' his grog. An' if all goes well, from our viewpoint, we'll be puttin' him behind bars."

"Mphm. Not necessarily. His legal status, like that of his world, is rather vague. Even so, the Rim Worlds governments, both over-all and planetary, could make life really hard for him. For example, somebody might decide that Inferno Valley is the site for a naval base. But I'm not concerned so

much with the legalities. It's the personal freedom angle. If somebody wants to blow his mind, has any government the right to try to stop him?"

"I see what you mean, Skipper. But when that same somebody is in a position of responsibility, like young Pleshoff, he has to be stopped. Or when somebody, like Clavering, is making a very nice profit out of other people's mind-blowing. . . ."

"In most of the Federated worlds it's the governments that make the profits, just as they do from every other so-called vice-liquor, tobacco, gambling. . . . Damn it all, Williams, is Clavering a sinner, or is he just a criminal, only until such time that somebody sees fit to liberalize our laws?"

"I'm not a theologian, Skipper."

"Neither am I. But both of us, when sailing in command, have been the law and the prophets. Both of us have deliberately turned a blind eye to breaches of regulations, whether Company's or Naval."

"When you're Master under God," observed Williams, "you can do that sort of thing an' get away with it. The trouble now is that we have far too many bastards between us an' the Almighty. It's all very well our hearts fair bleedin' for Clavering-but we have to keep our own jets clear."

"Mphm. All right, then. You suggest that we regard ourselves as policemen, pure and simple."

"I've known a few simple ones," said Williams, "but I've yet to meet one who's pure."

"You know what I mean!" snapped Grimes testily. "Don't try to be funny. Now, we think that the dreamy weed is coming in through Eblis, and that it's transshipped from here to Ultimo or wherever in Ditmar. Clavering tells me, by the way, that she's still held up. Her yeast vats were condemned. But where was I? Oh, yes. We think that the contraband is shipped from somewhere to Eblis. Through the spaceport? No, I don't think so. Too many people around, even when there's no cruise ship in, who might talk out of turn. Only a dozen of the people here are Sally Ann originals; the rest are Rim Worlders. The head waiters, the chef and his assistants, the mechanics in the repair shops. . . . So. So this is a fair hunk of planet, and I'd say that the only man who really knows it is Clavering, and Clavering, by putting the Malemute and her boats out of commission, has made sure that we don't get really to know it.

"Our fat friend Billingham is due here shortly, in Macedon, and he'll be relying on us to lay on transport. And we can't lay it on, and I can't see the Master of Macedon lending us one of his boats."

"So we just go on sittin' our big, fat butts doin' sweet damn' all," said Williams. "Suits me, Skipper."

"It doesn't suit me, Commander Williams. Much as we may dislike it we have a job to do. And as long as we're the ones who're doing it we stand some chance of protecting Clavering from the more serious consequences."

"That's one way of lookin' at it, Skipper. And Mrs. Clavering, of course. Pardon me bein' nosey, but she an' you seem to be gettin' on like a house on fire. Long walks by the river after dinner while Clavering's in his office cookin' his books."

"If you must know, Commander Williams, she has asked my help, our help. She knows that her husband is mixed up in something illegal, but not what it is. She has told me about the prospecting trips that he makes by himself, and about the Carlotti transceiver that he keeps, under lock and key, at his bottling plant by the Bitter Sea."

"Nothin' wrong with that. When he's out there he has to keep in touch with home."

"Yes. But an NST transceiver would do for that. You should know by this time that a Carlotti set is only for deep space communications."

"Just a radio ham," suggested Williams. "When he gets tired of hammering the stoppers on to bottles he retires to his den and has a yarn with a cobbler on Earth or wherever."

"Mphm. I doubt it. Anyhow, Mrs. Clavering is far from happy. She'd like to see her husband drop whatever it is he's doing, but she wouldn't like to see him in jail. If we can catch him before that fat ferret Billinghurst blows in we shall be able to help him to stay free. If Billinghurst gets his claws into him, he's a goner."

"You sure make life complicated, Skipper," complained Williams.

"Life is complicated. Period. Now, your work boat. . . ."

"In working order. But if you intend a long trip it'll be so packed with power cells that there'll be room for only one man."

"Good enough. And your engineers, I think, have been passing the time doing what repairs they can to Malemute, and have been in and out of Clavering's workshop borrowing tools and such."

"Correct."

"By this time they should be on friendly terms with Clavering's mechanics."

"If they don't know by this time which of the boats it is that Clavering takes out to the Bitter Sea, they should."

"They probably do know."

"I'd like a transponder fitted to Clavering's boat, and the necessary homing gadgetry to your workboat. I don't know quite how Clavering's boat can be bugged without somebody seeing it done-but, with a little bit of luck, it should be possible. Mphm. Suppose, say, that the inertial drive main rotor has to be carried to the shop so that work can be done on it with one of the lathes. Suppose that everybody-everybody but one man-is clustered around the thing, admiring it. And suppose this one man manages to stick the transponder to the underside of the hull of Clavering's boat when nobody is looking."

"Possible, Skipper, just possible. We already have transponders in stock; they're used quite a lot in salvage work. We've plenty of tubes of wetweld in the stores. An' if Clavering's mechanics know nothin' about the drug racket they'll not be expecting any jiggery pokey from my blokes. Yair. Could be done."

"And how's the repair work on our Carlotti set coming on?"

"Not so good."

"A pity. I'd like to do some monitoring. Just who does Clavering talk to?"

It was some time before the plan could be put into effect. The boat that Clavering usually used for his trips to the Bitter Sea-and for his prospecting trips-was undergoing an extensive and badly needed overhaul. Even without wind-driven abrasives to severely damage the exterior of an atmosphere craft, the air itself was strongly corrosive. Too, most of the work force was engaged on necessary maintenance to make Sally Ann thoroughly spaceworthy for her charter trip.

Macedon came in, and aboard her, as a passenger, was Billinghurst. Sub-Inspector Pahvani was with him, and a half dozen other Customs officers. Unlike policemen, Customs officers, when out of uniform, look like anybody else. Billinghurst and his people had no trouble in passing themselves off as ordinary tourists.

XXIII

"Looks like you've been having trouble, Commodore," commented Billinghurst to Grimes as the pair of them stood by the Devil's Stewpot watching what seemed to be the majority of Macedon's passengers wallowing in the murky, bubbling, steaming water. "Sabotage?"

"Accident," replied Grimes. "Sobraon was lifting off, and one of her stern vanes snagged one of Rim Malemute's mooring wires."

"Accident? You don't really believe that, do you?"

"I've handled ships for long enough, Mr. Billinghurst, to know that accidents do happen."

"All the same, Commodore, it's suspicious," stated Billinghurst.

"How so?" asked Grimes, just to be awkward.

"As I recollect it, the idea was that you were to run a survey of the planet, officially looking for sites for the naval base, and actually looking for places where dreamy weed might be brought in. I don't suppose that you've even started to do that."

"How right you are."

"Meanwhile, you're living in the lap of luxury, and the taxpayer is picking up the tab for your hotel bills."

"The taxpayer forked out for your fare in Macedon, and will be picking up

the tab for your hotel bills."

"That's different."

"How so?"

"Because, Commodore, in matters of this kind I'm a trained investigator. You're not. You can't do anything unless you've a ship under you. When Rim Malemute was accidentally knocked out of the picture you were knocked out of it too. I did expect some cooperation from you in the way of transport, but now I'll have to manage as best I can by myself. Don't worry; I've done it before."

"I'm not worrying," said Grimes. He looked with some distaste at an enormously fat, naked man waddling down to the hot pool like a Terran hippopotamus. He asked, "Why don't you try the stewpot, Mr. Billinghamst? You could afford to lose some weight."

"Because I've more important things to do, that's why. I'm not here on holiday."

"Neither am I, unfortunately."

"So you say."

"So I say. But tell me, just how do you intend to go about things? I realize that I'm just an amateur in these matters, so I'd like to know how a real professional operates."

Billinghurst lapped up the flattery. He said, "In any sort of detective work the human element is, in the final analysis, far more important than all the fancy gadgetry in the laboratories. One informer-voluntary or involuntary-is worth ten scientists. I have chosen to accompany me young, keen officers who are not unattractive to the opposite sex. Sub-Inspector Pahvani you, of course, already know. That is Sub-Inspector Ling just coming out of this absurdly named hot pool."

"Certainly a tasty dollop of trollop," remarked Grimes as the golden-skinned, black-haired, naked girl passed them.

"She is a very fine and capable young woman," said Billinghamst stiffly. "Anyhow, I have young Pahvani and three other men, Miss Ling and two other women. All of them are provided with ample spending money. All of them are to pass themselves off as members of well-to-do families on Thule-they'd have to be well-to-do to afford the fares that TG Clippers charge and a quite long holiday here-enjoying a vacation. Captain Clavering has quite a few unattached men and women among his staff here, and my officers have been instructed to . . . to make contacts."

"All over contacts," said Grimes.

"Really, Commodore, you have a low mind."

"Not as low as the mind of the bastard who first thought of using good, honest sex as an espionage tool. But go on."

"Well I'm hoping that some of Clavering's people become . . . er . . . infatuated with some of my people. And I hope that they-Clavering's people-talk."

"So you can build a case on bedtime stories."

"You put things in the most crude way, Commodore Grimes."

"I'm just a rough and tough spaceman, Mr. Billingham. It has been rumored that my rugged exterior hides a heart of gold-but there are times when even I am inclined to doubt that."

"Who's that young man whom Miss Ling is talking to?"

"That's Clavering's chef. Like all good chefs he is always tasting as he cooks. A daily session in the Devil's Stewpot helps him to keep his weight down. He's a Farawegian. He started his career in the kitchen of the Rimrock House at Port Farewell. Mphm. Your Miss Ling is coming back with him for another good sweat session. She must be conscientious. I hope she doesn't lose any weight; she's just right as she is."

"And does this chef know anything?"

"He certainly knows cooking. Ah, there's your Mr. Pahvani, getting on with the job. Does he use steel wool on his teeth, by the way? That smile, against his brown skin, is really dazzling. The recipient of the charm that he's turning on is Clavering's head receptionist. She's from Thule, but she prefers it here. Oh, looks like my Commander Williams is making a conquest from among Macedon's customers. I must say that I applaud his good taste."

