

## THE LAST HUNT

Grimes stood at the wide window of his office, which overlooked the Port Forlorn berthing apron, watched the starship New Bedford coming in. She was a stranger to the Rim Worlds. According to Lloyd's Register she was owned by the Hummel Foundation of Earth, The Foundation, Grimes knew, had been set up for the intensive study of xenobiology — its Interstellar Zoo, covering hundreds of square miles of Australia's Central Desert, was famous throughout the galaxy. Almost equally famous was New Bedford's master, Captain Haab. He was both master astronaut and big game hunter — an unlikely combination, but a highly successful one.

And what was Captain Haab doing out on the Rim?

Grimes could guess.

Slowly New Bedford dropped down from the clear sky — her arrival had coincided with one of Port Forlorn's rare fine days. She gleamed dazzlingly in the bright morning sunlight. As she gradually lost altitude the beat of her inertial drive rose from an irritable muttering to a noisy, unrhythmic drumming, frightening the snowbirds — which at this time of the year infested the spaceport — into glittering, clattering flight.

The commodore picked up binoculars, studied the descending ship. He already knew that she was modified Epsilon Class, but was interested in the extent of the modifications. She looked more like a warship than a merchantman, the otherwise sleek lines of her hull broken by turrets and sponsons. Most of these seemed to be recent additions. She must have been specially fitted out for this expedition.

No doubt, Grimes thought, Captain Haab would be visiting him as soon as the arrival formalities were over and done with — it would be more of a business than a courtesy call. But everything was ready. The files of reports were still in Grimes' office, the spools of film, the three-dimensional charts with their plotted sightings and destructions. If Haab wanted information — which he almost certainly would — he should have it.

New Bedford was almost down now, dropping neatly into the centre of the triangle marked by the brightly flashing red beacons. Already the beetlelike ground cars of the spaceport officials — port captain, port health officer, customs — had ventured on to the apron, were waiting to close in. But Haab, with all the resources of the Hummel Foundation behind him, would have no trouble in obtaining inward clearance.

New Bedford was down at last. Her inertial drive complained for the last time, then lapsed into silence. A telescopic mast extended from high on her hull, at control room level, and from it broke out a flag that fluttered in the light breeze. It was not, Grimes realised, the houseflag of the Hummel Foundation, a stylized red dragon on a green field. This standard was white and blue.

Miss Walton, Grimes' secretary, had come to stand with him at the window. "What a funny ensign — what is it supposed to be? It looks like an airship, a blimp in a blue sky."

The commodore laughed. "I think that the blue is supposed to represent sea, not sky. And that's not a blimp."

"What is it, then, Commodore?"

"It could be a white whale," Grimes told her.

"Captain Haab to see you, sir," announced Miss Walton.

Grimes looked up from his desk where he had been blue-pencilling the stores requisition sent by the chief officer of Rim Percheron. "Show him in," he told his secretary.

The girl returned to the office followed by Haab. The master of New Bedford was a tall man, thin, towering over the little blonde. There was an oddly archaic cut to his tightly fitting black suit, to his stiff, white linen and black stock. His face was gaunt and deeply tanned between his closely cropped black hair and black chin beard. His eyes were a startlingly pale blue. He walked with a peculiarly jerky motion and from his right leg came a strange faint clicking noise.

Grimes rose to his feet, extended his right hand. "Welcome to Port Forlorn, Captain."

Haab took the commodore's hand in his own almost skeletal claw. "Thank you, sir."

"Sit down, Captain. Tea? Coffee?"

"Coffee if I may, Commodore. Black."

"Will you attend to it, please, Miss Walton? Black coffee for two. And did you have a good voyage out, Captain?"

"A quiet voyage."

"First time I've seen anybody from the Hummel Foundation out here. Of course, we haven't much in the way of exotic fauna on the Rim. Not on the man-colonized planets, that is. Most of our animals were raised front Terran stock."

"I'm not concerned with any of the life forms actually on the planets, Commodore."

A grin softened Grimes' craggy face. "I can guess what you've come for, Captain —" Miss Walton brought in the coffee tray, set it on the desk. Grimes said to the girl, "Would you mind having the projection room ready? You know the films we shall want — those that the admiralty lent me."

"The ones shot on the Lorn-Llanith route, sir?"

"Of course."

"Very good, sir. Oh, would you mind if I asked Captain Haab a question?"

"Go ahead, Miss Walton."

The girl addressed herself to New Bedford's master. "I'm interested in flags, sir. What is the one that you have flying from your ship?"

Haab smiled thinly. "It's my own personal broad pennant. The Foundation allows me to wear it."

"But what is it, Captain?"

"A white whale," replied Haab.

"As I've already told you," grunted Grimes. "And now will you get those films ready?"

