

I'M A SORT OF EXCEPTION that proves the rule.

And that, oddly enough, is my name—George Rule, currently master in the employ of the Dog Star Line, one of the few independent shipping companies in the Federation able to compete successfully with the state-owned Interstellar Transport Commission. When I was much younger I used to be called, rather to my embarrassment, Golden Rule. That was when my hair, which I tend to wear long, and my beard were brightly blond. But, given time, everything fades, and my nickname has faded away with my original colouring. In uniform I'm just another tramp master—and the Odd Gods of the Galaxy know that there are plenty of such in the Universe!—and out of uniform I could be the man come to fix the robochef. It's odd—or is it?—how those engaged in that particular branch of robotics tend to run to fat...

But this exception business ...

The space services of the Rim Confederacy are literally crawling with officers who blotted their copy books in the major shipping lines of the Federation and various autonomous kingdoms, republics and whatever, and even with a few who left certain navies under big black clouds. The famous Commodore Grimes, for example, the Rim Worlds' favourite son, isn't a Rim Worlder by birth; he was emptied out of the Federation Survey Service after the discovery mutiny. (It was Grimes, by the way, who got me emptied out of Rim Runners, the Confederacy's state shipping line, many years ago.)

I am a Rim Wonder by birth. I'm one of the very few spacemen who was born an Outsider and who now serves in the Insiders' ships, the very opposite to all those Insiders who, for reasons best known to themselves, came out to the Rim. I was one of the first cadets to pass through the Confederacy's space training college at Port Last, on Ultimo. I started my space-going career as Fourth Mate of the old Rim Mammoth and then, after I gained my Second Mate's Certificate, was appointed Third Mate of Rim Tiger. Captain—as he was then—Grimes was master of her. He was a real martinet in those days.

Now that I'm master myself I can appreciate his reasons for wanting to run a taut ship. The affair aboard Discovery must still have been vivid in his mind and probably he was thinking that if he'd been less easy going the mutiny would never have happened. I didn't take kindly to the sort of discipline that he tried to impose. Rim Mammoth had been a very happy ship; the Tiger was far from it. Looking back on it all, any Third Mate of mine who tried to get away with the things that I tried to get away with would get a rough passage and a short one.

Anyhow—it was after I'd scrambled aboard at Port Fortinbras, very much the worse for wear, about two microseconds prior to lift-off—I was called into the Sacred Presence. Before he could start on me I told him what he could do with his Survey Service ideas. Then I told him what he could do with his ship. I told him that I wasn't at all surprised that Discovery's officers had done what they did. . . And so on.

I don't blush easily, but the memory of that scene induces a hot flush from my scalp to the tips of my toes. I was lucky, bloody lucky, not to have been

pushed out through an airlock without a spacesuit. (At the time we were, of course, well on our way to Port Forlorn.) Oh, I was escorted to the airlock after our landing on Lorn, taken to the Shipping Office and paid off, and told that it was extremely unlikely that Rim Runners would ever require my services again.

But I was lucky:

(a) I got a job.

(b) I got a job that took me away from the Rim.

(c) I got a job that exercised a certain civilizing influence (badly needed, I admit now) on me.

You may remember when Trans-Galactic Clippers used to include the Rim Worlds in the itinerary of their Universal Tours. One of their big ships—Sobraon—was in, and her Fourth Officer, who had incurred multiple injuries in a rented air car crash, was in hospital. The post was mine, I was told, until such time as a regular TG man was available to relieve me.

I took it, of course, hastily affixing my autograph to Sobraon's Articles of Agreement before Captain Grimes could breathe a few unkind words into the ear of Captain Servetty, who was to be my new boss. And it was with great relief that I watched, from the Clipper's control room, the lights of Port Forlorn fading below us as we lifted. I decided, then, to make the most of this second chance. I decided, too, that I'd not return to the Rim Worlds, ever.

There was nothing to hold me; I was an orphan, and had never gotten on with the various aunts and uncles on either side of my family. I'd had a girl, but she'd ditched me, some time back, to marry a wind turbine maintenance engineer. This broken romance had been one of the reasons—the main reason, perhaps—why I'd been such a pain in the neck to old Grimes. As the Universal Tour proceeded everything that I saw—the glamorous worlds such as Caribbea, Electra and all the rest of them—stiffened my resolution. The Rim Worlds were so dreary, and the planets of the Shakespearean Sector were little better.

This was before Grimes, commanding Faraway Quest, had discovered the worlds of what is now known as the Eastern Circuit—Tharn, Mellise, Grollor and Stree.

All that we had then were Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo and Thule—and, of course, Kinsolving's Planet and Eblis. But nobody ever went near either of those.

Sobraon knocked quite a few corners off me. There's a saying that you often hear, especially in star tramps, that Trans-Galactic Clippers is an outfit where accent counts for more than efficiency. Don't you believe it. Those boys may convey the impression of taking a cruise in daddy's yacht, but they're superb spacemen. They play hard at times—but they work hard.

I played with them—and I like to think that I pulled my weight when it was time to work. I was genuinely sorry when I paid off at Canis Major—Dogtown to the Sirians—the capital city of the Sirian Sector. There

was a new Fourth Mate, a Company boy, waiting for us there, so Captain Servetty had to take him on. He told me, though, that if I cared to fill in a TG Clippers application form he'd see to it that it received special consideration. I thanked him, of course, and I thought about it. I didn't have to think very hard about the repatriation to the Rim Worlds to which I was entitled. I took the money in lieu and decided to treat myself to a holiday.

It was while I was enjoying myself at New Capri that I met Jane. She too was on holiday—on annual leave, as a matter of fact. She was at that time a Purser with the Dog Star Line. It was largely because of her that I became a kennelman myself; I became a naturalized Sirian citizen shortly after we married. She gave up spacefaring when our first child was on the stocks.

Oh well, it's nice having your wife aboard ship with you—but it's also nice to have a home, complete with wife and children, to come back to. You can't have it both ways. And most of the time I got ships that never wandered far from Dogtown, and was contented enough as I rose slowly—but not too slowly—through the ranks from Third to Second, from Second to Chief and, finally, from Chief Officer to Master.

But now, after all these years, I was coming back to the Rim.

THE DOG STAR LINE ships spend most of the time sniffing around their own backyard, but now and again they stray. Basset had strayed, following the scent of commerce clear across the Galaxy. At home, on Canis Major, I'd loaded a big consignment of brassards and self-adjusting sun hats for Arcadia. I must find out some time how those brassards sold. They were made with waterproof pockets for smoking requirements, small change, folding money &c &c. The Arcadians, who practice naturism all the year round, have always seemed to manage quite well with a simple bag slung over one shoulder.

At Ursa Major (the Arcadians have a childish love of puns) I filled up with the so-called Apples of Eden, a local fruit esteemed on quite a few worlds. These were consigned to New Maine. And what would one load in Port Penobscot? Need you ask? Smoked and pickled fish, of course, far less fragrant than what had been discharged. This shipment was for Rob Roy, one of the planets of the Empire of Waverley.

The cargo we loaded on Rob Roy was no surprise either. The Jacobbeans, as they call themselves, maintain that their whisky is superior to the genuine article distilled in Scotland. It may be, it may not be; whisky is not my tippie. But the freight charges from the Empire of Waverley to the Rim Confederacy are far less than those from Earth to the Rim.

So Basset had followed the scent of profit clear from the Dog Star to the Rim, and now it looked as though the trail was petering out. On the other legs of the voyage Head Office, by means of Carlotti radio, had kept me well informed as to what my future movements would be. On my run from Rob Roy to Lorn they had remained silent. And Rim Runners, my agents on Lorn, had replied to my ETA with only a curt acknowledgement. I didn't like it. None of us liked it: we'd all been away from home too long.

Probably I liked it less than my officers. I knew the Rim Worlds; I could think of far nicer planets to sit around awaiting orders.

We found the Lorn sun without any trouble—not that we should have had any trouble finding that dim luminary. Even if we hadn't been equipped with the Carlotti Direction Finder, and even if the Rim Worlds hadn't been able to boast the usual lay-out of Carlotti Beacons, we'd have had no trouble. There's the Galactic Lens, you see, and it doesn't thin out gradually towards its edges; the stars in the spiral arms are quite closely packed. (I use the word "closely" in a relative way, of course. If you had to walk a dozen or so light years you wouldn't think it was all that close.) And then there's that almost absolute nothingness between the galaxies. Almost absolute.. .

There's the occasional hydrogen atom, of course, and a few small star clusters doing their best to convey the impression that they don't really belong to the galactic family. The Rim Confederacy is one such cluster. There are the Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo, Thule, Eblis and Kinsolving suns. To the Galactic East there's a smaller cluster, with Tharn, Grollor, Mellise and Stree. To the West there's a sizeable anti-matter aggregation, with a dozen suns. So, as long as you're headed in roughly the right direction when you break out of the Lens, you have no difficulty identifying the cluster you want.