"That," said Billingham, "is my Miss Dalgety that he's talking to. I'll have to warn her off him."

"Mistakes will happen. After all, you can hardly expect Williams to wear uniform for his daily dip, can you? Any more than you can expect Miss Dalgety to appear in her Sub-Inspector's finery."

"You seem to have made some enquiries, Commodore," admitted Billingham reluctantly. "Perhaps you will oblige me with thumbnail sketches of all Clavering's staff here."

"All? Devils as well as humans? I'm afraid you're out of luck as far as the devils are concerned. At first I thought I was getting them sorted out by the colour of their scales-and then I found out that this varies from day to day. If you look really hard you can tell which are males and which are females, though."

"Humans, of course, Commodore."

"Well," began Grimes, "there's Clavering himself. Spaceman. Hangs on to his Federation citizenship. Still makes an occasional voyage in command of Sally Ann, also brings in and takes out ships whose Masters want a pilot."

"I suppose he was piloting Sobraon when she fouled your Malemute."

"As a matter of fact, he was. Wife, Sally Clavering. Tall blonde, very attractive. Ex-purser, and looks after the books of the hotel, the chemical works on the Bitter Sea and the bottling plant. Then there's Larwood, another Federation citizen, Chief Officer of Sally Ann and Assistant Port Captain, Assistant Hotel Manager and assistant everything else. Very quiet. Doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, has no time for women. I think there was a marriage once, but it broke up. Ah, here's Mrs. Clavering. Sally, this is Mr. Billinghamurst, an old acquaintance from Port Forlorn. Mr. Billinghamurst, this is Mrs. Clavering."

Billinghurst bowed with ponderous dignity. He said, "I am very pleased to meet you." Then, "This is quite a place you have here. I'd heard so much about it that I just had to come and see it for myself."

"I hope you enjoy your stay, Mr. Billinghamurst. We do our best to make our guests feel at home."

Home was never like this, thought Grimes. A slight earth tremor added point to his unspoken comment.

Billinghurst was unshaken. It would have taken a major earthquake to unsettle him. He asked, "Do you have these tremors often, Mrs. Clavering?"

"Quite frequently. You soon get used to them."

"I hope you're right. I hope that I shall. Some people never get used to motion of any kind, and have to take all sorts of drugs to help them to maintain their physical and psychological equilibrium."

She laughed. "We dispense one very good drug for that purpose ourselves, Mr. Billinghamurst. You can get it in the bar. It's called alcohol."

"I think I could stand a drink," admitted Billinghamurst. "Will you join me, Mrs. Clavering? And you, Commodore?"

"Later, perhaps," she said. She dropped the robe that was all she had been wearing. "I always have my daily hot soak at this time."

Grimes got out of his own dressing gown. "And so do I."

He followed the tall, slim woman into the almost scalding water. They found a place that was out of earshot from the other bathers. She turned to face him, slowly lowered herself until only her head was above the surface. Grimes did likewise, conscious of the stifling heat, of the perspiration pouring down his face.

She said, "I don't like your fat friend, John."

"Neither do I, frankly."

"I never have liked customs officers."

"Customs officers?"

"Don't forget that I was once a spacewoman, a purser. I know the breed. But what were all those not so subtle hints about drugs? Did he expect me

to offer him a pipeful of dreamy weed?"

"Perhaps he did," said Grimes. "Perhaps he did."

"Surely you don't think . . .?"

"I wish I didn't."

"But. . . ."

"But the bloody stuff is coming into the Rim Worlds from somewhere, Sally. I know of one young man, an officer in our ships, who got himself emptied out because of it. I know of two other young people who were killed because the container of the weed, dropped from Ditmar, was destroyed, by remote control and by explosion, to stop it from falling into Customs' hands. I'm not saying that Ian knew anything about that; I'm sure that he didn't. But-on this world of all worlds!-he should bear in mind the old proverb: He who sups with the devil needs a long spoon."

"You're . . . accusing Ian?"

"The evidence-and what you yourself have told me-point to his being somehow implicated. If he gets out from under now I shall be able, I think and hope, to shield him from the consequences. If he doesn't. . . ."

She looked at him long and earnestly. Then, "Whose side are you on, John?"

"I'm not sure. There are times when I think that stupid laws breed criminals, there are times when I'm not certain that the laws are so stupid. When it comes to things like dreamy weed there's too much hysteria on both sides. It's far easier to handle drugs like alcohol, because nobody has made a religion of them."

"Have you talked to Ian yet, as I asked you to?"

"I've tried once or twice, but he's very hard to pin down."

"Don't I know it! But I think he realizes that the game's up and that he's let whoever has been bringing the stuff in that the trade is finished."

"He hasn't been able to get out to his bottling plant where he has his private transceiver. His air boat is still under repair, and it would take too long by road."

She said, "Surely the Port Captain is allowed to play around with the Carlotti equipment in the control tower in his own spaceport."

"Oh, well," said Grimes, "I'll shed no tears if it turns out that I've come here for nothing."

XXIV

Seeing a planet as a tourist is not the same as running your own survey, but it is better than not seeing a planet at all. Macedon, with all her experience-hungry passengers, was in, and the three large atmosphere

fliers, the aircoaches, were now completely overhauled and ready for service.

Billinghurst sneered at Grimes and Williams, saying that they were having a glorious holiday at public expense. He preferred to stay in Inferno Valley, keeping his eyes and his ears open. The only one of his officers to go on the tours was Denise Dalgety-but not so that she could continue to turn her considerable charm on to Williams. She had transferred her attentions to Larwood, who was in charge of the sightseeing expeditions. Grimes felt sorry for the dark, morose assistant manager. He would have liked to have warned him. More and more it was becoming obvious that he appreciated the company of the plump redhead who, ever more frequently, was able to coax an occasional smile from him. Sooner or later there would have to be a rude awakening.

The first trip was to the Painted Badlands. Grimes and Williams rode in the leading air coach, the command vehicle, which was piloted by Larwood. They had been given seats right forward, on the starboard side, immediately abaft the pilot. In the corresponding seats to port were an elderly Terran businessman and his wife, both looking slightly ludicrous in the heavy duty one piece suits, as much metal as fibre, that were mandatory wear. There was a single seat to port of that occupied by Larwood; in this, of course, sat Denise Dalgety. In any form of transport whatsoever rank hath its privileges. She, apart from Williams, was the only young passenger in the coach. Her companions had said, rather too loudly, at the bar the previous night, that they didn't want to be herded around with a lot of old fossils.

Dawn was just coming in when the three coaches lifted from the landing field close by the hotel. Their inertial drives hammering erratically, they climbed slowly, drifting a little to the west so that the fantastic bubble structure, multihued and luminescent, lay beneath them. Grimes permitted himself to wonder what would be the effect of a few handfuls of heavy steel darts dropped from the aircraft.

Slowly they climbed, hugging the north wall of the canyon which, in this light, was blue rather than red, splotched with opalescent patches where grew the phosphorescent lichen and fungi. Slowly they climbed, and with every meter of altitude they gained the orange ribbon of sky directly above them widened. "Aero-space Control to Painted Badlands Tour," came a matter-of-fact voice from the transceiver. "There's as much of a lull as you're likely to get. Keep clear of the Devil's Phallus. There's turbulence. Over."

"PB Tour to Aero-Space Control. Roger. Over."

Grimes grinned to himself. This, he knew, was all part of the window dressing.

Larwood said into his microphone, "Make sure your seat belts are fastened, folks. We may get a few bumps when we clear the canyon rim."

There were a few bumps, but very minor ones. The coaches were lifting under maximum thrust now, and below them was Inferno Valley, a deep,

dark slash in the face of the planet. To the south towered the Erebus Alps, peak after conical peak, from each of which a pillar of flame-shot smoke rose almost vertically. Dim in the distance were the Devil's Torches, volcanoes even more spectacularly active than those of the Alps. And beyond those? The Infernal Beacons? It was hard to be sure. Already the early morning clarity of the atmosphere was becoming befouled.

The note of the inertial drive changed as Larwood brought his coach around to a northerly heading. He announced, "If you look hard, folks, you'll see the Bitter Sea out to port, on our left. We shall be stopping there overnight on our way back. Most of the day we shall be spending in the Painted Badlands, of course."

"Pilot!" This was an old lady well back in the coach. "We've come all this way and you've shown us practically nothing of the Erebus Alps and the other ranges."

"I may wear wings on my uniform, madam," Larwood told her, "but they aren't bat's wings. A devil, one of those mythological devils out of the mythological hell, might survive there, but we certainly shouldn't. Updraughts, downdraughts, red hot boulders hurtling through the air—you name it, the Erebus Alps and the other ranges have got it. But I promise you that the Painted Badlands will be an experience none of you will ever forget. Now, all of you, you can either look astern, behind you, or at the stern view screen that is in front of every seat. I've just switched it on. The screen might be clearer. You will realize the sort of muck and rubbish we should have to fly through. The wind's just starting to rise."

Muck and rubbish, thought Grimes, peering into the screen that he shared with Williams. A good description. The pillars of fiery smoke from the multitudinous craters were leaning towers now, blown ever further and further from the vertical until they approached the horizontal. The sharp outlines of the peaks were blurred, were obscured by the wind-driven fumes and dust. Overhead the sky was no longer orange but a glowing yellow across which scudded the low black clouds. And below, the whirling flurries of red dust were blotting out all landmarks. Then, through some meteorological freak, the air ahead of them cleared and, brooding sullenly over the red plain, the Great Smokies appeared, almost black against the yellow sky, belching volumes of white steam and dark brown smoke.

"But you're flying over them, Pilot!" complained the old lady accusingly.

"Not over, madam. Through. Just fine in our starboard bow, a little to the right of dead ahead, you'll see the entrance to Dante's Pass. Also, if you will look at the smoke from the volcanoes, you will see that the wind is nowhere near as bad as it is to the south'ard. The Smokies are in the lee of the highest part of Satan's Barrier."

"But these mountains are only smoking," muttered the old lady.

"If we'd only known," whispered Williams to Grimes, "we could have brought along a couple of nuclear devices just to keep the old dear happy."

"Mphm. Smoke or flame—this is a good place for a holiday, but I wouldn't want to live here."

"Don't mention holidays, Skipper. Glamorpuss up ahead might hear you."