"And could you fill me in while we're waiting?" Haab asked Grimes. "Of course, Captain. I'll start at the beginning."

"As you know," said Grimes, "we operate lightjammers on the run between the Rim worlds and the Llanithi Consortium. The lightjammers are the only ships that can have their atomic charges reversed so that they can land on the anti-matter worlds without blowing themselves — and anybody else within ten thousand miles — to glory. The lightjammers had been running into trouble — a strange vessel kept appearing on a collision course, shoving them away to hell and gone off trajectory —"

Haab smiled. "You'll probably be hearing from the Rhine Institute about that. But the Hummel Foundation is concerned with living beings, not ghosts, not even such famous ghosts as the Flying Dutchman."

"Just as well. Since the navy started cleaning up the shipping lanes old Vanderdecken has been conspicuous by his absence. Maybe he's found a home on Atlantia. They still go in for sail in a big way there.

"Well, after the first reports came in I decided I'd better see for myself, so my wife and I took passage from Lorn to Llanith in Pamir. At that time it was thought that the Flying Dutchman was another lightjammer, a foreign ship snooping on our trade routes. But we had with us the Reverend Madam Swithin of the United Primitive Spiritualist Church, going out to Llanith as a missionary. Thanks to her we found out what the Flying Dutchman was and that Vanderdecken was warning us about something.

"So I grounded the lightjammers and sent a report to Admiral Kravitz, urging him to make a fullscale investigation. He did. Luckily our fleet was out on manoeuvres at the time so it all fitted in with the war games that were being played. Instead of the usual Redland versus Blueland it was the armed might of the Confederacy versus the Menace from Intergalactic Space!"

Haab registered strong disapproval. "Not a hunt," he growled, "but a military operation—"

"Of course. If one of our lightjammers had run into a herd of those things — or even a single one — there would have been a shocking mess. Don't forget that the Erikson Drive ships, unlike the Mannschenn Drive jobs, remain in normal space-time while accelerating to the velocity of light and return to NST when decelerating. The energy eaters —"

"Is that what you call them?"

"What else? The energy eaters were a menace to navigation and they were dealt with as such."

"I still don't like it."

"You're not master of a lightjammer, Captain. Oh, all right, all right, you're a big game hunter as well as being a shipmaster. But the EEs don't have nice, horned heads that you can hang on the wall. They don't have pretty pelts that can be made into fireside rugs."

"I want a living specimen."

"I doubt if your marvelous zoo in Central Australia would be able to accommodate it."

"A zoo need not be on a planetary surface, Commodore. The plans for an orbital zoo have been drawn up, with lines of magnetic force among a grouping of small artificial satellites forming the bars of a cage. If I capture a specimen the Foundation will have everything ready for its reception when I get it back to Earth."

"If you capture a specimen. The navy's doing a good job."

Haab inhaled deeply from the villanous black cigar that he was smoking as a counter measure to Grimes' foul pipe. He withdrew the thing from his mouth and his right hand, holding it, rested on his knee. Grimes sneezed. There was more than tobacco smoke in those acrid fumes.

He said hastily, "You're setting yourself on fire, Captain."

The other man looked down at the little, charred circle in the cloth of his trousers, beat out the embers with his left hand.

Grimes said, "You must feel deeply on the subject. You didn't notice that you were burning yourself."

"I do feel deeply, Commodore. But this leg's prosthetic. I lost the original on Tanganore when a harpooned spurzil took retaliatory action. The Tanganorans fitted me out with this tin leg and, by the time I got back to Earth where I could have had a new flesh-and-blood one grown, I'd gotten used to it. In any case — I couldn't spare the time for a regeneration job."

"Tanganore? that's in the Cepheid Sector, isn't it? and what is a spurzil?"

"A sort of big armor-protected whale. White."

"And now you're hunting Moebius Dick himself."

"Moebius Dick, Commodore?"

"I thought that your private flag was supposed to represent the original Moby Dick."

"No. It represents the spurzil that took a piece of me. It's a reminder to myself to be careful. But Moebius Dick?"

"Wait until you've seen the films, Captain Haab."

Grimes sat with Haab in the darkened projection room and Miss Walton started the projector. Slowly the screen came alive and in it glowed words: OPERATION RIMHUNT, FOR EXHIBITION TO AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

The credit titles were succeeded by a spoken account of what was happening, by some quite good shots of lightjammers arriving at and departing from Port Erikson, by an excellent shot of Herzogin Cecile making sail. The voice of the commentator said, "But these ships, the pride of our merchant navy and the first vessels successfully to trade with the anti-matter Llanithi Consortium, discovered that all was not plain sailing." Grimes contrived to wince audibly. "A new menace appeared on the trade routes and only by taking violent evasive action were the lightjammers able to escape certain destruction."

"No mention of Vanderdecken," commented Haab.