You have the Galactic Lens astern of you. When the space-time-twisting Mannschenn Drive is running it looks like an enormous, slowly squirming, luminescent amoeba. Ahead there's an uncanny blackness, and the sparse, glimmering, writhing nebulosities that are the Rim Suns seem to make that blackness even blacker, even emptier. And that emptiness still looks too damned empty even when the interstellar drive's shut down and the ship's back in the normal Continuum.

I could tell that my officers were scared by the weird scenery—or lack of it. I was feeling a bit uneasy myself; it was so many years since I'd been out here. But we got used to it after a while—as much as one can get used to it—and here we were at last, dropping down through the upper atmosphere of Lorn. The landing was scheduled for 0900 hours, Port Forlorn Local Time. We couldn't see anything of Port Forlorn yet, although we had clearance from Aerospace Control to enter and were homing on the radio beacon. Beneath us was the almost inevitable overcast, like a vast snowfield in the sunlight, and under the cloud ceiling there would be, I knew, the usual half gale (if not something stronger) probably accompanied by rain, snow, hail or sleet. Or all four.

"How does it feel to be coming home, sir?" asked my Chief Officer sarcastically.

"My home's in Canis Major!" I snapped. Then I managed a grin. "If you'll forgive my being corny, home is where the heart is."

"You can say that again, Captain," he concurred. (He was recently married and the novelty hadn't worn off yet.)

I took a last, routine look around the control room, just to make sure that

everybody was where he was supposed to be and that everything was working. Soon I'd have to give all my attention to the inertial drive and attitude controls and to the periscope screen; inevitably I'd have to do some fancy juggling with lateral and downthrusts. Rugged, chunky Bindle, the Chief Officer, was strapped in the co-pilot's chair, ready to take over at once if I suffered a sudden heart attack or went mad or something. Loran, the Second, was hunched over the bank of navigational instruments, his long, skinny frame all awkward angles and the usual greasy black cowlick obscuring one eye. His job was to call out to me the various instrument readings if, for some reason, such data failed to appear on the periscope screen. Young Taylor, the Third, an extraordinarily ordinary looking youth, was manning the various telephones, including the NST transceiver with which we were in communication with Aerospace Control. In most Dog Star Line's vessels this was the Radio Officer's job, but I had found that our Sparks, Elizabeth Brown (Betty Boops, we called her) was far too great a distraction. Even when she was wearing a thickly opaque uniform blouse (she preferred ones which were not) her abundant charms were all too obvious.

We fell steadily, the inertial drive grumbling away in its odd, broken rhythm, healthily enough. We dropped into the upper cloud levels, and at first pearly grey mist alternated with clear air outside our viewports. And then, for what seemed like a long time, there was only dark, formless vapour. The ship shuddered suddenly and violently as turbulence took her in its grip. The changing code of the blips from the radio beacon told me that I was off course, but it was early yet to start bothering about corrections.

We broke through the cloud ceiling.

Looking into the screen, stepping up the magnification, I could see that there had been few changes during my long absence. The landscape, as always, was grey rather than green, almost featureless, although on the horizon the black, jagged peaks of the Forlorn Range loomed ominously. There were the wide fields in which were grown such unglamorous crops as beans and potatoes. There was the city, which had grown only a little, with the wind turbine towers and the factory chimneys in the industrial suburbs, each smokestack with its streamer of dirty white and yellow vapour. Yes, it was blowing down there all right.

And there was the spaceport, a few kilometers from the city. I could see, towards the edge of the screen, the triangle of bright red flashing beacons on the apron. They were well to leeward, I noted, of the only other ship in port. This, I had been told, was Rim Osprey. There would be enough clearance, I thought hopefully, although I wondered, not for the first time, why Port Captains, with acres of apron at their disposal, always like to pack vessels in closely. I applied lateral thrust generously, brought the beacons to the exact centre of the screen.

At first it wasn't too hard to keep them there, and then we dropped into a region of freak turbulence and to the observers in the Port Forlorn control tower it must have looked as though we were wandering all over the sky. An annoying voice issued from the NST speaker, "Where are you off to, Captain?"

"Don't answer the bastard!" I snarled to Taylor.

I had control of her again and, as well as maintaining a steady rate of descent, corrected the ship's attitude. We dropped rapidly and the numerals of the radar altimeter display were winding down fast. I was coming in with a ruddy blush—but that, I had learned years ago, was the only way to come in to Port Forlorn. I said as much to Bindle, who was beginning to make apprehensive noises. "Try to drop like a feather," I told him, "and you'll finish up blown into the other hemisphere. . ."

I heard Loran mutter something about a ton of bricks, but ignored him.

There was little in the screen now but dirty concrete and the flashing beacons, marking the triangle in the centre of which I was supposed to land—but only when my stern vanes were below the level of the top of the control tower did I step up downthrust. The ship complained and shuddered to the suddenly increased power of the inertial drive.

I was beginning to feel smug—but what happened then wiped the silly grin off my face. I had been leaning, as it were, into the wind—and suddenly, as we came into the lee of the administration block, there was no longer any wind to lean against. Worse still, there was a nasty back eddy. I reversed lateral thrust at once, of course, but it seemed ages before it took effect. The marker beacons slid right to the edge of the screen, right off it. Then, with agonizing slowness, they drifted back, not far enough.. .

But we were down. I felt the slight jar and the contact lights came on. I cut the drive. Basset trembled and sighed as she sagged down into the cradle of her tripedal landing gear, as the great shock absorbers took the weight of her. With a steady hand—but it took an effort!—I fished a packet of Carib panatellas out of my breast pocket, struck one of the long, green cylinders and stuck the unlit end between my lips. (I almost did it the wrong way round, but noticed just in time.) I checked all the tell-tales, saw nothing wrong and ordered quietly, "Make it Finished With Engines."

Nobody acknowledged the order. I looked around indignantly. All three officers were staring out through one of the viewports. "Gods! That was close! Bloody close!" the Mate was muttering.

I stared through that viewport myself. Yes, it had been close. Another metre over towards the administration block and one or other of our stern vanes would have torn down the side of the other ship, ripping her open like a huge can opener. I unsnapped my belt, walked a little unsteadily to join the officers at the viewport. We could look directly into our neighbour's control room. A junior officer, the shipkeeper, was staring across at us. His face was still white. It had reason to be.

"Port Forlorn Control to Basset," came from the speaker of the NST transceiver. "Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," I replied automatically into the microphone.

"Port Forlorn Control to Basset. You are far too close to Rim Osprey. For your information, she is not a lamp-post." (Funny bastard, I thought.) "You will have to shift. Oh, by the way, you also destroyed two of our marker

beacons when you set down. Over."

I shrugged. It's a rare master who hasn't rubbed out the occasional marker beacon. And, after all, they're cheap enough. (But Rim Osprey wouldn't have been cheap if I'd hit her. But I hadn't hit her. So what?)

Finally, after the ground crew had set out new beacons, I tackled the ticklish job of shifting ship. I managed it with no damage except for a slightly dented vanepad and a long scratch on the concrete apron. (Straight as though drawn with a rule, the Mate remarked. I forgave him, but it wasn't easy.)

When we had reberthed to the Port Captain's approval Customs and Port Health boarded to clear us inwards. Both officials were quite amazed to find that my place of birth, as shown on the Crew List, was Port Forlorn. They had to say, of course, that I had gone to the dogs. My Agent—Rim Runners' Port Forlorn Branch Manager—made the same feeble joke. Finally we got down to business. He said, "I've nothing for you at the moment, Captain. My last instructions from your Owners were to try to arrange some sort of charter for you locally. . ."

I told him, rather plaintively, "But I want to go home. . ."

He replied cheerfully, "But you are home. Lives there a man with soul so dead, and all that. Don't you have friends or relatives here? And you were in Rim Riners once, weren't you?"

"I was," I admitted.

"Then you must know Commodore Grimes, our Astronautical Superintendent. He's in Port Forlorn now, as a matter of fact. . ."

"The commodore and I didn't part on the best of terms," I said carefully.

"Time wounds all heels," he told me. "Shall I tell him you're here?"

"Perhaps not," I said.

"He'll know anyhow, Captain. He always likes to look through the crew-lists of strange ships that come in here." He laughed. "He could be looking for your name!"

"I should have changed it when I changed my nationality," I said. "But I doubt if he'll want to see me again."

ODDLY ENOUGH—Or not so oddly—nobody went ashore that day. The weather was partly to blame; shortly after our final berthing a cold driving rain had set in.

Too, all the way to Lorn I'd been telling everybody how drab and dreary the Rim Worlds are, and they must have at least half believed me.

And then, after dinner that night, a little party started in the wardroom. We were all relaxing after the voyage and we had a few drinks, and a few more, and then. . . You know how it is. And, as always, we finished up in full voice, singing our Company's anthem.