Denise Dalgety turned in her seat, smiled sweetly at Williams. "I'm enjoying my holiday," she said.

"What was all that about, Denise?" asked Larwood.

"Nothing much, Ron. Nothing much. Just something that Commander Williams said."

"Oh," grunted Larwood. Then, into the microphone again, "Coming up to Dante's Pass now, folks. To port, Mount Dante. To starboard, Mount Beatrice. Looks like Dante's a heavy smoker still, but Beatrice seems to have kicked the habit. Ha, ha."

Ha, ha, thought Grimes. I'm rolling in the aisle in a paroxysm of uncontrollable mirth.

But his irritation faded as he stared out at the spectacular scenery. The coach had dropped to an altitude well below that of the peaks, seemed to be barely skimming the numerous minor craters that pocked the valley floor. Smoke was issuing from almost all of them-in some cases a trickle, in others as a billowing cloud. And all up the steep, terraced side of Dante were similar small craters, most of them active. The slopes of Mount Beatrice were also pockmarked but, for some reason, only an occasional wisp of vapor was evident.

"You could do better, Skipper," whispered Williams.

Grimes, who had brought out his pipe and was about to fill it, changed his mind and put the thing back in his pocket.

On they flew, and on, the three coaches in line ahead, the Great Smokies to either side of their course and at last falling astern. On they flew, and the smoldering mountain range dropped astern, and the foothills, each of which was a volcano. Smoke eddied about them, restricting visibility, often blotting out the view of the tortured landscape below them. Turbulence buffeted them, and once the coaches had to make a wide alteration of course to avoid a huge red tornado.

Desert was below them at last-huge dunes the faces of which displayed all colors from brown through red to a yellow that was almost white, with streaks of gray and silver and blue. Beyond the dunes was a region where great rock pillars towered like the ruins of some ancient devastated city, sculpted by wind and sand into fantastic shapes, glowing with raw color.

"The Painted Badlands," announced Larwood unnecessarily. "The wind's from the west still, so it's safe to land."

"What if the wind was from the east?" asked the old lady.

"Then, madam, we shouldn't have the protection of Satan's Barrier. There'd be a sandstorm that'd strip us to our bare bones. You can see what wind and sand have done to those rocks down there."

The irregular hammering of the inertial drive became less insistent. The

coach slowed, began losing altitude. It dropped at last to coarse red sand in what could have been a city square, a clear space with the eroded monoliths all about it. The second vehicle landed in a flurry of ruddy dust, then the third.

"Welcome to Dis," said Larwood. "You may disembark for sight-seeing. Respirators will be worn; I wouldn't say that the atmosphere's actually poisonous, but too much of it wouldn't do your eyes, throats or lungs any good. You will all stay with me and not go wandering off by yourselves. You may pick up souvenirs-pretty pebbles and the like-within reason, but I warn you that this wagon doesn't develop enough thrust to carry home one of the monoliths. Ha, ha."

One by one the passengers passed out through the airlock, jumped or clambered down to the windswept sand.

"If it wasn't for the easterlies," said Williams to Grimes, his voice muffled by his breathing mask, "this'd be a good spot for a Base."

"At least," said Grimes, "we shall be able to write some sort of report on this base business now. Just in case somebody actually asks for it."

XXV

It was a long day, and a tiring one. A heavy protective suit complete with respirator is not the most comfortable wear for sight-seeing, and Larwood was determined that they should see everything.

They looked at the Venus de Milo-which, if one used one's imagination, just could have been a giant statue of a woman, carved from black basalt minus her arms. Their guide made the inevitable joke about the consequences of fingernail biting. They saw the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It did lean, but there all resemblance ceased. They saw the Sphynx, which was not too unlike a great, crouching cat if looked at from the right angle) and the Great Pyramid. They returned to the comparative luxury of the coaches for a sandwich meal and very welcome cold drinks. After lunch a short flight took them away from the so-called City Square of Dis to another part of the Badlands. Here they saw the Colossus of Eblis, which vaguely resembled a man standing arrogantly with his legs apart, the Thinker-Larwood, of course, had to say that a huge stone toilet roll was being carved to hang alongside the seated, brooding figure-Mount Olga and Ayers Rock. Grimes made himself unpopular by saying that the originals of these last two named gained greatly in majesty by being situated in a vast empty desert with no surrounding clutter to distract attention from them.

They saw the Devil's Launching Pad, a low plateau surmounted by a remarkably regular row of what, from a distance, could have been archaic space rockets. They saw the Dinosaurs, and St. Paul's Cathedral, and St. Basil's Cathedral, and the Rainbow Bridge. They saw. . . . But it was all too much, much too much, at the finish. They stumbled through the surrealistic landscape, the rockscape, with its great contorted masses of garishly coloured stone, behind their guides. Even Larwood was running short of witticisms, although he did say that it just required one good crash to make the Lorelei look happy.

Tired, perspiring in their suits and behind their masks, they stumbled back into the coaches, gratefully loosening clothing and removing respirators. The irregular blotch of brightness in the yellow sky that was the sun was low in the west when they lifted, but there was daylight enough for the coaches to negotiate Dante's Pass without trouble, and Mount Beatrice honoured them with a salute, a huge, spectacular smoke ring, as they flew past. The sun was not yet down when they approached the western shores of the Bitter Sea and the white buildings of the bottling plant, on the bank of the River of Tears, stood out against the dusky red of the desert like a handful of white pebbles dropped there. As they approached they could see that these were of the by now familiar bubble construction-although, Larwood told them, the skins were centimeters instead of mere millimeters thick, and had frequently to be renewed.

He announced, on his public address system, "We shall be staying here overnight, folks. One dome has been fitted out as a dormitory for tourists, and the one adjoining as a mess hall. At dark floodlights will be turned on so that you may all enjoy a swim in the Bitter Sea. You will have time for another one in the morning, before we leave for Inferno Valley. Oh, before forget, there are fresh water showering facilities at the Bottling Plant. I advise you all to take a shower after swimming in the Bitter Sea."

* * *

"Swimming, the man said," complained Grimes, his voice muffled by the respirator that, now, was all that he was wearing.

"Walkin' on the water's just the thing for a high an' mighty Commodore," laughed Williams.

"But not for a mere Commander, like you."

"I wonder if one could really walk on it," murmured Williams. He managed a sitting posture and then overbalanced, finishing up flat on his back. He said, "Any bastard tryin' to commit suicide in this soup'd die o' frustration."

"Mphm." Grimes managed a kind of squat and looked around him. The other passengers were enjoying themselves, splashing and squealing in the harsh glare of the floodlights. But the one he was looking for-the only one who would have been worth looking at-was not there. Neither was Larwood, although the other two coach pilots were disporting themselves with their charges.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes again. So Billingham's pet blonde spy was earning her keep whilst he and Williams were having a good time. But perhaps she was having a good time too.

"Lookin' for Denise?" asked Williams.

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"She went off with that frosty-faced sidekick o' Clavering's just before we all got undressed for our dip. I suppose he's showin' her his etchings. Unless I get outter this hellbroth soon I'll be able to show all the girls my itchings!"

"Yes, it does seem to be mildly corrosive. I'd hate to swallow any. Coming out?"

"Too bleedin' right, Skipper. When I want a swim I have a swim, when I want a walk I have a walk. What we're doin' now is just a compromise."

Clumsily the two men splashed ashore. Once they were through the airlock of the bottling plant they removed their respirators, handing them to attentive attendant devils. They followed one of the natives to the showers, where others of his kind were scampering around in the clouds of steam armed with long-handled brushes, enthusiastically scrubbing down the naked humans. The red lighting of the place made it all look like a scene from a mythological Inferno-and, muttered Grimes, some of the tourists looked like refugees from the canvases of Hieronymus Bosch.

After their showers-hot water and detergent to remove the salty scum, cold water for refreshment-the two men got into clean coveralls provided by the management, collected personal belongings from their lockers in the change room, then strolled into the dormitory. There was no sign of either Denise Dalgety or of Larwood. They walked into the mess hall, where a few people were sitting over cold drinks. The girl and Clavering's assistant were not there either.

Grimes wasn't worried-what Billinghamurst's officers did with themselves, or had done to them, was none of his concern-but he was curious. Perhaps "curious" is not quite the right word. He had the feeling that the girl was finding out something and would have liked very much to know what it was. Perhaps pride was involved. He could imagine Billinghamurst telling his story to an appreciative audience: "There was the famous Commodore Grimes, and all that he did was to get his ship wrecked and then, with nothing at all that he could do, have one helluva good time like a tourist, at the taxpayer's expense. One of my Sub-Inspectors, a girl at that, did much better than he did."

"Denise Dalgety, the Beautiful Blonde Spy," muttered Williams.

"Jealous, Commander?"

"My oath, yes. I still haven't forgiven that bastard Billinghamurst for calling her off me. He ruined the beginnings of what promised to be a beautiful friendship. I wonder where he's taken her? Larwood, I mean."

"Clavering has an office here. Presumably his second-in-command has a set of keys to it."

"An' now he's chasin' her round the water cooler . . . or she's chasin' him round the water cooler."

"The chasing part," said Grimes, "must be well over."

"Some people are slow starters. All right, then. He's sittin' there, with a silly smile on his face, while she photographs the plans of the fortifications with the miniature camera hidden in one of her ear clips, which are the only things she's wearin' at the moment. There's a recorder in the other clip."

"Try to be serious, Williams."

"What about, Skipper? It'd be a lot easier for me if I knew which side you were on. Are you pro- or anti-smuggler? I know damn well that you're anti-Billinghurst-but who's not? Ever since we've been on this bloody job you've been obscuring the issue with a fog of moral principles. And we aren't concerned with the moral side of it, only with the legal side."

"And that," Grimes told him, "is even more obscure. Whose laws apply on this planet-the laws of the Confederacy or the laws that Clavering makes up as he goes along? The Confederacy, don't forget, didn't want Eblis. Clavering saw its possibilities."

"And so what? As planetary ruler he pays his taxes to the Confederacy rather than to the Federation-because that way he pays less. But, by so doing, he has admitted Confederate jurisdiction."

"Here she comes," said Grimes in a low voice.

Here she came. She saw Grimes and Williams, walked to the table where they were seated. An attentive devil clattered up to take her drink order. She waved the native away.

"Commodore," she said, smiling sweetly, "I understand that you're attached to this investigation as an astronomical expert."