"Our navy refuses to believe in ghosts," Grimes told him. "Their psychologists have a marvelous theory that the Flying Dutchman was no more than a projection of our own precognitive fears, a visual presentation of a hunch."

The commentator went on: "Commodore John Grimes of the Rim Worlds naval reserve — also astronomical superintendent of Rim Runners — was a passenger aboard the lightjammer Pamir. He was in her control room when the master, acting upon a hunch, trimmed his sails in order to make a large alteration of course to port —"

"I like that!" snorted Grimes. "I had to bully the stubborn bastard into making the alteration."

"— deciding that there must have been some unseen danger ahead of the ship, Commodore Grimes made a report to Admiral Kravitz, recommending that a thorough survey be made of the trade routes between Lorn and Llanith. At the time the fleet was out on the manoeuvres off Eblis and the frigates Rim Culverin and Rim Carronade were detached to carry out investigations in the neighbourhood of Llanith."

The last shot of a lightjammer under sail faded from the screen, was replaced by one of a conventional warship proceeding under Mannschenn Drive, obviously taken from a sister ship. In the background glowed the warped, convoluted Galactic Lens, an oval of luminescence twisted through and into an infinity of dimensions. The outline of Rim Culverin herself was hard and clear.

"Arriving at the position in which, according to Commodore Grimes' report, the danger was thought to exist, Rim Culverin and Rim Carronade reduced to cruising speed and initiated a search pattern. Both vessels, of course, had their mass proximity indicators tuned to maximum sensitivity. Eventually a target was seen in the screens, the indications being that it was something extremely small, with barely sufficient mass to register. It must be pointed out, however, that collision with a dust mote at a speed close to that of light could have serious consequences —"

"How do your lightjammers guard against that?" asked Haab.

"We don't. Cosmic dust is something that we don't have any of out on the Rim."

"What about hydrogen atoms? Wouldn't they be as bad?"

"We don't have any of those either — or the operation of lightjammers would be impossible. But look!"

"— inertial drive only, Rim Culverin and Rim Carronade approached the target with caution. Radar had been put into operation when the ships made their re-entry into normal space-time and proved more effective than the mass proximity indicator had been. The original target was resolved into a cluster of targets, each presenting an echo in the screen equivalent to that given by a small ship, such as a scout. Furthermore, as the range decreased to a hundred kilometres and less, the targets could be seen visually."

In the screen was what looked like a star cluster, bright against the intergalactic nothingness.

"The cautious approach was continued —"

The effect now was more like a swarm of fireflies than a star cluster. The points of light were in rapid motion, weaving about each other in an intricate dance. The ship from which the film had been taken was approaching the shimmering display — probably magnification was being stepped up at the same time. If it were not — then the approach was far from cautious.

Each of the dancing lights possessed a definite shape.

"Haloes," murmured Haab.

"Not haloes," Grimes told him. "Look more closely, Captain." Nonetheless, haloes they could have been, living annuli of iridescence —but twisted haloes. As they rotated about their centers they flared fitfully, seemed to vanish, flared again.

"What do they remind you of?" asked Grimes.

"The antenna of a Carlotti beacon or transceiver," replied Haab after a moment's thought. "But circular, instead of elliptical — that's what I thought when I saw the stills that the Survey Service passed on to the Foundation. It's more obvious when you see the things in motion."

"In other words," said Grimes, "a Moebius Strip. But watch."

The voice of the commentator came up again. "Rim Culverin dispatched a drone to make a closer investigation —"

There was a shot of the little craft — a spaceship in miniature, bristling with a complex array of scanners and antennae — pulling out and clear from the parent ship. Rim Carronade's camera tracked her until she was too distant for details to be distinguished. Then this picture was replaced by

the one seen by the probe's electronic eyes. The small unmanned craft was making a close approach to one of the whirling rings of light. The enigmatic thing was almost featureless, although flecks of greater luminosity on its surface were indicative of its rotation. It was a Moebius Strip made from a wide, radiant ribbon. It flared and dimmed like an isophase beacon with a period synchronized with that of its revolution. It could have been a machine — yet it gave the impression that it was alive. It filled the screen, spinning, pulsing — and then there was blackness.

The commentator said in a matter of fact voice, "The drone went dead. It had not been destroyed, however. Powerful telescopes and radar aboard both ships could still pick it up. But it was obvious that all its electronic equipment had suddenly ceased to function.