All the big outfits have one, usually some very old song with modern words tacked on to the antique melody. In the Waverley Royal Mail they have their own version of Fly, bonny boat, like a bird on the wing. In TG Clippers it's one of the ancient Terran sea chanteys, Sally Brown. (Way, hey, roll and go!) Rim Runners have a farewell song from some old comic opera. (Goodbye, I'll run to find another sun/ Where I may find! There are hearts more kind than the ones left behind. . .)

And ourselves, the Dog Star Line? The choice is obvious.

"How much is that doggy in the window?"

(Arf! Arf!)

"The one with the great big glass eyes. . ."

"How much is that doggy in the window?"

"I think she looks ever so nice"

"I don't want a Countess or a Duchess,

"I don't want an Empress with wings. . ."

(This, of course, a dig at the Waverley Royal Mail Line.)

"I don't want an Alpha or a Beta. . ."

(The two biggest classes of ship in the Interstellar Transport Commission.)

"Or any of those fucking things!"

"How much is that doggy in the window?"

(Arf! Arf! Arf!)

"The one with the Sirius look, "How much is that doggy in the window?"

"Please put my name down in her book!"

We were all happily arfing away, with a few yips and bow-wows, when the Mate noticed a visitor standing just outside the wardroom door. "Come in, come in!" he called. "This is Liberty Hall! You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard! But. . ."

We took the cue and roared in unison, "Beware of the dog!"

"That last," remarked a voice, familiar after many a year, "makes a very welcome new addition."

I turned slowly in my chair to look at him. At first I thought that the old bastard hadn't changed a bit.

Then I saw that his hair was grey now, matching his eyes, and that his face had acquired a few new wrinkles. Otherwise it was as it always had been, looking as though it had been hacked rather than carved out of some coarse textured stone and then left out in the weather. His ears were the same

prominent jug handles of old.

"Don't let me interrupt the party, Captain Rule," he went on, slightly emphasizing the title. "I had some business with Rim Osprey, and then I thought that I'd call aboard here to see you. But it can wait until the morning."

I got to my feet, extended a slightly reluctant hand. He shook it. "Good to have you aboard, sir," I said in the conventional manner. "Will you join us in a small drink?"

He grinned. "Well, if you twist my arm hard enough. . ."

I introduced him around and found him a chair. If he was bearing no malice—and he had far more reason to than I did—then neither was I. He was very soon completely at home.

Betty Brown—wearing one of her transparent shirts and a skirt that was little more than a pelmet—and Sara Taine, my Purser, sat—literally—at his feet, getting up now and again to bring him savouries or to freshen his drink. I didn't get that sort of service. I thought resentfully, and this was my ship. . . He had a fine repertoire of songs and stories, far more extensive than any of ours. Well, he should have done. He had been around so much longer.

At last he raised his wrist and looked at his watch. He said, "Thank you for the party, but I must be going. . ."

"The night's only a pup, Commodore," Bindle told him.

"It was a bitch of a night when I came aboard," he replied, "and probably still is. Raining cats and dogs. . ." He laughed. "Your Dog Star Line brand of humour seems to be catching. . ."

"Just one more before you go? One for the road?" urged the Mate.

"No. Thank you. I don't want to find myself in the doghouse when I get home. Goodnight, all. Goodnight. Goodnight. . ."

I saw him down to the after airlock.

He told me, "I'll be seeing you in the morning, Captain Rule, if it is convenient."

"Would you mind answering a question before you go, sir? I asked him.

"I'll try. What is it?"

"I've always rather suspected, sir, that you were instrumental in getting me that berth in Sobraon. After all, Captain Servetty didn't have to take me, of all people. And he must have known why I was ... available. . ."

"He did know, Captain. He asked me if he should sign you on. I told him that you had the makings of a good officer, but that he'd have to keep a close eye on you."

I said, "If I hadn't been such a self-centred puppy I'd have known that you were still getting over the Discovery business. . ."

He said, "Let's forget about it, shall we? It was all so long ago, and so very far away. . ." Suddenly he looked old, then recovered, equally suddenly, his appearance of ageless strength. "Goodnight, Captain Rule." Our handshake, this time, was really sincere. "I'll see you in the morning."

Wrapping his rather flamboyant cloak about his stocky figure he strode down the ramp, ignoring the wind and the rain, let himself into his squat, ugly little ground car, and then was gone in a flurry of spray.

"THAT COMMODORE GRIMES isn't anything like the ogre you made him out to be," said Sara Taine when she brought me in my tea tray the next morning. "I'm looking forward to seeing him again. What time will he be coming aboard?"

I said severely, "He's married. Very happily, I believe."

She frowned. She had one of those thin, serious faces, under sleek, gleaming black hair, on which a frown sits rather well. She complained, "All the attractive men in my life are married. You, and Peter Bindle, and now your old pal Commodore Grimes. . ."

"What about the engineers?" I asked her. "What about the Second and Third Mates? Or the Quack?"

"Them!" she snorted, then grinned softly, "If I wasn't such a good friend of Jane's. . ."

"Don't tempt me, Sara. The way this voyage is dragging on I shouldn't require so very much tempting."

She had been sitting on the bed, sipping her own cup of tea. She got up, moved to a chair. "That will do, Captain Rule. As I've said, Jane and I are good friends. I want us to stay that way. But it is a pity that she has such archaic ideas about sex, isn't it?" She put her cup back on the tray with a clatter, got up and went out of the bedroom, leaving me to deal alone with the business of getting up to face the day.

Showered and dressed I made my way down to the wardroom for breakfast. There were no absentees; the Doctor had insisted that each of us take a neutralizer tablet before retiring. As you know, they're very effective—but by the time you need them you're in such a state you can't be bothered to take them. That's one of the beauties of having a party aboard ship; you have your own medical practitioner on hand to prescribe as required ...

Canvey, the Interstellar Drive Engineer, asked what everybody else was intending to ask. He got in first. "Was that only a social call last night, Captain, or did Commodore Grimes have any information about our next loading?"

And then Terrigal, Reaction Drive Engineer, stated rather than asked, "He's coming aboard again this morning, isn't he?"

I told them, "The Commodore is Rim Runners' Astronautical Superintendent,

not their Traffic Manager."

"But he still piles on a lot of gees, doesn't he?" said Canvey.

"I suppose he does," I admitted. I helped myself liberally from the dish of Caribbean tree-crab curry on the table, hoping that it would taste as good as it looked and smelled. (It did. Sara was as good a cook as she was a purser, and even the most sophisticated autochef—which ours wasn't—gives of its best only when imaginatively programmed.) I asked, "How is the crab holding out, Sara?"

"It isn't," she said. "This is the last of it."

"I tried to make a tissue culture," put in Dr. Forbes, who was Bio-Chemist as well as medical officer, "but it died on me. . ." He looked more like a professional mourner than ever as he imparted the bad news.

"Then I hope they send us home by way of Caribbea," I said.

"So there is a chance of our getting home," persisted Canvey. He was one of those little, grey, earnest men who always seem to be persisting.

"I'll believe it when we crunch down in Dogtown," said Porky Terrigal glumly, making sure of his second helping of the fragrant curry.

"You must have heard something, Captain. . ." went on Canvey.

"I'm just the Master," I told him. "Nobody ever tells me anything."

Breakfast over, I went back up to my quarters. Bindle brought me a morning paper; somebody in Rim Runners' dock office had been thoughtful enough to send copies on board. I lit a cigar, skimmed through it. It was deadly dull. (Other people's local rags are always dull—but this, *The Port Forlorn Confederate*, had been my local rag once. . .) I noted that Basset was listed in the Shipping Information column as having arrived. I noted, too, that the date of her departure was given as "indefinite". I knew that already.

I read that the Confederacy's Department of Tourism was thinking about reestablishing the holiday resort on Eblis. I read about the Burns Night party that had been thrown by the Ambassador of the Empire of Waverley. Obviously he couldn't have been waiting for our consignment of Waverley scotch. I read about the Rim Rules Football match between the Port Forlorn Pirates and the Desolation Drovers. I found it hard to raise any interest in the account of the game. Even when I had been a Rim Worlder myself I hadn't been all that keen, and on most of the worlds of the Sirian Sector the game is Old Association, the only real football. Finally I found the crossword. It wasn't one of the cryptic variety, just a collection of absurdly simple clues that a retarded child of five could have solved in four minutes. It only took me three and a half.

There was a knock at the door. I threw the paper aside, got out my chair to welcome Commodore Grimes.

He took the seat I offered him, pulled out of his pocket an ancient and battered pipe that looked as though it was the very one that he had always

smoked when I last knew him. It smelt like it, too. Sara Taine came in with a tray of coffee things. She seemed disposed to hang around with flapping ears, and looked hurt when I told her, "That will be all, thanks, Sara."

Grimes said, "Quite comfortable quarters you have, Captain Rule."