"Mphm. I suppose so."

"Ron showed me round the bottling plant. He said that I should see more if I had his undivided attention, that it would be better than going on the conducted tour of inspection later this evening."

"Mphm."

"It wasn't very interesting really. Just machines doing things, washing bottles, filling bottles, sealing bottles. . . ."

"Mphm."

"And then he took me into the office."

Grimes, looking at Williams' face, had trouble in keeping his own straight.

"I'm not very well up on ships' instruments. Usually I'm concerned with passengers' baggage. Tell me, Commodore, that radio with an antenna like a Mobius Strip, formed as a long ellipse, universally mounted, is a Carlotti transceiver, isn't it?"

"It is." (But he knew already that there was one in the bottling plant.)

"And it's never used for short range signalings? Only ship to ship, ship to planet, planet to ship, planet to planet?"

"As a general rule."

"A message came through while we were. . . ." She blushed. "Well, a message came through. Ron said that I'd have to leave the office, as it was

probably Captain Clavering calling about some important business and, even though he trusted me, some matters regarding the bottling of the River of Tears water were a commercial secret. Luckily I'd taken my ear clips off, and left them behind when I went out. And then, after. . . ." She blushed again. "And then after I left Ron-he let me back inside when whoever it was had finished sending-I played it back when I went into the toilet."

She detached the ornament of interlocking golden rings from her right ear, put it on the table. She said, "I have it set for the lowest volume. You'll have to pretend to be looking at it closely. Press the spring clip."

"An interesting piece of jewelry," commented Grimes, picking it up. "Very fine workmanship."

He heard, "Damn! The Old Man's calling from Inferno Valley!" (Presumably earlier conversation had been censored by one of those involved.) "Let him call." "But darling, it could be important." "Answer it then, and get it over." "Denise, it's not that I don't trust you, but it could be something confidential." "All right then, I'll go out into the main office. Give me time to put something on." "There's no need, all the doors are locked." "Do you think more of your boss than you do of me?" "Please, Denise, just leave me and let me answer this call." "All right, all right. I bet Billy Williams wouldn't drop me like a hot cake and come a-running if Commodore Grimes whistled for him!" A hissing silence, then, "SB three calling IC. Anyone there? I repeat, anyone there?" The voice was oddly familiar. "IC answering SB three. This is RL receiving you." "I've a shipment for you, IC. Will advise later when. Presumably usual place. Over." "But, SB three, the heat's on." "You'll want this shipment for the Convention, won't you? Over, and most definitely out." Silence, then Ron Larwood's voice again, presumably on a normal telephone. "That you, Sally? Can I get hold of the Captain? I'll call later then. No, no trouble with the tour. Very well behaved bunch of customers. See you tomorrow. Goodnight."

And that was all. There are more secrets than commercial ones.

XXVI

Before they could all sit down to their evening meal there was the conducted tour of the bottling plant-all very boring unless one happened to be an engineer. Larwood pointed out with pride the way in which the machinery was mounted on floating platforms so that it would suffer no damage, and even go on functioning, in the event of an earth tremor. There were free samplings of the mineral-rich water, from which Grimes and Williams abstained. What had happened during their first night on Eblis had put them off the stuff.

Grimes, more out of spite than from any desire to know, asked, "And what's behind that door, Mr. Larwood?"

"Just the office, Commodore Grimes. Nothing of any interest whatsoever."

"I'd rather like to see it, Mr. Larwood. As I spend most of my days behind an office desk I might get some ideas as to how to make myself more comfortable. If your office is like the plant it'll be up to the minute."

"I'm sorry, Commodore. Only Captain Clavering has the keys. In any case, there's nothing at all to see."

"Some other day, perhaps?" said Grimes vaguely.

"Yes, Commodore. Some other day."

And then they were all sitting down at the tables in the mess hall, and the devils were bringing in steaming platters of food and bottles of cold wine, and everybody was tucking in to the bouillabaisse made from various denizens of the Bitter Sea as though none of them had eaten for at least a week. Even Williams enjoyed it, leaving nothing in his bowl but empty shells and cracked claws. Denise Dalgety, who was at the next table, was eating with a very good appetite, but Larwood was off his feed.

It was bedtime then, and the tourists retired to the dormitory. The air mattresses were very comfortable, and even the chorus of snores from all around him could not keep the Commodore awake. He was vaguely conscious of a slight earth tremor just before he dropped off, but it did not worry him.

* * *

Music over the public address system woke the tourists. Most of them went out for a last swim in the Bitter Sea, but Grimes and Williams did not. Apart from anything else there was privacy for conversation in the shower room.

"I wonder just who SB three is," said Grimes. "That voice sounded familiar. I've heard it before, but a very long time ago. It made quite an impression on me."

"One o' the Australoid accents, Skipper," said Williams.

"Pots and kettles, Commander. Pots and kettles. But it hadn't got that peculiar Rim Worlds twang, like yours."

"Austral?" suggested Williams doubtfully.

"Mphm. Yes. Could be. And those initials, SB, ring some kind of bell too. IC is obviously Ian Clavering, and RL is Ron Larwood. Do we know anybody who has SB for initials?"

"I don't, Skipper, 'cept for a sheila back on Lorn called Susan Bartram. It couldn't have been her."

"How do you know? In this sort of business all sorts of odd people may be implicated."

"It wasn't a woman's voice," began Williams, then realized that Grimes was not entirely serious.

"Yes, as you say, Commander, it was a man's voice. But whose?"

"There're one helluva lot o' men in this Galaxy-an' you, in your lifetime, have met at least your fair share of 'em."

"Too right."

And then the first of the bathers came in from the Bitter Sea, and the attendant devils got busy with detergent and long-handled brushes, and there was no more opportunity for conversation.

* * *

After a good breakfast the tourists got back into the coaches. The first pallor of dawn was showing in the eastern sky, with the black plumed Great Smokies in silhouette against the yellow luminosity, when the vehicles lifted. To the south'ard the low clouds reflected the glare from the Erebus Alps and the Devil's Torches. The wind had yet to rise, although the Bitter Sea was well enough in the lee of Satan's Barrier to be shielded from the full fury of the westerlies.

Larwood and the other two pilots wasted no time. Was he in a hurry, wondered Grimes, because he wanted to report that odd deep space radio call to Clavering, or because he wanted to get back to Inferno Valley while the dawn lull lasted? But he must have called Clavering again last night, after he had got rid of Denise Dalgety. And Clavering was to lift off at sunset in Sally Ann on his charter voyage, so Larwood must have made sure of getting in touch with him as soon as possible.

The sun came up-and there, ahead, was the dark gash in the ochre desert that was Inferno Valley. From its eastern end white steam, from the Devil's Stewpot, was lazily rising, curling in wreaths about the Devil's Phallus. One thing about this world, thought Grimes, there's no need to go the trouble and expense of putting up wind socks.

Larwood started to lose altitude as the coaches approached the western end of the valley, dropped below the lips of the canyon as soon as possible, skimmed over the placid waters of the Styx at reduced speed, almost brushing the upper branches of the ghost gums along its banks.

He grounded just in front of the main entrance to the Lucifer Arms, said into his public address microphone, "Well, that's all, folks. Thank you for your company and cooperation."

Williams looked at the back of Denise Dalgety's blonde head and whispered,

"She and the Mate

"Would cooperate

"Upon the office table."

"There's probably a settee in there," said Grimes, taking a malicious pleasure in seeing the girl's ears redden.

"All ashore what's going ashore!" said Larwood with spurious heartiness. "This is the end of the penny section!"

Clavering, Grimes noticed, was waiting just inside the hotel entrance. He looked impatient. Grimes could not see Larwood's face, but the back of his

neck looked impatient too. Slowly, clumsily, the tourists extricated themselves from the coach. Grimes and Williams politely held back to let Denise Dalgety out first. She said sweetly, "After you, Commodore," but Larwood seemed anxious to be rid of her.

At last they were all out, standing in gossiping groups on the firm red sand. Larwood, his responsibilities at an end, went straight to Clavering. The two men exchanged a few brief words and then went into the hotel, brushing past Billinghamurst, who was on his way out. Denise Dalgety walked swiftly towards the fat Customs chief to make her report.

"Nobody loves us, Commander," said Grimes sadly.

"Is it surprising, Skipper?" countered Williams.

XXVII

Grimes managed to have a few words in private with Clavering before his departure for Ultimo. It was natural enough that he should wish to have a look over Sally Ann, and that vessel's Master could not very well refuse his request.

When they were in the old liner's control room Grimes said seriously, "I'm warning you, Captain."

"What about, Commodore?" Clavering's voice was altogether too innocent.

"You know."

"All right. So I know. So what?"

"Try to get out of this mess that you've gotten into, man. Tell whoever's behind the racket that he'll have to find some other way of bringing the stuff in. The risk, for you, just isn't worth it. You've built up a very nice little business here—a not so little business, rather. How long will it last if the Confederacy gets really hostile?"

Clavering said stiffly, "For your information I am pulling out." His face worked strangely. "Also for your information—I knew Inga Telfer. I . . . I knew her well. I don't need to tell you, Commodore Grimes, that the owner and manager of a holiday resort has even better opportunities than a passenger ship officer. Did you see any of Inga's work? There's a lot of Eblis in it; she was always saying that this planet is a painter's paradise. Eblis and dreamy weed, and all splashed down on canvas. When I heard of her death I was . . . shocked. I want nothing more to do with the traffic that killed her. Satisfied?"

"Mphm. What about the consignment that's on the way?"

"What consignment?" countered Clavering.

"I just assumed that there would be one," said Grimes. He could not say more for fear of blowing Denise Dalgety's cover.

"Assume all you like," said Clavering.

And then his Chief Officer-not Larwood, who would be staying behind to run things in his captain's absence-came in to report that he had completed the pre-lift-off inspection.

"Thank you, Mr. Tilden," said Clavering. "And now, if you'll excuse me, Commodore, I have to start thinking about getting this old lady upstairs. Mr. Tilden will show you to the after airlock."

"This way, sir," said the Mate.

"A pleasant voyage, Captain," said Grimes.

"Thank you. Enjoy your stay on Eblis, Commodore."

"I'll do just that," promised Grimes.