"It was obvious, too, that the cluster of mysterious entities was approaching the frigates at high velocity. Captain Laverton, aboard Rim Carronade, ordered a withdrawal from the scene. Rim Carronade and Rim Culverin proceeded west, first at normal cruising speed, then increasing to maximum inertial drive acceleration. But the hostile beings steadily decreased the range. Rim Carronade and Rim Culverin were obliged to open fire with their stern-mounted laser cannon —"

The screen showed the false star cluster again, but its individual components were no longer dancing about each other, maintaining a globular formation -- they were holding a steady trajectory. They were no longer alternating between light and darkness. Every now and again they would flare into increased brilliance, which did not diminish. "Realizing that laser was an encouragement rather than a deterrent," the commentator went on, "Captain Laverton decided to take evasive action and ordered the starting of the Mannschenn Drive units aboard his ship and Rim Culverin, reasoning that once the frigates were out of synchronization with normal space-time the hostile entities would be unable to press home their attack. At first it seemed that these tactics would be successful, but after a lapse of no more than fifteen seconds the things reappeared at even closer range than before, obviously matching temporal precession rates. Captain Laverton returned to normal space-time briefly — and in the few seconds before he restarted his Mannschenn Drive, just as the entities reappeared off Rim Carronade's quarter, launched a torpedo with a fission warhead fused for almost instant detonation. This defensive action was successful."

The screen displayed a fireball of incandescent plasma, expanding and thinning, the obvious aftermath of an atomic explosion in deep space. Through the cloud of glowing gases could be seen only a mere half dozen of the entities — earlier there had been at least fifty of the things.

"Returning to NST, Captain Laverton observed that the majority of the creatures had been destroyed and that the few survivors were sluggish and — he thought erroneously — badly injured. Two were dispatched by laser fire. The remaining four retreated rapidly, eluding the frigates.

"The first phase of Operation Rimhunt was over."

"The next spool, sir?" asked Miss Walton.

"Not just yet, if you don't mind," replied Haab. Then: "I beg your pardon, Commodore. But I'd like to talk about what we've just seen first."

"Talk away, Captain." Grimes refilled and lit his pipe. "Talk away."

"As you know, Commodore, I've seen the stills and read the reports that your navy passed on to the Federation Survey Service, that the Survey Service, in its turn, passed on to the Foundation. I was present at most of the conferences of the Foundation's boffins. I didn't understand all they were saying, but I caught the general drift. The energy eaters, as they dubbed them, are just that. Their peculiar Moebius Strip configuration ensures that their entire surface is exposed to any source of radiation. According to our mathematicians they must be susceptible to magnetic fields — so the cage that our people are designing should work. The creatures are also susceptible to beamed Carlotti transmissions, which could be used to prevent a caged entity from escaping by desynchronizing with normal space-time."

Grimes grunted affirmatively.

"And as we have just seen — they can be killed. Killed by kindness." Haab chuckled dryly. "Throw the energy of a nuclear blast on to their plates and they're like a compulsive eater digging his grave with a knife and fork."

"Mphm."

"But I don't want to kill them. I want to capture one, or more than one, to take back to Earth. I want to save a specimen of this unique life form, probably not a native of this galaxy, before the species is hunted to extinction."

"Then you had better get cracking," Grimes told him without much sympathy. To him a menace to navigation was just that. "At last report there's probably only one of the things left."

"Moebius Dick," murmured Haab.

They watched the remainder of the films of Operation Rimhunt, which could as well have been called Operation Search and Destroy. The use of fission weapons, stumbled upon by Captain Laverton, remained effective, but it had to be improved upon. The energy eaters were intelligent — just how intelligent no one knew, probably no one ever would know. After the almost complete wiping out of that first cluster they tended to run from the Confederacy's warships. Magnetic fields, set up by two or more vessels, were an invisible net from which not all of the entities escaped —and those that did so made their getaway by desynchronization. Time-space twisting Carlotti beams were employed by the hunters and this technique seemed to inhibit temporal precession.

"Butchers," muttered Haab at last. "Butchers."

"Exterminators," corrected Grimes. "But both butchers and exterminators are essential to civilization. What about all the animals you have killed in your profession? Can you afford to talk?"

"I can, Commodore. In the first place, I've gone after living specimens far more than I have dead ones. In the second place, the odds have never been stacked against the quarry in my hunts—as they have been in this operation of yours."

Grimes grunted. "I'm not a hunter. If I really wanted a dinner of grilled trout I'd be quite capable of tossing a hand grenade into the stream. If I have an infestation of rats or mice I go out and buy the most effective poison on the market."

"I seem to recall," said Haab, "that you once used a fusion bomb to destroy a rat-infested ship."

"Yes. I did. It was necessary."

"Necessity," murmured Haab, "what sins are committed in thy name? But let's agree to shelve our differences. Do you think I could see the charts of sightings and — ah — victorious naval actions?"

"Let's have them, please, Miss Walton," said Grimes.

Grimes later entertained Haab in his home. After the captain had returned to his ship Grimes' wife, Sonya said "So that's the great hunter."

"I hope you were impressed;" said Grimes.