"Yes," I agreed. "Basset and her sister ships are an improvement on the Commission's basic Epsilon design. We have our own yards now in the Sector, of course, and build our own vessels. . ."

"Passenger accommodation?" he asked.

"I can take a dozen, in single berth cabins. More if people are willing to double up."

"Mphm." He tooked at me through the cloud of acrid smoke that he had just emitted. I countered with a smokescreen of my own. "Mphm. You know, of course, that we have our own Survey Ship, Faraway Quest. . . ."

"I've heard of her, sir."

"Well, the Quest's out of commission. Will be for some months yet. Oh, she's old, I admit, but even I didn't know that there were so many things wrong with her until she came up for Survey. . ." He relit his pipe, which had gone out, using one of the archaic matches that he still affected. "You know Kinsolving's Planet, of course?"

"I know of it, Commodore. I've never been there."

"I have," he told me. "Too often. The things that have happened to me there shouldn't happen to a dog. Well, the Port Forlorn University wants to send another expedition to Kinsolving. Normally I'd have been their bus driver, in Faraway Quest. But she, as I've told you, is grounded. And our Navy won't lay a ship on for a bunch of civilian scientists, psychic researchers at that. And all of our merchant tonnage, the Rim Runners fleet, is heavily committed for months to come. Do you get the picture?"

"I'm beginning to," I admitted reluctantly.

"Do I detect a certain lack of enthusiasm, Captain Rule? I can't say that I blame you. Oh, well, it shouldn't be hard to arrange a charter whereby we man the ship with our own personnel, while you and your boys and girls are put up in hotels at the Confederacy's expense."

"I stay with my ship," I told him. "And I'm pretty sure that all my people will be of the same mind."

"Good. I was expecting you to say that. So. . . If the charter is arranged—it's not definite yet—you'll be carrying half a dozen scientists, two qualified psionists, the Kinsolving's Planet Advisor and his wife. The Advisor is me, of course. Sonya—my wife—doesn't like that world any more than I do, but she maintains that I'm far less liable to get into trouble if she's along. . ."

"What is wrong with Kinsolving?" I asked.

"You're a Rim Worlder born," he said. "You know the stories." Yes, I knew the stories, or some of them. Kinsolving had been colonized at the same time as the other Rim Worlds, but the colonization hadn't stuck. The people—those of them who hadn't committed suicide, been murdered or vanished without trace—were taken off and resettled on Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo and Thule.

They all told the same story—oppressive loneliness, even in the middle of a crowd, continuous acute depression, outbreaks of irrational violence and, every night, dreams so terrifying that the hapless colonists dreaded going to bed. One theory that I remembered was that Kinsolving is the focal point of . . . forces, psychic forces. Another theory was that around the planet the fabric of our Universe is somehow strained, almost to breaking point, and that some of the alternate Universes aren't at all pleasant by our standards. But you don't have to go to Kinsolving to get the feeling that if you make an effort you'll be able to step into another Continuum; that sensation is common enough anywhere on the Rim. But it's on Kinsolving that you know that no effort at all is necessary, that a mere sneeze would suffice to blow you out of the known Universe into. . . Into Heaven? Maybe, but the reverse would be more likely.

"Kinsolving," said Grimes softly, "is a sort of gateway. . . It's been opened quite a few times, to my knowledge. I'd as lief not be involved in its opening, but. . ." he shrugged. . . "it seems to be my fate always to be involved with the bloody planet."

There was a heavy silence, which I thought I'd better break. "The professional psionics you mentioned. . . ?"

"Old friends of mine," he told me. "Ken Mayhew. One of a dying breed. He was a Psionic Communications Officer long before the Carlotti System was dreamed of. He still holds his commission in the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve. And Clarisse, his wife. A telepath and a teleporteuse. Both of them know Kinsolving."

"And does this Mayhew," I asked, "still cart his personal amplifier around with him? I can remember the old-time PCOs and how they used to make pets of those obscene, disembodied dogs' brains. . ."

"Ken used to keep his poodle's brain in aspic," said the Commodore, "but not any longer. He and Clarisse work as a team. She amplifies for him when he's sending or receiving, and he for her when she's teleporting."

"And the scientists? Any weirdos among them?"

"Oddly, enough, no. They study psychic phenomena without being in any way psychic themselves. They've cooked up some fantastically sensitive instruments, I understand, that can measure the slightest variations of temperature, atmospheric pressure, electrical potential and whatever. They have their own theory about Kinsolving, which is that the planet is actually haunted, in the good, old-fashioned way. And for a ghost to appear and speak and throw things around it must get energy from somewhere. A drop in temperature, for example, indicates that energy is being used." He laughed, rather mirthlessly. "It makes a change from all the other ideas

about Kinsolving—multidimensional universes and all the rest of it. . ."

"And what are your ideas about it, sir?" I asked.

"Kinsolving," he said, "is a world where anything can happen and almost certainly will."

The charter was arranged; our Canis Major Head Office was happy enough that profitable employment had been found for Basset. We, Basset's crew, were not so happy. We were all a long way from home, and too long a time out, and this excursion to Kinsolving would inevitably delay our departure from the Rim Worlds for the Sirian Sector.

There was one slight consolation; we were not kept hanging around long on Lorn. One day sufficed for the discharge of our inward cargo. It was a matter of hours only to ready the passenger accommodations for occupancy. There was the routine overhaul of all machinery, which took four days, and while this was in progress extra stores were taken on and the crates and cases containing the scientists' equipment loaded. On the morning of the sixth day the passengers boarded.

Ken and Clarisse Mayhew I had already met at Grimes' home, where he and Sonya, his wife, had had us all to dinner. Ken was a typical telepath, one of the type with which I have become familiar in the days when the only FTL communication between ships and between ships and planet-bases stations was through the PCOs. He was tall, inclined to be weedy, with mousy hair, muddy eyes and an otherworldly appearance. Clarisse was another kettle of tea, not at all conforming to the popular idea of a psionist. She was a very attractive girl with brown hair and brown eyes, strong featured, although a mite too solidly built for my taste. Sonya Grimes, however, was the sort of woman for whom I could fall quite easily; tall and slim, with a thin, slightly prominent nose and a wide mouth, remarkable violet eyes, sleek auburn hair. Her figure? She could have worn an old flour sack and made it look as though it had been imported at great expense from Paris, Earth.

The commodore and his wife were guests in the control room during liftoff. Sonya was a spacewoman, I had learned earlier, and although married to a Rim Worlder she still retained both her Federation citizenship and her Survey Service commission. Grimes, I could see, was just itching to get his own paws on the controls. (He had confided to me that, at times, he found the life of a desk-borne commodore more than a little irksome.) But he sat in one of the spare chairs, well out of the way, watching. I don't think that he missed anything. Sonya was beside him. She laughed when we went through our own Dog Star Line ritual after the routine checks for spaceworthiness.

The junior officer present—young Taylor, the Third—demanded in a portentously solemn voice, "What is the Word?"

We all roared in reply, "Growl you may, but go you must!"

Sonya, as I have said, was amused. She whispered to her husband, "I'm beginning to find out why this company's ships are called the chariots of the dogs. . ." I knew what she meant. That Twentieth Century book,

Chariots of the Gods, is still regarded as a Bible by those people who believe in the Old Race who started all the present civilization extant in the Galaxy.

Aerospace Control gave us clearance to lift, wished us bon voyage. We climbed into what was an unusual phenomenon for Lorn, a clear sky. Soon the spaceport was no more than a huddle of model buildings far below us, with three toy ships on the apron. (Rim Kestrel and Rim Wallaby had come in before our departure; Rim Osprey was due to leave, for the worlds of the Eastern Circuit, later in the day.)

The little bitch was handling well. I took her up easily, not trying to break any records. I heard Sonya murmur, "George isn't like you, John. He doesn't show off using his auxiliary reaction drive when there's no need for it. . ." Grimes replied with a far from expressionless face.

Lorn, with its wide, dreary (even in the sunlight) plains, its jagged, snow-capped mountains, diminished below us, became a mottled globe, grey-brown land, green-blue water, white snow. Still we drove upward, through and clear to the Van Allens.

The inertial drive was shut down and the directional gyroscopes grumbled into life, swinging the ship about her axes, bringing her head around to point almost directly at the target star, the Kinsolving sun, a solitary spark in the empty blackness. On the ship's beam glowed the iridescent lens of the Galaxy, spectacular and, to those of us not used to seeing it from outside, frightening. I steadied her up on the target, making a small allowance for drift. I restarted the inertial drive and then started the Mannschenn Drive, the space-time-twister.

As on every such occasion I visualized those gleaming rotors spinning, precessing, fading as they tumbled down the warped dimensions fading yet never vanishing, dragging the ship and all aboard her into that uncanny state where normal physical laws held good only within the fragile hull. There was the long second of *deja vu* during which time seemed to run backward.