* * *

Not so very long later he stood with Billingham and Williams, a little apart from Macedon's passengers, and watched Sally Ann lifting off. The big ship climbed slowly and, it seemed, laboriously-although this impression may have been due to the way in which the irregular hammering of her inertial drive was echoed back from the red basalt cliffs of the canyon walls. Slowly she climbed, clambering up towards the strip of darkling yellow sky far overhead, her far from inconsiderable bulk dwarfed by the towering monolith of the Devil's Phallus. Slowly she climbed at first, then faster and faster, hurrying to get clear of the atmosphere during the sunset lull.

Abruptly Billingham asked, "Did you find anything out, Commodore?"

"Eh? What?"

"I asked," repeated the fat man patiently, "if you found anything out?"

"I don't wear ear clips," said Grimes.

"Ha, ha. Very funny. But, talking of electronic gadgetry, it's a bloody pity you haven't got your Carlotti receiver repaired yet."

"Why?"

"Do I have to spell it out? Because then we could monitor all incoming and outgoing signals."

"Not necessarily," Grimes told him. "This mysterious SB Three could be sending on a very tight beam, aimed directly at the bottling plant. I didn't get a look at the transceiver there myself, but probably it's designed for tight beam transmission."

"Not that it makes any difference," said Billingham, "since you can't do anything about it, anyhow."

I've got Clavering's word that he's pulling out, thought Grimes. For what it's worth. . . . How many times have men engaged in illegal activities said, "Just one more time?" Too many. Far too many. And was Clavering already using his ship's Carlotti equipment to establish communication with SB

Three? All too likely.

"I don't suppose anything will happen until Clavering gets back," said Billinghamurst.

"If then," said Grimes.

"Are you helping me or not, Commodore?"

"I was merely expressing an opinion. For your information, Mr. Billinghamurst, as you should have gathered from the conversation your Miss Dalgety recorded, everybody on this planet knows who you are and what you're here for, and they suspect that my story about the projected naval base is just a blind. The way in which Ditmar's been held up at Port Last stinks to high heaven. It's obvious, as Larwood said, that the heat's on."

"When the heat is on, Commodore, people get panicky and make silly mistakes."

"Some people do, but not all."

"These ones will," said Billinghamurst flatly, and waddled off.

"The old bastard really loves you, Skipper," commented Williams.

"Doesn't he? Damn it all, Commander, I rather envy him. To be in a job where there's no question of rights or wrongs or personal freedoms, just what's legal and what's illegal. . . ."

"Remember Pleshoff and Fellini and Inga Telfer."

"Pleshoff's a young idiot, and unlucky to boot. Fellini and the girl were killed by H.E., not by dreamy weed. Too, we're just assuming that the charge in the drop container was detonated deliberately. Don't forget that it was under fire from laser and projectile weapons."

"If you were takin' a more active part, Skipper, you'd be far happier. You wouldn't be carryin' on as if yer name was Hamlet, not Grimes."

"Perhaps you're right. If only we had the Malemute in running order. . . ."

"But we haven't. But we still have the work boat, and that transponder is still stuck to Captain Clavering's pet atmosphere flier."

"For all the good it is," said Grimes.

XXVIII

It seemed safe to assume that nothing would happen until Clavering's return from Ultimo, if then. Billinghamurst condescended to explain to Grimes the part that the Commodore would have to play should the mysterious SB Three land on Eblis to discharge a consignment of dreamy weed.

"We have to bear in mind," he said, "that we're surrounded by legal complications. We can't touch Clavering-or, if we do, his legal eagles are going to raise a scream that'll be heard from here to the Magellanic Clouds. Given time, no doubt, we could nail something on him. But what? No

matter. SB Three, however, is most definitely a lawbreaker. He-or she, or it, for all I know-is landing on one of the Rim Worlds without going through the formalities of obtaining an Inward Clearance. He and his ship are liable to arrest. I have the legal power to make such an arrest, of course-but usually, in such cases, the Navy is called upon to seize on behalf of the Customs Department. You, even with the small handful of Rim Malemute's officers at your disposal, will be able to put a prize crew aboard the seized vessel and take her to Port Last."

"I suppose so," admitted Grimes. "I'd be happier if I had the Malemute at my disposal as well as her officers, though. I had the little bitch fitted with a good set of teeth, and now she won't be able to show them, let alone use them."

"This isn't a naval action, Commodore. This is merely the seizure of a smuggler."

"Mphm. Some quite respectable merchant vessels are armed like young cruisers. I shouldn't be at all surprised if SB Three, if he shows up, packs an even heavier wallop."

"When SB Three shows up," said Billinghurst firmly, "we will arrest him."

"And meanwhile?"

"My people will continue to cultivate the friendships they have made. So far the only one to have got results is Miss Dalgety. As you know. It isn't up to me to give you orders, Commodore, but perhaps if you continued making your sightseeing tours you might learn something."

"Thank you," said Grimes, with mock humility.

So he saw the Valley of the Winds and listened to the Devil's Organ-which, he said, reminded him of the lowing of a sick cow. He visited the Burning Pits, and he and Williams amused themselves by imagining Billinghurst being reduced to a puddle of grease at the bottom of the Wishing Well, into which they threw coins to watch them become blobs of molten silver in seconds. They were flown over the Fire Forests on a day when conditions were suitable, and applauded with the rest of the tourists when Larwood solemnly named a new volcano Mount Denise, swooping low to drop a bottle of champagne (he always carried a few on this trip for such occasions) into the bubbling crater.

They dined and danced in the Lucifer Arms, they perspired in the Devil's Stewpot and even, eventually, got into the habit of running straight from its almost boiling waters into the artificially cooled Purgatorial Pool. They spent evenings in the Gambling Hell and soon learned to avoid the One Fingered Bandits so as to make their money last longer at the TriDi Roulette tanks. Insofar as the smuggling was concerned they saw nothing, heard nothing, learned nothing. As far as they could gather Denise Dalgety, although enjoying herself even more than they were, had learned nothing further, and neither had the other undercover Customs agents.

Finally Macedon departed on the next leg of her Galactic cruise and the hotel was almost empty again, the only guests being Billinghurst and his

people and Rim Malemute's crew. Larwood busied himself with the overhaul of the tourist coaches and Denise Dalgety, left to her own devices and not liking it, took up with Williams. Grimes spent much of his spare time in the company of Sally Clavering. Billinghurst sat around and sulked.

Then, with the ship Sally Ann on her way back from Port Last, there was an outbreak of fresh activity. The main lounge was converted into a dining room, and the vast, domed dining hall was stripped of its furniture-an easy job, since it had merely to be deflated and stowed-and hung with somber black drapes.

"I don't like it, John," confessed Sally Clavering to Grimes. "But this is the way they want it, and they're paying."

"They, I take it, being the Church of the Gateway."

"Yes. They must be going to hold services in here. But . . . all this black. No crucifixes, or stars and crescents . . . not even a Crux Ansata."

"Not even an alarm clock," said Grimes. "I was on Darsha once, and went to a service in the famous Tower of Darkness. The clock is running down, and all that. Made quite an impression on me. I suppose Entropy is as good a god as any, although not to my taste."

"Do you know anything about these Gateway people, John?"

"Hardly a thing, Sally. It's a new cult that's sprung up on Ultimo, quite recently." And, he thought, dreamy weed's mixed up in it somehow. The hallucinogens have been part and parcel of quite a few freak religions.

She said, "I don't think I shall like them. I wish Ian I hadn't agreed to let them hold their convention here. But they're paying well."

"Thirty pieces of silver?" asked Grimes.

She snapped, "That's not funny."

"I'm sorry, Sally. But . . . I could be wrong, I probably am, but it often seems to me that religion has betrayed Man more times than it has led him upwards."

"I don't agree."

"You don't have to. Even so, what Marx said seems, to me, to have validity. Religion is the opium of the people." And opium is the religion of some people.

"Marx . . . there's a false prophet for you."

"Not altogether false." He laughed. "I'm a spaceman and you're an ex-spacewoman, and the pair of us should know better than to discuss two of the subjects that are taboo in space-religion and politics."

She said, "We're not aboard ship now."

"We might as well be. Just a handful of men and women living in one little

valley on a hostile planet. . . ."

"You'll be serving out the rifles and the revolvers next, to fight off the hostile natives."

"Are they restless tonight?" I know that I am, he thought, I can't help feeling that Clavering's going to do one last piece of drug running-and, as far as he's concerned, it will be quite legal. But SB Three will be on the wrong side of the fence as far as the law's concerned.

He excused himself as soon as he decently could, went to find Billinghamurst, told him what he suspected. The Customs officer was scornful. He said, "You only see the obvious, Grimes, when your nose is rubbed in it The convention was mentioned in that Carlotti call recorded by Miss Dalgety. You and your officers had better be on their toes when Clavering gets back with his shipload of cranks. I've already warned my people."

"I don't think, somehow," said Grimes, "that SB Three will be landing in Inferno Valley."

"Are you sure you can't get your bloody ship fixed in time?" demanded Billinghamurst.

"Quite sure," Grimes told him.

XXIX

Sally Ann came in from Ultimo, dropping down through the morning twilight the dawn lull, the eddying streamers of white mist rising sluggishly from the Devil's Stewpot. Sally Ann came in, and all Clavering's staff, as well as the guests at his hotel, were out to watch the berthing. The big ship settled gently to her pad just beyond the crippled Malemute. Almost immediately the mooring crew of devils, under Larwood's direction, swarmed over her, shackling on and setting up the wire stays. Only when this job was completed did the last mutterings of the liner's inertial drive fade into silence. Then, up and along her towering hull, airlock doors opened and ramps were extruded.

Disembarkation at a port like Inferno Valley-as Grimes took pleasure in pointing out to Billinghamurst-was not a lengthy procedure. There were no Port Health, Immigration, or Customs officials to slow things up. Within seconds the first passengers were trooping ashore.

Grimes looked at them curiously. They were like-yet markedly unlike-the spheres with whom he had rolled at Port Last. The women's heads were shaven, the men all had long hair and beards. But most of them belonged to a different age group, were older, and wore long dark robes instead of form revealing clothing.

Larwood came to greet the first group down the ramp. He saluted the man who seemed to be in charge. He asked courteously, "Are you the . . . er . . . leader, sir?"

The tall, gray-haired and gray-bearded man replied, "Yes, my son. I am the Guru William. Is all prepared for us?"