"Impressed?" Oh, I suppose I was in a way. But the man's a monomaniac. Hunting is his whole life."

"But you can say in his favor that he's more concerned with capturing than killing."

"Is that so much better?" she demanded. "Have you ever seen the Hummel Foundation zoo?"

Grimes had seen it many years ago when he had been a very junior officer in the Survey Service. He had thought at the time that those animals from Earth-type planets had been comparatively lucky, they had been allowed a limited freedom in the open air. The beings from worlds utterly unlike Earth had been confined in transparent domes, inside which the conditions of their natural habitats had been faithfully reproduced in all respects but one — room to run, fly or slither.

He said, "I think I know what you mean."

"I should hope you do," she replied. "I'd sooner be dead than in a cage."

"Haab's only doing his job."

"But he needn't enjoy it so much."

"Are we so much better?" he queried. "Here are these creatures, drifting in from the Odd Gods of the Galaxy know where. They may be intelligent—but have we tried to find out? Oh, no — not us. All we did find out is how to destroy them."

"Don't come over all virtuous, John. You were the first to start screaming about menaces to navigation on the Lorn-Llanith route. Now your precious lightjammers can come and go as they please. And that's what you wanted."

The following morning he received a call from Admiral Kravitz. "I'm putting you back on the active list, Grimes."

"Again, sir? My paper work piled up when I made the voyage in Pamir and I'm still trying to shovel my way through the worst of the drifts."

"I want one of our people along in New Bedford as an observer. You are the obvious choice for the assignment."

"Why me?"

"Why not you? You were keen enough to make a voyage in Pamir when it suited you. Now you can make a voyage in Haab's ship when it suits me."

"Does Captain Haab know I'll be along?"

"He has been told that he will have to have a representative of our navy aboard when he lifts from Port Forlorn. He has only one spare cabin in his ship — a dogbox — so you'll not be able to have Sonya along. Still, it should be an interesting trip."

"I hope so," said Grimes.

"With you among those present, it will be." The Admiral chuckled. "But I have to ring off. I'll leave you to fix everything up with Haab. Let me know later what's been arranged. Over and out."

Grimes rose from his desk. "Miss Walton," he said to his secretary, "I shall be aboard New Bedford if anybody wants me. Meanwhile, you can call Captain Macindoe at his home — he's due back from leave, as you know — and ask him to come in to see me after lunch. He'll be acting superintendent in my absence."

"Not B — Not Commander Williams again?" asked the girl disappointedly.

"No. Billy Williams, as you almost called him, is better at looking after his precious Rim Malemute than keeping my chair warm. What the pair of you were doing when I was away in Pamir and on Llanith I hate to think."

He grinned, then made his way out of the office.

He looked with fresh interest at New Bedford as he walked briskly across the apron. His earlier curiosity about her had been academic rather than otherwise, but now that he would be shipping out in her he was beginning to feel almost a proprietorial concern.

He stared up at the dully gleaming tower that was her hull, at the sponsons and turrets that housed her weaponry, at the antennae indicative of sophisticated electronic equipment of a nature usually found only in warships and survey ships. But she was both, of course. Her normal employment could be classed as warfare of a sort and as survey work —also of a sort.

Grimes marched up the ramp to the after airlock. His way into the compartment was barred by an officer who asked curtly, "Your business, sir?"

Grimes' prominent ears started to redden. Surely everybody in Port Forlorn knew who he was. But this ship, of course, was not a regular visitor and her personnel were not Rimworlders.

He said gruffly, "Commodore Grimes to see Captain Haab."

The young man went to a telephone. "Fourth mate here, Captain. A Commodore Grimes to see you. ...Yes, sir. Right away." then to Grimes: "Follow me, sir."

The elevator carried them swiftly up the axial shaft. Haab's quarters were just below and abaft the control room. The master rose from his desk as Grimes was ushered into his day cabin. "Welcome aboard, Commodore. Thank you, Mr. Timon, you may carry on." When the officer had left Haab asked, "And what can I do for you, Commodore Grimes?"

"I believe, Captain, that you've already heard from our admiralty."

"Indeed I have. They're insisting that I carry some snot-nosed ensign or junior lieutenant with me as an observer —"

"Not an ensign or a lieutenant, Captain."

"Who, then?"

Grimes grinned. "Me."

Haab did not grin in return. "But you're not —"

"But I am. I'm a reserve officer back on the active list as and from this morning."

"Oh?" Haab managed a frosty smile. "I'm afraid I can't offer you much in the way of accommodation, Commodore. This is a working ship. There's a spare cabin the mate has been using as a storeroom—he's getting it cleaned out now."

"As long as there's a bunk —"

"There is—but not much else." Haab's grin was a little warmer. "But I am neglecting my duties as a host."