Inside the control room colours sagged down the spectrum and perspective was distorted, and all sounds were as though emanating from a distant echo chamber. Then all snapped back to normal, although the thin, high whine of the drive was a constant reminder that nothing was or would be normal until we were at our destination. And there was nothing normal outside the ports, of course. Ahead the Kinsolving sun was a writhing, multicoloured nebulosity, and on the beam the Lens was a pullulating Klein flask blown by a drunken glass blower. It looked as though it were alive. Perhaps it was alive. Perhaps only with the Mannschenn Drive in operation do we see it as it really is. . .

I dismissed the uneasy thought from my mind. I said to Bindle, "Deep Space routine, Mr. Mate."

"But who will keep the dog watches?" asked Taylor.

"You're all watchdogs," I replied.

"More of your ritual?" asked Sonya interestedly.

"Yes," I admitted, feeling absurdly embarrassed. "I suppose it does sound rather childish to an outsider. . ."

Grimes laughed. "I remember one ship I was in when I was in the Survey Service. The cruiser Orion. We called her O'Ryan, of course, and everybody had to speak an approximation to Irish dialect, and our song, just as Doggy In The Window is your song, was The Wearin' Of The Green. . ."

"Still rather childish," his wife said, but her smile took any sting out of the words.

Grimes said, "Well, Captain Rule, are you coming down to meet the customers?"

I said, "I suppose it's one of the things I'm paid for."

THE CUSTOMERS—the passengers—were in their own saloon. Ken and Clarisse Mayhew I had already met, of course, the others, until now, had been no more than names on the passenger list. There was a Dr. Thorne—I never did get it straight what exactly he was a doctor of—and his wife.

They were Jack Spratt and Mrs. Spratt in reverse, he a bearded, Falstaffian giant, she a grey, wispy sparrow. There were two, almost identical young men; mousey, studious, bespectacled. Their names were Paul Trentham and Bill Smith. The two young women could have been their sisters, but were not. One was Susan Howard, the other Mary Lestrangle. They were friendly enough—not that they overdid it.

Sara, ever efficient, had seen to it that the bar in the saloon was well stocked. Thorne took over as barman; the drinks soon dispelled the initial stiffness of this first meeting. I rather took to the leader of the expedition and he to me. I felt that I would be able, without giving offense, to ask him a question that had been bothering me slightly.

"Tell me, Doctor," I put to him, "why don't you have any mediums along? You have two psionicists, sure, but they are, essentially, communications specialists, and by communications I don't mean communications with the dear departed."

He laughed, a little ruefully. "One thing that our researches have taught us is this. There are many, many phoney mediums. Even the genuine ones sometimes, although not always intentionally so."

"What do you mean, exactly?"

"Look at it this way. A genuine medium is determined to deliver the goods. If the goods aren't forthcoming, because conditions aren't right, perhaps, then he or she would just hate to disappoint the customers. Quite possibly subconsciously—but now and again consciously—fake results are delivered. The main trouble, I suppose, is that the average medium doesn't have it drummed into him, all through a long training, that high standards of professional ethics must be maintained. A graduate of the Rhine Institute, however—such as Ken Mayhew—is bound by the Institute's code of ethics.

He is therefore far more reliable than any medium."

"But you do believe in spiritualism, don't you?"

"I believe that there are hauntings. I believe that Kinsolving's Planet is haunted. I—we—want to find out by whom. Or what."

"I seem to be spending my life finding out," grumbled Grimes. "But every time I get a different answer."

"Perhaps you're a catalyst, Commodore," suggested Mrs. Thorne.

"And perhaps Captain Rule is a dogalyst," said Sonya.

I tried to laugh along with the rest at the vile pun—jokes about the Dog Star Line are all right when we make them, but...

THE VOYAGE was a relatively short one. It was like all other voyages, except that at the latter end of it we should not be landing at a proper spaceport with all the usual radio-navigational aids. There would be no bored voice coming from the NST speaker, talking us down. There would be no triangle of beacons to mark our berth on the apron. Come to that, there would be no apron. The spaceport had become a sizeable crater when something had destroyed the Franciscan ship Piety a while ago.

Grimes had brought his charts with him. Together we studied them. He advised me to make my landing in the old Sports Stadium, on the shore of Darkling Tarn, not far from the city of Enderston, the ruins of which stood on the east bank of the Weary River. Those colonists had shown a morbid taste in place names. . . That applied to all the Rim Worlds, of course, but Kinsolving took the prize for deliberately miserable nomenclature.

The commodore acted as pilot when we finally made our approach; he had been on Kinsolving before, more than once, and he possessed the local knowledge. I handled the controls myself, of course, but he was in the chair normally occupied by Bindle, advising.

We were making an early morning descent—always a wise policy when landing on a world without proper spaceport facilities. The lower the sun's altitude, the more pronounced the shadows cast by every irregularity of the ground. Too, when an expedition arrives at sunrise it has all the daylight hours to get itself organised. Left to myself, I'd have arrived when I arrived and not bothered about such niceties. It was Grimes, with his years of Survey Experience behind him, who had urged me to adopt Survey Service s.o.p.

So we were coming down after a few hours of standing off in orbit. Already there was enough light for us to be able to make out details of the landscape beneath us. There was the Weary River—and with all the twists and turns it was making it was small wonder that it was tired! There was the Darkling Tarn—looking, Grimes said, like an octopus run over by a steamroller. Bindle loosed off the sounding rockets that, at Grimes' insistence, had been added to our normal equipment. Each of them, in its descent, left a long, unwavering smoke trail: there was no wind to incommode us.

Each of them released a parachute flare that drifted down slowly. As we ourselves dropped, the picture in the periscope screen expanded. We could see the city at last, a huddle of overgrown ruins. We could see the Stadium, an oval of green that was just a little lighter in tone than the near-indigo of the older growth around it. One of the flares had fallen just to one side of the sports ground and started a minor brush fire; the smoke from it was rising almost directly upwards.

At least it would be easier landing here than at the proper spaceport on Lorn. . .Grimes guessed my thoughts. "The ground's level enough, Captain Rule," he told me. "Or it was, last time I was here."

"Any large animals?" I asked. "Just the descendants of the stock brought by the original colonists. Wild pigs and cattle. Rabbits. They'll all have sense enough to bolt for cover when they hear us coming down."

In the periscope screen the ground looked level enough. I maintained a slow but steady rate of descent, slowed it to the merest downward drift when there were only metres to go. At last the contact lights flashed on. I cut the inertial drive. The silence, broken at first by the sighing of the shock absorbers and the usual minor creakings and groanings, was oppressive. I looked at the commodore. He nodded, and said, "Yes, you can make it Finished With Engines." Before I did so I glanced at the clinometer. The ship was a little off the vertical, but only half a degree. It was nothing to worry about.

"So we're here," whispered Sonya. "Again." I didn't like the way she said it.

"Shore leave?" asked Bindle brightly. "Of course, we shall want an advance from the Purser first, sir."

"Ha, ha," I said. "Very funny." I looked out through the view-ports. This didn't look like a world on which there would be any need for money. It didn't look like a world on which to take a pleasant walk.

Oh, the day was bright enough, and such scenery as was in view was pretty enough, in a jungly sort of way, but. . . It was as though a shadow was over everything, dimming colours and bringing a chill to the air that bit through to the very bones. The sunlight streaming through the viewports was bright, dazzlingly so, to the outer eye—but as far as the inner eye was concerned it could have been the rays of a lopsided moon intermittently breaking through driving storm clouds. I'm not a seventh son of a seventh son or any of that rubbish, and if I applied for admission to the Rhine Institute for training they'd turn me down without bothering with the routine tests, but I do have my psychic moments.

A premonition of impending doom, I thought. I liked the feel of it. I thought it again.

"If you don't mind, Captain Rule," said Grimes, "I'll assume command until such time as we lift off again. The ship is still your charge, of course, but all extravehicular activities are my pigeon."

"As you please, sir," I said a little stiffly. He was doing no more than to confirm, in front of witnesses, what had already been decided—but it was

essential that my officers have no doubt as to who was boss cocky of the expedition. "Your orders, sir?"

"Please pass the word for everybody, ship's officers and civilian personnel, to assemble in the ward-room for briefing. I shall just be repeating what I have told you all time and time again during the voyage—but this is a world on which you can't be too careful. This is a planet on which anything might happen, and probably will."

I reached for the microphone and gave the necessary orders.

THE WARDROOM was crowded with everybody packed into it, but there was seating for everybody. Grimes, nonetheless, remained standing. He said quietly, "Of all of us here, only Commander Mayhew, Mrs. Mayhew, Commander Verrill and myself have set foot on Kinsolving before. . ."