"All is prepared, Your . . . Your Reverence. Accommodation for two hundred people. Our main hall converted into a temple, to your specifications."

"It is good," said the Guru.

"It is good," echoed those of his followers within earshot.

"Somethin' odd about these bastards, Skipper," whispered Williams to Grimes.

"Mphm. Yes." The Commodore looked at the members of the Church of the Gateway as they trooped past him. They walked as though they were in a state of trance, gliding over the hard-packed red sand somnambulistically. Every face, young, not so young, or old, male or female, wore the same expression of . . . of beatitude? When the saints go marching in, thought Grimes irreverently, I don't want to be of their number.

Clavering came down the ramp from the forward airlock, letting the escalator do all the work. He looked very worried. He started to walk to where Larwood was still talking with the Guru and his party, then paused where Grimes, Williams, and Billingham were standing.

Grimes said, "Nice Sunday School Outing you have here, Captain."

Clavering almost snarled, "That's not funny, Commodore!" then hurried on.

"What's bitin' him?" asked Williams.

"The same as what's just starting to nibble me, probably," Grimes told him. "Are you like me, Commander Williams? Do you feel uncomfortable when you're among really pious people, men and women who evince a passionate belief in something utterly irrational? Have you ever tried to argue with some fanatical true believer who's doing his damndest to convert you to his own brand of hogwash? That's the way I feel now, looking at this bunch."

"Live an' let live," said Williams airily.

"I quite agree. That's the viewpoint of the cynical, tolerant agnostic. But don't forget that it's always been the overly religious who've taken a righteous delight in the slaughter of nonbelievers. Crusades, Jihads, bloody revolutions to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat-you name it, they've done it."

"I think these are a harmless bunch, Skipper, even if they are a bit odd. No more than rather elderly Blossom People with a few extra trimmings. Just spheres who're a bit too stiff in the joints for any really hearty rolling."

"Mphm. You could be right. I hope you are right." He turned to look at the devils who were bringing passengers' baggage ashore. "They don't seem to have much gear with them, do they?"

"Don't suppose they need much," said Williams. "Just a change of robes an' a spare pair o' sandals. A tube of depilatory cream for the sheilas. That's all. Somethin' to be said for travellin' light."

Billingshurst broke into the conversation. He said, "Well, Commodore, the balloon should be going up at any time now."

"What balloon?" asked Grimes, just to be awkward.

"You know," growled the fat man. "As long as you're ready to do what has to be done when it goes up."

"If it goes up," corrected Grimes.

"It will, Commodore, it will."

Grimes said to Williams as the Chief Collector moved ponderously away, "I hate to have to say it, but I'm afraid he's right."

It was, however, all of five days before the balloon did go up.

Those five days were . . . interesting. The People of the Gateway did not behave as the previous tourists had done. They went on no sightseeing tours. They did not frequent the Gambling Hell, neither did they simmer and freeze themselves in the hot and cold pools. They infuriated the Chef by demanding very plain foods, although their consumption of alcoholic drinks was far from low. Morning, afternoon and evening they met in the made-over dining hall, which they called their temple. They made no attempt to convert outsiders, but neither did they refuse admission to the curious.

Grimes attended one or two services, of course, as did Williams and Rim Malemute's officers, and Billingshurst and his people, and the human staff of Inferno Valley. There was no singing, no sermonizing. The worshippers sat on the floor, in near-darkness, around the central dais on which the Guru William was seated. Every time he would open proceedings by saying, "Brethren, let us meditate. Let us open our minds to the true reality." There would be silence, often a long silence, broken only by the subdued sound of breathing. Then somebody would utter a single word, such as, "Peace." Another silence. "Darkness everlasting." Silence again, and a growing tension. "The end of light." "The end of life." "Not-life, not-death." More silence. "The Gateway to Infinity." "Open the gate, open the gate, open the gate!" "The Gateway to Never." "Open the gate!"

"Gives me the willies, Skipper," Williams confessed to Grimes.

"I prefer religions that go in for Moody and Sankey style hymns," said the Commodore.

"Yeah. At least you can fit your own kind o' words to most o' the tunes." He began to sing untunefully,

"Whiter than the whitewash on the wall!

Whiter than the whitewash on the wall!

Wash me in the water

Where yer wash yer dirty daughter

An' I shall be whiter than the whitewash

On the wall!"

"Please, Commander."

"Sorry, Skipper. But sittin' crosslegged among that bunch o' morbid hopheads makes me wanter relax with a spot o' light blasphemy when I get outside. An' you said that you liked Moody an' Sankey."

"I'm not so sure that I do, now. Meanwhile, what do our spies report?"

"Captain Clavering's aircar is ready to lift off at a second's notice. So are all the coaches. An' so is our work boat. Clavering's buggy is still bugged. Absolutely no joy with any of our radio equipment. But I have the boys on watches, an' they'll let us know at once if an' when anything happens."

"And our friend Billinghamurst has his boys and girls on watches too. But I think that if Clavering does lift off to a rendezvous with SB Three it will be either around dawn or sunset."

"An' Mrs. Clavering? What's she sayin' these days?"

"Nothing much. Nothing much at all. She's worried stiff, of course. She did sort of hint that this would be the very last time, and that if I called my dogs off I should be . . . er . . . adequately recompensed." He grinned wryly. "Unluckily Billinghamurst's dogs are in the hunt as well as mine, and I can't imagine any woman wanting to be nice to Billinghamurst."

"People have probably said the same about you, Skipper."

"Remind me, Commander," said Grimes, "to have you busted down to Spaceman Fourth Class when we get back to civilization."

XXX

The balloon went up at dawn.

Substituting literal for metaphorical language, Clavering's private atmosphere flier lifted off at dawn. Grimes and his officers were already standing to, although none of them had incurred suspicion by venturing outside their hotel rooms with the exception of the watchkeeper aboard Rim Malemute. The young man hurried to the Lucifer Arms to inform the others that Clavering was on his way-to where?-but Grimes, even through the double, air-filled skin of his sleeping quarters, had heard the unmistakable irregular beat of an inertial drive unit.

The plan of operations was put into effect at once. The watch officer ran back to Rim Malemute and switched on the NST transceiver. This was still useless insofar as the reception or transmission of messages were concerned, but it was capable of jamming. He then carefully jockeyed the tug's work boat out of its bay, brought it to the landing ground in front of the Lucifer Arms.

Meanwhile Williams and his Chief Officer, both armed with stunguns, had gone to the hangar in which the resort's aircoaches were garaged. When

Grimes and Billingham entered the building it was to hear Williams saying to Larwood, "I hereby requisition these vehicles for service in the Rim Worlds Navy."

"Stop playing at pirates, Commander Williams!" growled Larwood. "You've no legal right to do anything of the sort. These coaches are the property of a citizen of the Federation!"

Grimes intervened. "Mr. Larwood," he said. "I can, quite legally, requisition these vehicles-and I am doing so. I shall give you a receipt, and there will be adequate compensation."

"Legally? Come off it, Commodore."

"Yes. Legally. I am empowered to requisition any air or space vehicles of Rim Worlds registration for naval service. I can't touch your precious Sally Ann or her boats-she's Federation registry. But your coaches . . . they are licensed to carry passengers by the Confederacy."

"You bloody space lawyer!"

Sally Clavering had appeared on the scene. Her face was pale and drawn. She said, "Don't argue, Ron. It'll get us nowhere. He has the law on his side." The look she shot at Grimes should have shriveled him up where he stood.

He said, meaning it, "I'm sorry, Sally."

"You should be. For your information, just in case you're interested, Ian has gone to have it out with Drongo Kane, to tell him to find somebody else to handle his trade at this end, on one of the other Rim Worlds." She addressed herself to Billingham now, as well as to Grimes. "But Ian has broken no laws, and you know it."

"Did you say Drongo Kane?" demanded Grimes. So his had been the oddly familiar voice recorded by Denise Dalgety.

"Yes."

"And would the name of his ship be Southerly Buster?"

"Yes. Southerly Buster III."

"Come on, Commodore." Billingham was impatient. "We can't afford to waste any time."

"I know, I know. And I know now whom we're up against. And I don't like it." He grinned. "Or perhaps I do. There're a few old scores to settle!"

* * *

Grimes took the work boat up. He hoped that by this time Clavering would be sufficiently distant for the small craft to be beyond the range of his radar. He hovered above Inferno Valley, making altitude slowly, until the commandeered air coach had lifted above the canyon rim. It was not possible for him to exchange any words with Williams, who was piloting the

vehicle; the interference being broadcast by Rim Malemute's defective transceiver inhibited any sort of communication. In any case, it would have been advisable to maintain radio silence. Would this jamming effect the functioning of the transponder? Grimes had been assured that it would not, but he was not sure until he saw that the needle of the compass-like indicator had steadied on to a definite heading. He looked into his radar screen. There was nothing but ground clutter. Good. If he could not "see" Clavering, then Clavering could not "see" him.

He turned the boat on to the indicated heading, gave her maximum forward thrust. She vibrated frighteningly, excessively, but she went. He put her on to automatic pilot. It was awkward, he was beginning to find, to have to do everything himself. He had become far too used, over the years, to the control rooms of ships, with attentive officers at his eyes and hands. He felt that he could do with at least three pairs of the former and two of the latter. He looked into his radar screen again. The coach was following him. He transferred his attention to the gyro compass, then to the chart. Clavering, it seemed, was making for Dante's Pass. So Kane's landing place was somewhere in the Painted Badlands.

He looked out through the viewscreens-out, ahead and down. The dawn lull wasn't lasting. Below him the surface of the desert was obscured by driving clouds of red sand; ahead, the Great Smokies were all but invisible. It was obvious, too, that the boat was sagging very badly to leeward. He returned to his instruments to make the necessary course adjustment. He knew that Williams, an excellent pilot, would be doing the same-if he had not already done so.

Another course adjustment. . . .

He thought, The little bitch is going sideways.

And was that the Great Smokies showing up in the radar screen? It must be. Still there was no sign of Clavering, although the indicator needle jerked to starboard, showing that he had entered the Pass.

And if I keep him ahead, thought Grimes, stopping himself from changing course, I shall pile up on Mount Beatrice.