He walked to the little bar that stood against the bulkhead under the mounted head of some horrendously horned and tusked beast Grimes could not identify. "Perhaps you will join me in a sip of mayrenroth?"

"It will be my pleasure." Haab filled small glasses with viscous, dark-brown fluid and Grimes accepted his, raised it. "Your very good health, sir."

"And yours, Commodore."

The drink was potent, although Grimes did not much care for its flavour. He said, "This is an unusual — ah — spirit."

"Yes. I laid in a supply when I was on Pinkenbah. The natives ferment it from the blood of the mayren, a big, carnivorous lizard."

"Fascinating," said Grimes, swallowing manfully. "I suppose your ship is well stocked with all manner of foods and drinks."

"She is," Haab told him.

New Bedford lifted from Port Forlorn on a cold, drizzly morning, driving into and through the gray overcast. Grimes was a guest in her control room and, he was made to feel, a very unwelcome guest. Haab was coldly courteous, but his officers managed to convey the impression that they resented the presence of the outsider and were demanding silently of each other: What is this old bastard doing here?

New Bedford went upstairs in a hurry. Word had come through to Port Forlorn that Rim Arquebus was not only tracking what was believed to be the last of the energy eaters but had already made two unsuccessful attempts to destroy the creature. Haab had protested and had been told this sector of space was under the jurisdiction of the Rim Worlds Confederacy and that he, his ship and his people were only there on sufferance. The attitude adopted by his government did not make things any more pleasant for Grimes.

Haab wasted little time setting trajectory once he was clear of Lorn's Van Aliens. He lined his ship up on an invisible point in space some light-years in from the Llanith sun, then put his inertial drive on maximum acceleration, with his Mannschenn Drive developing a temporal precession rate that Grimes considered foolhardy. Foolhardy or not, the discomfort was extreme — the cruising weight of three gravities acceleration combined with the eerie sensation of always being almost at the point of living backward.

Apart from these discomforts she was not a happy ship. Her people, from the master down, were too dedicated. They lived hunting, talked hunting, thought hunting and, presumably, dreamed hunting. Grimes was allowed into a conversation only when it was assumed that he would make some contribution to the success of the expedition — and this was not often.

One night, at dinner, Haab did ask him for his views on the energy eaters.

"How intelligent do you think they are, Commodore?"

Grimes put down the fork with which he had been eating some vaguely fish-tasting mess, about which he had not dared to inquire. The implement clattered loudly on the surface of the plate — the high acceleration took some getting used to. He said, "You've seen all the reports, Captain Haab."

"Yes, Commodore Grimes. But you must have formed an opinion. After all, the energy eaters are in your back garden."

Grimes decided that he might as well talk as eat — he would not be missing much. "I don't suppose I need to tell you about the Terran shark, Captain. He has, however, been described as a mobile appetite. He just eats and eats without discrimination, often to his own undoing. He just

hasn't the sense to consider the consequences. Right?"

Haab looked to Dr. Wayne, his biologist. Wayne grinned and said. "The Commodore hasn't put in very scientific language, but he's not far off the beam."

"Then," Grimes went on, "we have human beings who are compulsive eaters. They often are far from being unintelligent — yet they cannot control themselves, even though they know that they are digging their graves with knives and forks. The energy eaters are more intelligent than sharks. They may be as intelligent as we are but we don't know. Intelligent or not, they are handicapped."

"Handicapped? Just how?" demanded Haab.

"Unlike human compulsive eaters they have no control over their intake. If there is raw energy around they absorb it, whether they want to or not. They know, I think, that the absorption of the energy generated by a nuclear explosion will be fatal — but if they are in the vicinity of such a blast they cannot help themselves. Sorry — they can help themselves, but only by exercising their power of temporal precession. And by the time they found this out they were almost extinct."

"Then Moebius Dick will give us a good fight," commented the mate. "He has survived in spite of everything that the navy has thrown at him."

"The Commodore isn't very interested in fighting fish," said Haab. "He told me that he fishes for trout with hand grenades."

"I believe in getting results," said Grimes, conscious that the officers and specialists around the table were looking at him coldly.

New Bedford sped through the warped continuum, homing on the continuous Carlotti signal that Grimes had persuaded the captain of Rim Arquebus to transmit. The warship was remaining in the vicinity of the last sighting of Moebius Dick and had received orders from the Admiralty to cooperate with Haab. Coded signals had been made to Grimes and, reading them, he had gained the impression that Captain Welldean of the Arquebus was far from happy. But Grimes' heart did not bleed for Welldean. Welldean was in his own ship with his own people as shipmates and his own cook turning out meals to his own taste. No doubt his feelings had been hurt when he had been ordered to abandon his own hunt and to put himself under the command of a reserve officer. But he was not an unwelcome guest aboard somebody else's vessel.