Commander Verrill? I wondered, then realised that he meant Sonya. "As we have told you," he went on, "this is a dangerous world, a very dangerous world. You have heard the story of what happened to the Neo-Calvanist expedition when an attempt was made to invoke the Jehovah of the Old Testament. I was among those present at the time, as was Mrs. Mayhew, and the crater where the spaceport used to be bears witness to the destruction of their ship, Piety. You have heard what happened when our own expedition, a little later, tried to repeat that foolhardy experiment. That time there was only one victim—me. And then there was the landing made by the Federation Survey Service's ship, Star Pioneer, aboard which Commander Verrill and myself were passengers. That time the pair of us got into trouble. . ."

"Of course," Sonya said sweetly, "I wasn't worrying myself sick about you the other times. . ."

"Mphm. Anyhow, this a smaller expedition, than the previous ones and I therefore insist that when excursions are made from the ship there is to be no splitting up; nobody is to go wandering off by himself on some wild goose—or wild ghost—chase. Personal transceivers will be carried at all times. Ship's personnel, acting as escorts to the scientists, will be armed. Captain Rule and all of his officers hold commissions in the Sirian Sector Naval Reserve and are trained in the use of weaponry. . ."

Ha! I thought. Ha bloody ha! I remembered, all too well, our practice session at the Navy's small arms range shortly before our lift off from Dogtown. "Miss," the exasperated Petty Officer Instructor had said at last to Betty Boops, "if you really want to hurt anybody with that pistol creep up close and hit him over the head with it. . ." And most of the rest of us including myself, weren't much better. Only Sara, the Purser, made a fair showing.

"Compared to the rest of you," the P.O. had said, "she's Annie Oakley." He went on, turning to Betty, "And you, Miss, are Calamity Jane." Sara had been quite pleased...

Grimes continued, "You civilian ladies and gentlemen are not to set Foot off the ship without your ... watchdogs. Is that understood, Dr. Thorne?"

"Understood, Commodore," replied the scientist laconically.

"Good. I don't know about the rest of you, but my belly is firmly convinced that my throat's been cut. I propose that we all enjoy breakfast before getting the show on the road."

THERE WERE, as a matter of fact, two shows to be gotten on the road. One was the small party leaving the ship on foot to poke around the stadium and its environs, the other one flew to the city in the pinnace that we had on loan from the Rim Worlds Navy and that we carried in lieu of one of our own boats, which had been left in Port Forlorn. Like any ship's boat it was not only a spaceship in miniature but could be used as an atmosphere flier. Unlike a merchant-ship's boat, it was armed, mounting a heavy machine gun, a small laser cannon and a rocket projector.

Grimes and Sonya were in the boat party, as were Ken Mayhew, Dr. Thome, Rose, his wispy wife, Sara Taine and myself. Sara was pleased at having real guns to play with—somehow she had appointed herself Gunnery Officer of the pinnace—and was hoping that she would have a chance to use them. I was hoping that she wouldn't.

We boarded the boat in its bay. The commodore took the controls, the rest of us disposed ourselves around the small cabin. The inertial drive unit grumbled into life and we lifted from the chocks and then, with the application of full lateral thrust, shot out through the open port into the bright sunlight. Grimes took us round the ship in an ascending spiral. Bindle, who was minding the shop, waved to us from the control room. We were close enough to see his envious expression.

Grimes levelled out, headed for the city. It was not easy to see from this relatively low altitude; when we had been looking down on it the street plan had been obvious enough, but from a height of a mere one hundred metres it looked only like an unusually lumpy piece of jungle in the distance. Oh, there were a few ruined towers, prominent enough, but they were so overgrown that they could have been no more than freak geological formations.

I tried to enjoy the flight. I should have enjoyed it; the bright sunlight was streaming through the ports, the scenery over which we were skimming was unspoiled, I had enjoyed a good breakfast and my after-breakfast cigar was drawing well. And yet. . . For no reason at all—apart from a quite illogical feeling of unease—I kept looking aft. I noticed that the others—apart from Grimes—did so too. (But

Grimes had his rear view screen above the console.) A fragment of half remembered verse kept chasing itself through my mind. How did it go?

Like one that on a lonesome road

Doth walk in fear and dread,

And having cast a glance behind

Durst no more turn his head,

Because he knows a fearsome fiend

Doth close behind him tread...

Something like that, anyhow. And, in any case, there wasn't any fearsome fiend in our wake. I hoped.

Grimes tapped out his pipe and refilled and relit it for about the fifth time. Sara Taine checked, yet again, the pinnacle's fire control panel. (But could you shoot at ghosts? I wondered. Had anybody had the forethought to substitute silver bullets for the normal machine gun ammo?) Dr. Thorne cleared his throat and, speaking loudly to be heard over the irritable snarl of the inertial drive, asked Mayhew, "Do you feel anything, Ken?"

"I suspect," replied the telepath, speaking slowly and carefully, "that something out there doesn't like us. . ."

"A normal state of affairs on this world," grumbled Grimes.

"Are there likely to be any manifestations, Commodore?" said Thorne.

"Anything, no matter how unlikely, is likely here," was the reply.

Cheerful shower of bastards! I thought.

Rose Thorne—people do tend to be given unfortunate names, although the lady's parents couldn't have been expected to know that she'd marry whom she did—had opened the case that she had carried aboard with her and was tinkering with fragile looking instruments. She was finding out, I supposed, if there were any variations in temperature, gravitational or magnetic fields or whatever. Presumably she discovered no anomalies. In any case, she said nothing. And Ken Mayhew had a very faraway look on his face, was staring into nothingness, a nothingness in which ... something stirred. That was the impression I got. Cold shivers were chasing themselves up and down my spine.

"Cheer up, George," Sonya admonished me. "The first time here is the worst."

"Not for me it wasn't," grunted the commodore. "Although every time was bad."

"My first time was bad," stated Sonya.

We were over the outskirts of the city now, following a broad street through the cracked surface of which trees and bushes had thrust. On either side of us were the buildings, creeper-covered houses with empty windows peering like dead eyes through the tangled greenery. I found myself thinking of ancient graveyards—cemetaries in which the victims of massacre had been buried and commemorated, and then, after many years, forgotten. Something, disturbed by our noisy flight, scuttled below and ahead of us, finally diving into a doorway.

"Hold your fire, Sara," said Sonya sharply. "It's only a hen." "Nothing wrong with roast chicken," I said. "The fowl in the tissue culture vats has long since lost whatever flavour it had. . ."

"There wouldn't have been much left for roasting if I'd let fly with the MG," Sara told me.

It was a feeble enough joke, but we all laughed nervously.

We came to a sort of square or plaza. There was a group of statuary—once a fountain?—in the middle of it, but so overgrown that it was impossible to see if the figures had been men or monsters. They looked like monsters now. Around the plaza were ruined towers, their outlines blurred by what looked like—was, in fact—Terran ivy. Those colonists had brought a fair selection of Earth flora and Fauna with them, some of which had survived and flourished.

Grimes set the pinnace down carefully, very carefully, selecting an area that did not have any sturdy bushes and saplings thrusting up through the paving. We landed with hardly a jar. Reluctantly, it seemed, he turned off the drive. We could hear ourselves think again. This was not the relief that it should have been. The silence, after the arhythmic snarl and thump of the motor, seemed about to be broken by . . . something. By what?

"Well," said the commodore unnecessarily, "we're here."

"You know the city," said Thorne. "Wasn't there— isn't there—some sort of temple. . ."

"I don't want to go there again," said Sonya determinedly.

Grimes shrugged. "It's as good a place to start our. . . investigations as any. After all, we are here to investigate ..." he remarked. He turned to Mayhew. "You're the psionist, Ken. What do you think?"

The telepath seemed to jerk out of some private dream, and not a pleasant one. "The temple. . ." he murmured vaguely. "Yes. . . I remember. You told me about it. . ."

"Where is this temple?" asked Thorne.

"We shall have to walk," Grimes told him. "It's not on the plaza. It's in a little alley. . . I'm not sure that I'll be able to find it again. . ."

"I can lead you there," said Mayhew.

"You would!" muttered Sonya. So the telepath was picking something up, I thought. He would home on it, as a navigator homes on a radio beacon. I was beginning to feel as the commodore's wife was obviously feeling about it. Deciding to throw in my two bits' worth I asked, "Shall we leave somebody to guard the pinnace?" Sara scowled at me. She was the obvious choice. She would be no more keen on going outside than any of us, but she most certainly did not want to be left alone.

"It will not be necessary, George," said Grimes. "We will, of course, notify the ship of our intentions. And Ken will maintain his telepathic hook-up with Clarisse. And, before leaving, each of us will leave his hand impression so that the outer airlock door can be locked after us. . ."

This we did. The door would now open if any of us placed either hand—or

only fingertips—on the plate set in the hull beside the entrance. One by one we jumped down to the mossy paving stones. There was an unpleasant dankness in the air in spite of the sunlight, a penetrating chill. Yet, according to the thermometer that Mrs. Thorne produced from her capacious shoulder bag, it was mild enough, a fraction over twenty six degrees, too warm for the heavy, long-sleeved shirts, long trousers and stout boots that we were wearing.