He made the necessary adjustments to his radar. Yes, there they were, Dante and Beatrice, marking the entrance to the Pass, steadily approaching the centre of the screen. He changed to a shorter range setting, and a shorter one, put the boat back on to manual steering. The wheel, mounted on the control column, bucked in his hands. The little craft had been designed to be used in airless space rather than in an atmosphere, a turbulent atmosphere at that. Williams, he thought with a twinge of jealousy, would be having a far better time of it in his air coach.

Hell! That's too bloody close!

Grimes yanked the control column violently to port, applying lateral thrust. Through his starboard window he saw black, steaming rocks dropping away from him. He must have missed them by the thickness of a coat of paint. He jerked the column to starboard as he saw, through a rift in the billowing smoke and steam, one of Mount Dante's minor craters almost below him.

Hastily he reduced speed, hoping that Williams would not overtake him and crash into his stern.

He threaded his way through the pass on radar, breathed a great sigh of relief when he was out and clear. He would have liked to have got out his pipe, but he dared not take his hands from the controls. He flew through the last of the heavy smoke and steam into relatively clear air-but only relatively clear. Although on this side of the Smokies it was almost calm, some freak of atmospheric circulation had brought down a thick haze, a yellow murk through which the fantastic rock formations looked menacingly. And Grimes was obliged to make a rock-hopping approach, as was Williams astern of him. If they flew above the eroded monoliths they would be picked up by Drongo Kane's radar. The master smuggler was not a man to neglect precautions.

Grimes watched his indicator needle, keeping Clavering ahead as much as possible. At the same time he watched his radar screen and tried to keep a visual lookout. Afterwards, when he told the story, he would say, "If the Venus of Milo had been equipped with arms I'd have knocked them off-and I as near as dammit castrated the Colossus of Eblis!" This was exaggeration, but only slightly so.

On he flew, and on, perspiring inside the protective suit that he was wearing, his hands clenched on the wheel, his attention divided between the indicator needle, the radar screen, the forward window of his cramped cabin and the chart of the area, one blown up from the brochure issued to tourists. He passed as close as he dared to the rock formations so that he could sight them visually and identify them. Now and again, caught by a freak eddy, he had to apply vertical or lateral thrust, or both together. The work boat complained but kept on going.

Then, ahead on the radar screen but still obscured by the haze, loomed a great mass. There was only one formation that it could be, and that was Ayers Rock. But surely the Rock did not have a much smaller monolith just over a kilometre to the east of it.

Grimes decided not to reduce speed. By so doing he could well forfeit the advantage of surprise. He ignored his radar, concentrated on a visual lookout. And, at last, there, on his port bow, was the sullenly brooding mass of red granite and, right ahead, indistinct but clearer with every passing second, the silvery spire of a grounded spaceship. By the foot of the ramp from her after airlock was a small atmosphere craft.

The Commodore applied maximum forward thrust and, at the same time, using one hand, worked his respirator over his head. He put the boat on full reverse when he was almost up to and over Clavering's craft. He cut the drive, slammed down heavily on to the red sand. He was out of the door and running for the ramp before the dust had settled. He was dimly aware that Williams, just behind him, had brought the coach in to a hasty landing.

It was too much to hope for-but it seemed that his arrival had been neither seen nor heard. The airlock outer door remained open, the ramp remained extended. He pulled his stungun from its holster as he ran up the gangway. Impatiently he waited for Williams and Billinghurst to join him in the

chamber of the airlock; it was too small to hold more than three men. The others-Rim Malemute's people and the Customs officers-would have to wait their turn.

Williams used the standard controls to shut the outer door, to evacuate the foul air of Eblis and to introduce the clean air of the ship into the chamber. All this must be registering on the remote control board in the control room, but perhaps there was no officer on duty there. He pushed the knob that would open the inner door. It opened.

A tall figure stood on the other side of it to receive them-a big man who, if he lost only a little weight, could be classified as skinny. His face, under the stubble of greyish yellow hair, was deeply tanned and seamed, and looked as though at some time in the past it had been completely shattered and then reassembled not too carefully.

He said, "Welcome aboard, Commander Grimes! I beg your pardon, Commodore Grimes. But I always think of you as that boy scoutish Survey Service Lieutenant Commander who was captain of Seeker."

Grimes removed his respirator with the hand that was not holding the gun. "Captain Kane," he said, "you are under arrest, and your ship is seized."

"Am I, now? Is she, now? Let's not be hasty, Commander-Commodore, I mean. What will the Federation say when it hears that a breakaway colonial officer has arrested one of its shipmasters? Suppose we have a yarn about old times first, Commodore. Come on up to my dogbox to see how the poor live. This is Liberty Hall-you can spit on the mat an' call the cat a bastard!"

"I'd rather not accept your hospitality, Captain Kane, in these circumstances. Or in any circumstances."

"Still the same stuffy bastard, ain't yer, Grimes? But if yer seizin' Southerly Buster III-I still haven't forgiven yer fer what yer did ter the first Southerly Buster-yer'll have ter see her papers. Register, Articles o' Agreement an' all the rest of it."

"He's right," said Billinghamst.

"Ain't yer goin' ter introduce me to yer cobbors, Commodore?"

"This is Mr. Billinghamst," said Grimes curtly, "Chief Collector of Customs for the Confederacy. And this is Commander Williams, of the Rim Worlds Navy."

"The way I'm surrounded," drawled Kane. "I suppose I should surrender. But I ain't goin' to. I . . ."

Whatever else he said was drowned by the sudden clamour of Southerly Buster's inertial drive as she lifted with vicious acceleration, as she staggered under the sudden application of lateral thrust that threw the three unprepared men heavily to the deck.

Kane's stungun was out, and a couple of tough looking characters, similarly armed, had put in an appearance.

Speaking loudly to be heard above the irregular beat of the drive Kane said cheerfully, "An' if he's doin' what he was told ter do, my gunnery boy's just in the act o' vaporizin' your transport with his pet laser cannon. I hope none o' your nongs are still inside that coach they came in."

But he didn't seem to be worrying much about it.

XXXI

"An' now," drawled Drongo Kane, "what am I goin' ter do with you bastards?"

"Return us to Inferno Valley!" snapped Grimes.

Kane lazily surveyed his prisoners-Clavering, Grimes, Billinghamurst, and Williams, the officers from Rim Malemute, the Customs sub-inspectors. He said, leering in Denise Dalgety's direction, "Seems a cryin' shame ter throw a good blonde back ter where she came from, don't it?"

The girl flushed angrily and Williams snarled, "That's enough o' that, Kane!"

"Is it, now, Commander? Get it inter yer thick head-an' that goes for all o' yer-that there ain't a thing any o' yer can do."

And there's not, thought Grimes. Not until this paralysis wears off. And it won't, as long as these goons keep giving us extra shots with their stunguns as soon as it looks like doing so.

"In fact," Kane went on, "I think I deserve some reward for goin' back, for not leavin' Blondie an' the others wanderin' around in the desert." He extricated a gnarled cigar from the breast pocket of his uniform coverall, ostentatiously lit it with his laser pistol. It stank as bad as it looked.

"Release us at once!" blustered Billinghamurst.

"An' wouldn't yer be peeved if I did, Chief Collector? What if I took yer at yer word, an' dumped yer down in the Painted Badlands, miles from anywhere, an' with no transport but yer own bleedin' hooves?" He exhaled a cloud of acrid smoke. "But yer dead lucky. Clavering here won't play ball, so I have ter go all the way ter Inferno Valley in person, singin' an' dancin', ter make me own deal with the boss cocky o' that bunch o' holy joes. Church o' the Gateway, ain't it? They want dreamy weed, I've got it. They can have it, at my price." He fixed his attention on Grimes. "Ever hear o' Australis, Commodore? Not Austral. Australis. A frontier planet like these worlds o' yours, only 'stead o' bein' on the Rim it's way out to hell an' gone beyond the south rotor bearin' o' the Galaxy. Did a sim'lar deal there, wi' some bunch o' religious nuts. They had a guru, too. Often wonder what happened. Been no news out o' Australis fer quite some time. Could be that the world itself ain't there any more. After I heard the guru's advance spiel about what he said was goin' ter be the final act o' worship, acceptance an' all the rest of it I decided ter get the hell out." He grinned. "Tell yer what. I'll return yer all ter Inferno Valley, an' insist that this Guru William try ter make converts o' yer. If he won't play he gets no dreamy weed."

"The users of it," remarked Billinghamurst, "claim that dreamy weed is

non-addictive."

Keep out of it, you stupid, fat slob! thought Grimes.

"So 't'is, Chief Collector. So 't'is. Smoked it once myself-try anythin' once, that's me. Guess I've the wrong kind o' mind. Didn't see visions or dream dreams. But I'm a baddie, an' you're all goodies."

Clavering said, "There will be no business transactions of any kind on my world."

"An who's goin' ter stop me from doin' business? Not you, fer a start. You were pleased enough ter take yer rake-off from my deals until that silly bitch got blown up, weren't yer? Oh, well, go an' stew in yer own juice with the other goodies."

Grimes realized that sensation was coming back into his hands and feet, that he could move his fingers and toes. He mentally measured the distance between himself and the arrogant Drongo Kane, and between Kane and the three armed spacemen lounging negligently in the doorways of the ship's saloon. There was a chance, he thought. There was a chance, and if he could use Kane's body as a shield it might be a good one.

"Mr. Welland," drawled Drongo Kane, "yer might give the . . . er . . . passengers a sprayin' over with yer stungun. I noticed the Commodore twitchin' his pinkie just now."

The weapon, set on low power, buzzed softly. Grimes' nerves tingled, then went dead. He could breathe, he could move his eyes, he could speak, even, but that was all.

"I'll give yer all a stronger dose before we land," Kane promised them. "The Guru an' his boys an' girls can carry yer off me ship."

"You'll be sorry for this," promised Grimes.

"I shan't be when I count the foldin' money that Guru William's goin' ter hand over ter me," Kane assured him. "Or, if I am, I shall cry all the way ter the bank."

XXXII

Kane left then, presumably to take over the pilotage of his ship. The three guards remained. They sneered at Billingham's offer of a free pardon, a reward even, if they assisted the forces of law and order. They laughed loudly when Denise Dalgety made an appeal to their decency as human beings. Welland, who seemed to be Kane's Second Mate, exclaimed, "We ain't decent, lady; if we were we wouldn't be in Drongo's rustbucket. If yer want ter find out just how indecent we can be. . . ."