At last the tiny spark that was Rim Arquebus showed up just inside the screen of the mass proximity indicator. Speed was reduced and eventually both drive units were shut down. Rim Arquebus hung there, five kilometers from New Bedford, a minor but bright constellation in the blackness.

Welldean's fat, surly face looked out from the screen of the NST transceiver at Grimes and the others in New Bedford's control room.

"Have you any further information, Captain?" asked Haab.

Welldean replied in a flat voice, "The EE emerges into NST at regular half hourly intervals, remaining for ten minutes each time, presumably to feed on the radiation emitted by my ship. Pursuant to instructions —" he seemed to be glaring directly at Grimes — "I have made no hostile moves. Would the Commodore have any further orders for me?"

"None at the moment, Captain," Grimes told him. "Just stand by." "Rim Arquebus standing by," acknowledged Welldean sulkily.

"When will Moebius Dick —" Haab was interrupted by a shout from his mate.

"There she blows!"

The energy eater had appeared midway between the two ships. It was huge, brilliantly luminous, lazily rotating. Grimes paraphrased wryly, He who eats and runs away will live to eat some other day . . . This thing had eaten and run away, eaten and run away and it had grown, was a vortex of forces all of a kilometer across. It would never fit into New Bedford's capacious hold, a compartment designed for the carriage of alien life forms, some of them gigantic. But this did not matter. The cage of beams and fields would be set up outside the ship, but still within the temporal precession field of the Mannschenn Drive.

Grimes, a mere observer aboard a vessel that was not his own, felt superfluous, useless, as Haab and his officers went into the drill that had been worked out to the last detail. The mate, Murgatroyd, would remain on board in charge of the ship — and Haab, with the second, third and fourth mates, would go out in the one-man chasers. Haab was already in his spacesuit — the small craft were no more than flying framework, unpressurized — and his prosthetic leg, through some freak of sound conductivity, clicked loudly as he moved. In his armor, with that mechanical noise accompanying every motion of his legs, he was more like a robot than a man, even though his chin beard was jutting through the open faceplate of his helmet.

"Good hunting, Captain," said Grimes.

"Thank you, Commodore." Haab turned to his mate. "You're in charge of the ship, Mr. Murgatroyd. Don't interfere with the hunt." Then, to Grimes: "Will you tell Captain Welldean to keep his guns and torpedoes to himself?" Welldean's heavy face scowled at them from the screen of the NST transceiver.

"Moebius Dick has gone," announced Murgatroyd.

"When he surfaces again, we shall be in position," Haab told him as he left the control room.

Murgatroyd looked at Grimes. There's nobody else to talk to, he seemed to be thinking, so I may as well pass the time of day with you. He said, "The Old Man always brings 'em back."

"Alive?" queried Grimes.

"When he wants to," replied the mate.

Then he laughed. "He hasn't much choice as far as that thing's concerned. If it's dead it's — nothing." Even in free fall he contrived to give the impression of being slumped in his seat. An incongruous wistfulness softened the rough, scarred, big-featured face under the coarse, yellow hair.

"You wish you were out in one of the chasers," Grimes stated rather than asked.

"I do. But somebody has to mind the shop — and it always seems to be me. There they go, Commodore."

Four bright sparks darted into the emptiness between New Bedford and Rim Arquebus. As they reached a predetermined position they slowed, stopped, then slid into a square formation. Moebius Dick should reappear at the centre of the quadrangle and then, at Haab's signal, each of the little crafts would become a fantastically powerful electromagnet and each would emit the beamed Carlotti transmissions, effectively netting the energy eater in time and space.

Murgatroyd and Grimes stared into the screen of the mass proximity indicator. Four little points of light marked the positions of the chasers, a much fainter one denoting the presence of the energy eater.

"Master to New Bedford," crackled from the speaker. "Check position, please."

"New Bedford to master," replied Murgatroyd. "You are exactly in position. Over."

"Rim Arquebus to Commodore Grimes," put in Welldean. "Do you wish me to take any action when the EE surfaces?"

"Haab to Grimes. You are only an observer. And that goes for your navy, too. Over."

"The Old Man gets tensed up," remarked Murgatroyd, with the faintest hint of apology in his voice.

"Rim Arquebus to Commodore Grimes. My weaponry is manned and ready," persisted Welldean.

"So is mine." Murgatroyd chuckled, waving a big hand over his fire-control console.

The minutes, the seconds, ticked by. Grimes watched the sweep second hand of the clock. He had noted the time of Moebius Dick's disappearance. The half-hour was almost up. When that red pointer came around to 37 ...

"Now!" yelled the Mate.

Moebius Dick was back. The enormous circle of gyrating luminescence had reappeared in the centre of the square formed by the chasers. From the NST speaker came the low-pitched buzz and crackle of interference as the

solenoids were energized. The energy eater hung there, quivering, seeming to shrink within itself. Then it moved, tilting like a precessing gyroscope.