Mayhew took the lead, with Grimes, projectile pistol in hand, walking beside him. Sonya and I, immediately behind, followed his example, although she favoured a laser hand gun. The Thornes followed us. Sara, carrying a submachine gun, brought up the rear. The telepath led us over the broken pavement, deviating from his course as required to avoid clumps of bushes and the occasional tree, but heading all the time to where a wide street opened off the plaza. It looked more like some fantastically fertile canyon than a manmade thoroughfare. The leaves of the omnipresent ivy glistened in the sunlight, glossy greens and a particularly poisonous looking yellow. There were other creepers too, native perhaps, or importations from other worlds than Earth, but they were fighting a losing battle against the hardy, destructive vine.

We walked slowly and cautiously into the wide street. It must have been an imposing avenue before the abandonment of the city, before burgeoning weeds blurred its perspective and obscured the clean lines of the buildings on either side of it. I tried to visualise it as it had been in its heyday—and succeeded all too well. Everything. . . flickered, flickered then shone with an unnatural clarity. I cried out in alarm as I stared at the onrushing stream of traffic into which we were so carelessly walking. A gaudy chrome and scarlet ground car was almost upon us, the fat woman driving it making no move either to swerve or to brake her vehicle. I grabbed Sonya's arm to drag her to one side, to safety. She cried out—and her sharp voice shattered the spell. Again there was the brief flickering and when normal vision returned I could see that nothing was moving in the street save ourselves. There was no traffic, no homicidal ground car. But there was a low mound ahead of us looking like a crouching, green furred beast. Freakishly, the lenses of its headlights had not been grown over and were regarding us like a pair of baleful eyes. And had I seen the ghost of the machine, I wondered, or of its driver?

Sonya was rubbing her arm and glaring at me. The others had stopped and were staring at me curiously.

"Did you see something, George?" asked Thorne.

I said slowly, "I saw this street as it must once have been, at its busiest. We were right in the middle of the traffic, about to be run down." I pointed at the derelict, almost unrecognisable car. "We were almost run down by . . . that. Or its ghost."

"The ghost of a machine?" demanded Thorne incredulously.

His wife, looking at an instrument she had taken from her bag, said, "The graph shows a sudden dip in temperature. . ."

"But a machine?" repeated the scientist.

"Why not?" countered Grimes. "Life force rubs off human beings on to the machinery with which they're in the most intimate contact. Ships, especially. . . And a car is, in some ways, almost a miniature ship. . ." He turned to Mayhew. "Ken?"

The telepath replied, in a distant voice, "I . . . I feel . . . resentment . . . In its dim, mechanical way that thing loved its mistress. It was abandoned, left here to rot. . ."

"Did you see anything?" persisted Thorne.

"I saw the same as George did," admitted Mayhew. "But I knew it wasn't. . . real."

We resumed our trudge along the overgrown street. Everybody, I noticed with a certain wry satisfaction, gave the abandoned car a wide berth. We walked on, and on, trying to ignore the brambly growths that clutched at our trouser legs as though with malign intent.

"Here," announced Mayhew.

We could just make out the entrance to a side alley, completely blocked with a tall, bamboo-like growth with tangled strands of ivy filling the narrow spaces between the upright stems.

"Shall I?" asked Sonya.

"Yes," said Grimes, after a second's thought.

While Sara watched enviously the commodore's wife used her laser pistol like a machete, slashing with the almost invisible beam. There were crackling flames and billows of dense white smoke. Coughing and spluttering, with eyes watering, we backed away. I couldn't help thinking that a fire extinguisher would have been more useful than most of the other equipment we had brought along.

But only the bamboo burned; the surrounding ivy was too green to catch fire once the laser was no longer in use. At last the smoke cleared to a barely tolerable level and we were able to make our way forward. The embers were hot underfoot, nonetheless, but our boots were stout and the fabric of our trousers fireproof.

We found the church.

It was only a small building, standing apart from its taller neighbours. It was a featureless cube. Well, almost a cube. I got the impression that the angles were subtly, very subtly, wrong. Unlike the buildings to either side of it it was not overgrown. Its dull grey walls seemed to be of some synthetic stone. The plain rectangular door was also grey, possibly of uncorroded metal. There were no windows. Over the entrance, in black lettering, were the words, TEMPLE OF THE PRINCIPLE.

Grimes stared at the squat, ugly building. I could see from his face that he was far from happy. He muttered, "This is where we came in."

"This," Sonya corrected him, "is where we nearly went out. . ."

They had told me the story during the outward passage. I knew how they had investigated this odd temple, and found themselves thrown into an alternate existence, another plane of being on which their lives had taken altogether different courses. It had not been a dream, they insisted. They had actually lived those lives.

"Something. . ." Mayhew was muttering. "Something. . . But what? But what?"

"And what was the principle that they . . . er . . . worshipped?" asked Thorne, matter-of-factly.

"The Uncertainty Principle. . ." said Grimes, but dubiously. "You know, the funny part is that in none of the records of the abandoned colony is there any mention of this temple, or of the religion with which it was associated."

"The worshippers must have ... left," Sonya said, "before the other colonists were evacuated."

"But where did they go?" asked Thorne.

"Or when," said Mayhew. "To when, I mean."

Grimes filled and lit his pipe, then almost immediately knocked it out again, put it back in his pocket. He pushed the door. I was expecting it to resist his applied pressure but it opened easily, far too easily. He led the way inside the temple. The others followed. I was last, as I waited until I had raised Bindle on my personal transceiver to tell him where we were and what we doing. He—always the humorist—said, "Drop something in the plate for me, Captain!"

I was expecting darkness in the huge, windowless room, but there was light—of a sort. The grey, subtly shifting twilight was worse than blackness would have been. It accentuated the. . . the wrongness of the angles where wall met wall, ceiling and floor. I was reminded of that eery sensation one feels in the interstellar drive room of a ship when the Mannschenn Drive is running, the dim perception of planes at right angles to all the planes of the normal Space-Time continuum. Faintly self-luminous, not quite in the middle of that uncannily lopsided hall, was what had to be the altar, a sort of ominous coffin shape. But as I stared at it its planes and angles shifted. It was, I decided, more of a cube. Or more than a cube. . . A tesseract?

Rose Thorne was pulling instruments out of her capacious bag. She set one of them up on spidery, telescopic legs. She peered at the dial on top of it. "Fluctuations," she murmured, "slight, but definite. . ." She said in a louder voice, "There's something odd about the gravitational field of this place. . ."

"Gravity waves?" asked her husband.

She laughed briefly. "Ripples rather than waves. Undetectable by any normal gravitometer."

Thorne turned to Grimes. "Did you notice any phenomena like this when you were here before, John?" "We didn't have any instruments with us," the commodore told him shortly.

"And what do you feel Ken?" the scientist asked Mayhew.

But the telepath did not reply.

Looking at him, the way that he was standing there, his gaze somehow turned inward, I was reminded of the uneasy sensation you get when a dog sees something—or seems to see something—that is invisible to you. "Old. . ." he whispered. "Old. . . From the time before this, and from the time before that, and the time before and the time before. . . The planet alive, alive and aware, a sentient world. . . Surviving every death and rebirth of the universe. . . Surviving beyond the continuum. . ."

It didn't make sense, I thought. It didn't make sense.

Or did it?

His lips moved again, but his voice was barely audible. "Communion. . . Yes. Communion. . ." He took a step, and then another, and another, like a sleepwalker. He paced slowly and deliberately up to—into—the dimly glowing tesseract. He seemed to flicker. The outline of his body wavered, wavered and faded. Then, quite suddenly, he was gone.

The metallic click as Sara cocked her sub-machine gun was startlingly loud. I still don't know what she thought that she was going to shoot at. I did know that in this situation all our weapons were utterly useless.

"We have to get Clarisse here," said Grimes at last. "She's the only one of us who'll be able to do anything." He added, in a whisper, "If anything can be done, that is. . ."

WE HAD TO GO outside the temple before we could use our personal transceivers. Clarisse was already calling; she knew, of course. She was already in Basset's second boat, which was being piloted by young Taylor. Grimes told him to try to land in the street just by the mouth of the alley. There were more obstructions there than where we had set down, in the square, but speed was the prime consideration. I walked, accompanied by Sara, to the proposed landing site, my transceiver set for continuous beacon-transmission so that Taylor could home on it.

We heard the boat—the inertial drive is not famous for quiet running—before we saw it. Taylor came in low over the rooftops, wasting no time. He slammed the lifecraft down to the road surface, crushing a couple of well-developed bushes and knocking a stout sapling sideways. I shuddered. I didn't like to see ship's equipment—especially my ship's equipment—handled that way. The door midway along the torpedo-shaped hull snapped open. Clarisse jumped out.