"No!" she cried. "You wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't I, honey?"

But he didn't, though it was obvious that it was fear of Kane that restrained him rather than any respect for the girl.

Grimes, listening to the varying beat of the inertial drive, was trying to work out where they were. They were flying through severe turbulence, that much was obvious. He said to Clavering, "Has Kane been to Inferno Valley before?"

"Only as a passenger, Commodore. And only in my flier, usually during the evening lull."

"Mphm. Will he be able, do you think, to get down into the valley with the winds on top at gale force, at least?"

"You did, Commodore."

"In a much smaller ship."

Welland guffawed scornfully. "The Old Man could take this bitch through hell without singeing her hide! But stow the gab, will yer? Yer none o' yer sparklin' conversationalists!"

"For the last time . . ." began Billinghurst, making a final attempt to enlist aid from this unlikely quarter.

"Aw, shaddup!"

The stunguns buzzed, and breathing became almost impossible, and talking quite impossible.

Grimes could still think, and he could hear. There were surges of power as lateral thrust was applied one way and the other, then a diminution of the irregular beat as vertical thrust was reduced.

Southerly Buster III was coming in for a landing.

XXXIII

Those who had been Kane's prisoners were seated in a group to one side of the huge dining hall, and with them were Sally Clavering and the members of Clavering's staff. These, too, had been incapacitated by judicious use of the stunguns. Drongo Kane had collected his payment from the Guru William and had gone, the noisy hammering of his inertial drive echoing back and forth between the sheer cliffs of the valley's walls until it had suddenly faded into silence.

Kane was gone-but the Guru William remained.

He was a harmless man-to judge by his appearance-saintly, even. He had stood over the nonbelievers after they had been dragged and carried into his temple and had looked at them for long minutes, a faint smile curving his mouth, his huge, brown eyes looking through and beyond the helpless men and women. He murmured, "Peace."

Grimes tried to say something, anything, but could not. He would be voiceless until the paralysis wore off.

"Peace," murmured the guru again, but in a louder tone. "Peace. The last, the everlasting, peace. And you, my sons and my daughters, are blessed,

for you shall see, with us, the cessation of all that is harsh, all that is discordant."

Billinghurst managed to make some sort of noise. "Blahh . . . blahh."

"I must leave you, my sons and my daughters, my brethren, my sisters. The worship, the last act of worship, of acceptance, is to begin. Surrender yourselves. Join with us, the People of the Gateway. The gateway is about to be opened."

On to what? Grimes demanded of himself desperately. On to what? More than any of the others, with the possible exception of Williams, he was starting to realize the implications of it all. He tried to hold his breath as he smelled the sweet yet acrid taint that was beginning to pervade the air in the dome, reasoning that the smoke of burning dreamy weed was being blown in through the airconditioning system. He wondered how much the Guru William had paid for the consignment. A small fortune-or a large one-must be smoldering away somewhere behind the scenes.

William had mounted the dais and, surrounded by acolytes, was squatting there in the lotus posture. The bald heads of the women glimmered eerily in the dim light. Their eyes, and the eyes of the men, seemed to be self-luminous. Drifting streamers of grey fog curled about them.

"We accept. . ." intoned the Guru.

"We accept . . ." repeated his flock. The words had a faraway sound, like a thin, cold wind rustling the detritus of long dead years.

"The nothingness . . ."

"The nothingness . . ."

"Beyond the stars."

"Beyond the stars."

The nothingness, or the otherness, thought Grimes. Here, out on the Rim, on the very edge of the expanding galaxy, the skin of the bubble that held the continuum was stretched almost to bursting, the barriers between the dimensions were flimsy, almost nonexistent. There were, Grimes knew all too well, the other time tracks, the alternate universes. And what-if anything-lay between the time tracks, the universes?

"Open the Gateway . . ."

"The Gateway to Never . . ."

I will not believe, Grimes told himself. I will not believe.

The effects of the last stungun shock were wearing off now, but the fumes of the consciousness-expanding drug were taking effect. On the dais the guru's form was outlined by an aura, not of light, nor yet of darkness, but of nothingness.

And the word beat in the Commodore's mind, Never . . . never . . . never. . .

. Those about him were becoming insubstantial, filmy. . . . He lifted his hand-and realized with horror that he could see through it, that he was looking through skin and flesh and bone at the calm, the impossibly calm face of Pahvani.

"Nirvana . . ." the young sub-inspector was murmuring. "Nirvana. . . ."

And was this what had happened on Australis, to Australis? Was this why Drongo Kane had gotten away and clear like a bat out of hell? The picture that formed in Grimes' mind of a huge, black, winged mammal beating its way through and between towering columns of crimson fire was as real as though he were actually seeing it-and it was better than that nothingness which was showing through the widening rents in the very continuum.

"Open the Gateway. . . ."

"The Gateway to Never . . ."

"Accept, accept. . . ."

I'm damned if I'll accept, thought Grimes.

Light was beating upwards in waves-red, orange, dazzling blue-white-from the core of the planet, washing over and through Grimes' body like cool water, dissipating itself in the utterly starless dark, the dark that was a negation of everything, all around, light that fought a losing battle against the nothingness, that faded, faster and faster, to a faint, ashy glimmer. He put out his hand, or thought that he put out his hand, to catch one of the last, feeble photons, held it in his cupped palm, stared at the dying, weakly pulsating thing and willed it to survive. It flared fitfully, and . . .

Somebody had hold of his sleeve, was shaking it. Somebody was saying, almost hissing, "Sir, sir!"

Grimes stared at the intrusive being. So this was what lay in the nothingness between the time tracks. It was hell, the old-fashioned hell of the fundamentalist faiths at which he had always sneered, a hell peopled by horrendous, horned and tailed demons. . . .

"Sir! Sir! Come back, please!"

Come back? What the hell was this stupid devil yapping about? How could he come back when he was only just getting there?

"Sir! Earthquake. Bad one!"

"Go away . . . go away. . . ."

The scaled, clawed hands were at his face, were forcing something over his head. Grimes drew in a panicky breath, and the sudden inhalation of almost pure oxygen nearly choked him. He put up his hands to try to tear off the respirator, but there were devils all around him, restraining him. He was aware that the floor was heaving underfoot, and he was fighting as much to retain his balance as to throw off his assailants.

His assailants?

His saviors.

The floor was like a calm sea over which a long, low swell was rolling, and the walls of the dome were bellying inwards. But only Grimes and his attendant demons were aware of this-and he still wondered if this were actuality or some drug-induced vision. Billinghamurst squatted there like a Buddha, and beside him young Pahvani was staring into-or at-nothingness, a supernaturally sweet smile on his thin face. Williams was muttering, "The Outback. The last Outback. . ." And Sally Clavering . . . was that a halo faint-gleaming about her head, or was it merely a wreathing streamer of dreamy weed smoke?

And were Billinghamurst and Williams and the others as insubstantial as the guru and his people? They were all fading, fading fast, as they swayed in time to the waves that swept across the floor in regular undulations. They were fading-and again, through rents in the very fabric of space-time, that ultimate, horrifying nothingness was increasingly evident.

If only the simple, three dimensional fabric of the dome would rend, to release the hallucinogenic fumes. . . .

What was hallucination, and what was not?

"Sir, sir!" It was the devil who had first pulled Grimes back to reality, or to what passed for reality. "Sir, sir! Do something, please! We are frightened."

You aren't the only one, thought Grimes.

He looked at the native. He must have been a kitchen helper of some kind. He was wearing an incongruous white apron, and a belt with a pouch into which were thrust various tools.

"Give me your knife," ordered the Commodore.

He grabbed the implement, used it to tear away the black hangings shrouding the interior wall of the dome. Behind these the plastic was tough, too tough, even though the knife was razor-sharp. And then . . . and then the wall bellied inwards as there was a particularly severe tremor and the skin was stretched almost to bursting.

The knife penetrated, and tore the outer skin as well. There was a great whoosh as the air rushed out, and Grimes and his helpers were blown through the opening into the night, into the night that was blessedly normal despite the earthquake shocks that continued, with increasing severity. He stood there, keeping his balance somehow, and watched in fascination as the fantastic bubble structure that was the Lucifer Arms collapsed upon itself, as balloon after glowing balloon deflated, some with explosive suddenness, some slowly. The generators kept working until the very end, and the darkness-the real darkness, the natural darkness-did not sweep in until the last bubble had burst.

Grimes had battery powered emergency lights brought from Rim Malemute, and then the rescue work began.

XXXIV

"I've just heard from Clavering," said Grimes to Sonya. "He and Sally didn't come out of it too badly. The Lucifer Arms was insured against earthquake damage, and Lloyd's paid up."

"Earthquake damage!" she scoffed. "Earthquake damage! When you were running amok with a long knife!"

"It wasn't all that long. And there was an earthquake, after all."

"Joking apart, John, what do you make of it all?"

"You've read my report."

"Yes. But I sort of gained the impression that you were too scared, still, to write what you really thought."

"Could be. Could be. You know, I keep thinking of the Lucifer Arms as a microcosm of the universe in which we live, our space-time continuum. What would have happened if the Guru William had succeeded in bursting the bubble of what we think of as reality, just as I burst that bubble of inflated plastic?"

"I can't see us all going whooshing out into nothingness."

"Can't you? The guru's body was never found, you know, or the bodies of about a hundred of his disciples. Or that of young Pahvani. They could have fallen into one of the fissures that opened and closed again-but it's odd that, apart from the utterly missing people, there were no casualties." He slowly filled and lit his pipe. "An unfortunate business. Clavering and his people will have to leave the Rim, of course. Billinghamurst's a vindictive bastard. Drongo Kane'll get away scot free. He broke no Federation laws, and I doubt very much if we could get him extradited to any of our worlds."

"And the Confederacy," she said, "will be confirmed in its archaic puritanism insofar as the permissive practices of the Federated planets are concerned."

"I hope that you're right," he said. "I sincerely hope that you're right." She looked at him in some amazement. He laughed. "No, I'm not becoming a wouser in my old age. It's just that I've been made to realize that even if what you do doesn't much matter, where you do it does."

"To use the so-called mind-expanding drugs out here, on the Rim, is like smoking over a powder barrel!"

"The sort of thing you'd do," she jeered, but without malice.

"But only tobacco," he told her, puffing away contentedly on his pipe. "But only tobacco."