Haab's voice could be heard giving orders: "Increase to six hundred thousand gauss. To six-fifty — seven hundred —".

From one of the chasers came a bright, brief flare and from the speaker a cry of alarm: "Captain, my coil has blown!"

"Master to second and fourth mates — triangular formation."

Moebius Dick was spinning about a diametric axis, no longer a circle of light but a hazy sphere of radiance. The energy eater was rolling through the emptiness, directly toward one of the three still-functioning chasers. The small craft turned to run. Rim Arquebus stabbed out with a barrage of laser beams. In New Bedford's control room Murgatroyd swore, added his fire to that from the frigate. It was ineffective — or highly effective in the wrong way. The monster glowed ever more brightly as it absorbed the energy directed at it, moved ever faster. The chaser turned and twisted desperately, hopelessly. The other chasers could not pursue for fear of running into the fire from the ships. There was nothing that they could have done, in any case.

"The Old Man's boat — " muttered Murgatroyd. "I guess it's the way he wanted to go—" His hand fell away from the firing stud. Moebius Dick was rolling over Haab's small and fragile craft.

Grimes, on the NST VHF, was ordering, "Hold your fire, Rim Arquebus! Hold your fire!"

Weildean's voice came back: "What the hell do you think I'm doing?" Adding, as a grudging afterthought: "Sir."

The lights of the chaser flared briefly through the luminous, swirling haze that enveloped them, flared and died. But something, somebody, broke through the living radiance. It was the spacesuited Haab, using his personal propulsion unit to drive him back to his ship.

He broke through and broke away and for a second or so it seemed that he would succeed. Then Moebius Dick was after him, overtaking him, enveloping him. From the NST speaker came a short, dreadful scream. The globe of flame that was the energy eater seemed to swell, was swelling, visibly and rapidly, assuming the appearance of a gigantic, spherical fire opal. The three surviving chasers retreated rapidly.

Dark streaks suddenly marred the iridescent beauty of the sphere, spread, rapidly covering the entire surface. Where Moebius Dick had been there was only nothingness.

No, not nothingness.

Floating in the darkness, illumined by the searchlights of the three small craft, was the lifeless, armored figure of Captain Haab.

"They'll bring him in," muttered Murgatroyd. "I'll take him back to Earth for burial. Those were his wishes."

"Rim Arquebus to New Bedford," came Welldean's voice. "Do you require medical assistance? Shall I send a boat with my surgeon — "

"We've a quack of our own," snarled Murgatroyd, "and a good one. But even he won't be able to do anything. The Old Man is dead."

"It was his leg that saved him," said Grimes to Sonya when, back at Port Forlorn, he was telling her the story of the hunt.

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, perhaps it wasn't his leg, but all of us came to the conclusion that it was, as it were, the last straw that broke the camel's back."

"Make your mind up, John. I'd gotten used to the idea that Moebius Dick was a sort of latter-day white whale — and now you refer to him as a camel!"

"You know what I mean — I'm talking about the item that finally made him lose control. Moebius Dick had been feeding well over a period of quite some weeks. Every time Rim Arquebus heaved a torpedo at him he'd skim the cream off the fireball and then vanish, being too intelligent to overeat. But all life forms tend to act unintelligently when infuriated and he was no exception. When he broke out of Haab's electromagnetic net he was no more than a dangerous, vicious animal. He was being pumped full of photons by the concentrated laser fire from the two ships — and it meant as little to him as a stream of bullets means to a charging carnivore. He 'killed' Haab's chaser, gulping all the energy from its machinery. He would have killed Haab himself — Haab was in a state of complete paralysis when he was brought on board — if he hadn't started his meal on the Captain's leg.

"You know that the Tanganorans are famous for their powered prosthetic limbs, don't you? Haab's right leg was a beautiful machine with its own, built-in power plant — cells with a working life of at least twenty standard years after installation, a slow, rigidly controlled fission process. Moebius Dick got that twenty years' worth of energy in one bite."

"Critical mass or critical charge — or whatever?" murmured Sonya. "But Haab's anagrammatic namesake wasn't as lucky with his peg leg."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Or was he more than just a namesake?"

"I still don't get you."

"You must remember that talk we had with the Reverend Madam Swithin about reincarnation. How she told us that — according to the tenets of her Church — some souls have to wait around for centuries until the shuffling of chromosomes and genes produces just the right body, with just the right brain and psychological make-up, for their next embodiment. "It makes an odd sort of sense, doesn't it? Captain Ahab, the whaler — Captain Haab, the hunter —"

"But Ahab was only a fictional character!" Grimes protested to his wife.

"Aren't we all finally," she asked reasonably. "Those of us who deserve being made into legends?"