She brushed past us, unspeaking, ran into the alley, clouds of fine ash exploding about her ankles. Sara and I followed her. Clarisse hesitated briefly at the temple doorway, exchanging a few words with Grimes and Sonya, then hurried inside. When the rest of us joined her we found her

standing by the altar, motionless, her face set and expressionless. In the dim light she looked like a priestess of some ancient religion.

Then she spoke, but not to any of us.

"Ken," she whispered, obviously vocalising her thoughts. "Ken. . ." She smiled suddenly. She was getting through. "Yes ... Here I am. . ."

"Where is he?" demanded Grimes urgently.

She ignored the question. Suddenly, walking as Mayhew had walked, she stepped into that luminous shape, that distorted geometrical, multi-dimensional diagram. We saw the outline of her body through her clothing, her shadowy bone structure through her translucent flesh, and ...

Nothing.

Thorne broke the stunned silence. "Did you observe the meter while all this was happening?" he asked his wife.

You cold blooded bastard! I thought angrily, then realised that the scientists' instruments might provide some clue as to what had happened.

"No," she admitted, then stooped over the gravitometer, pressed a button. "But here's the print-out."

We could all see the graph as she showed it to him. There were the slight, very slight irregularities that she had referred to as gravitational ripples. And there were two sharp and very definite dips. The first one must have registered when Mayhew disappeared, the second when Clarisse vanished.

So It, whatever It was, played around with gravity. A sentient planet, I reflected, ought to be able to do just that ...

"Rose," said Grimes, "watch your gravitometer, will you?"

She shot him a puzzled look, but obeyed. The commodore brought something small out of his pocket. It was, I saw, a box of matches. He tossed it towards the tesseract. Nobody was surprised when it, too, vanished.

"The field intensified," reported the woman. "Briefly, slightly, but very definitely."

"So. . ." murmured Grimes. "So what?" He turned to face us all. "We must get Ken and Clarisse out. But how?"

Nobody answered him.

Having waited in vain for a reply he continued. "Twice, while on this blasted planet, I've been shunted . . . elsewhere. Each time I got hack. I still don't know how. Rut if I could, they can." He gestured towards the altar. "That thing's a gateway. A gateway to where—or when?" He addressed me directly. "You've an engineroom gantry aboard your ship, George. And there are drilling and cutting tools in the engineers' workshop."

"Yes," I told him.

"I'd like them here. Mphm. But there'll be only a few metres of wire on your gantry winches. We could want more, much more. . ."

I remembered, then, something which had been a source of puzzlement to me for a long time. "In the storeroom," I told him, "are two funny little hand winches, with reels of very fine wire. There's a lot of wire. Nobody knows what those winches are for. But. . ."

"But they might come in handy now," said Grimes, suddenly and inexplicably cheerful. "I think I know what those winches are—although what they're doing aboard a merchant spaceship is a mystery. In the Survey Service, of course, we had things like them, for oceanographical work. . ."

"Your're losing me, sir," I said.

"I could be wrong, of course," he went on, "but I've a hunch that these will be just the things we need. I'd like one of them out here at once. The other one, I think, could be modified slightly. Your engineers can study the simple workings of it, and then fit it with a motor from your gantry. . ."

I suppose that he knew what he was talking about. Nobody else did.

We went outside the temple to use our transceivers to get in touch with Bindle, back aboard the ship. Grimes put him in the picture and then gave him detailed instructions. As well as the first of the odd little hand winches and the cutting tools he wanted a sound-powered telephone, with as much wire as could be found.

Then the commodore and myself went to the mouth of the alley to await the return of Taylor with the first installment of equipment. The boat came in at last and we boarded it at once and were promptly carried to the flat roof of the building. Under my watchful eye the Third Officer made a very cautious landing—but that rooftop, by the feel of it, could have supported the enormous weight of an Alpha Class liner. We unloaded the tools and the reel of wire, then Taylor lifted off and returned to the ship.

Grimes looked at the wire reel and laughed. He said, "And you really don't know what this is, George?"

"No," I told him.

"Was your ship ever on Atlantia?" "A few times, I think, but never when I was in her."

"And one of those times—probably the last time—she overcarried cargo," went on Grimes. "And the good, Dog Star Line Mate buried those left-over bones in the back garden, thinking that they might come in handy for something, some time. This is a sounding machine, such as the Atlanteans use in their big schooners, and such as we, in the Survey Service, use for charting the seas of a newly discovered world. But our machines have motors."

"I thought that all sounding was done electronically," I said.

"Most of it is," the commodore told me, "but an echometer can't bring up a sample of the bottom... Yes, this is a sounding machine, Armstrong Patent."

"Is that the make of it?", Grimes laughed again, obviously, amused by my ignorance. I rather resented this. It was all very well for him; he was one of the experts, if not the expert, on Terran maritime history. And not only that, he holds a Master Mariner's Certificate in addition to his qualifications as a Master Astronaut—he had actually sailed in command of a surface vessel on that watery world Aquarius.

"Armstrong Patent," he said, "is the nickname given by seamen to any piece of machinery powered by human muscle. And they're a weird mob, the Atlanteans, as you may know. They have a horror of automation even in its simplest forms. They pride themselves on having put the clock back to the good old days of wooden ships and iron men. But they do import some manufactured goods—such as this." He looked at the dial set horizontally on top of the winch. "And then two hundred fathoms of piano wire here. That's about three hundred and sixty five metres." He pulled a cylinder of heavy metal from its clip on the winch frame. "And here's the sinker. About ten kilograms of lead, by the feel of it."

"Oh, I see," I admitted. (Well, I did, after a fashion.)

"Mphm." Grimes was studying the legs on which the machine stood, the feet of which were designed so that they could be bolted to a deck. "Mphm. . ." He straightened up, then walked to the edge of the flat roof. I followed him. There was no parapet. I stayed well back; I don't suffer from acrophobia—I'd hardly be a spaceman if I did—but I always like to have something to hold on to. And it looked a long way down. The temple hadn't looked all that high from the ground, but in its vicinity perspective seemed to be following a new set of rules.

Grimes was shouting down to his wife after a futile attempt to use his personal transceiver. Apparently the inhibitory field was as effective on the roof as inside the building. Sonya, we want some timber. Yes, timber! Two good, strong logs, straight, each at least two metres long and fifteen centimetres thick. . . Yes, Use your laser to cut them!"

When she had gone, accompanied by the others, he determined the centre of the flat roof by pacing out the diagonals. Where these intersected he put down his precious pipe as a marker. I brought him the laser cutter—one with a self contained power pack. He held it like the oversized pistol that it resembled, directing the thin pencil of incandescence almost directly downward.

At first it seemed the surface of the roof was going to be impossible to cut; the beam flattened weirdly at the point of impact, spreading to a tiny puddle of intense light, dazzlingly bright even though it was in the full rays of the sun. And then, quite suddenly, without any pyrotechnics, without so much as a wisp of smoke, there was penetration.

After that it was easy. Grimes described a circle of about one metre diameter but left a thirty degree arc uncut. He switched off and put down

the cutter, then retrieved his pipe. When it was safely back in his pocket he extended a cautious fingertip to the cut in the roof. He looked puzzled. "Cold, stone cold," he whispered. "It shouldn't be. But it saves time."

I fetched the pinch bar and we got one end of it under the partially excised circle, then levered upwards. It came fairly easily, and did not spring back when the pressure was released. I took a firm hold on the smooth edge and held it while Grimes completed the cut.

When the disc was free it was amazingly light, even though it was all of four centimeters thick. I put it to one side and we looked down.

The altar—I may as well go on calling it that, although I was sure by now that it had no religious significance—was almost directly below us. Its alien geometry glimmered wanly. I'd been expecting, somehow, to find myself looking down into a hole, a very deep hole, but such was not the case. It was just as we had seen it from ground level, a distorted construct of slowly shifting planes of dim radiance. But we knew that if we fell into it we should keep on going.

Somebody was calling. It was Sonya, back from her wood-cutting expedition. We went to the edge of the roof. She and Sara were carrying one suitable looking log between them, the Thornes another. She shouted, "How do we get these up to you?"

Grimes did something to the winch handles of the sounding machine so that the wire ran off easily. He pulled as much as he needed off the reel, lowered the end of it over the edge of the roof to the ground. Sonya threw it around the first of the logs in a simple yet secure hitch. We pulled it up. It wasn't all that heavy, but the thin wire bit painfully into the palms of our hands. Then we brought up the second one.

We used the laser cutter to trim the logs to square section, adjusting the beam setting carefully before starting work. We didn't want to cut the roof from under our feet. Then we arranged the two baulks of timber so that they bridged the circular hole. We lifted the sounding machine and set so that it rested securely on the rough platform. Grimes shackled the heavy sinker to the end of the wire, left it dangling. "Mphm. . ." he grunted dubiously. He had found, clipped inside the frame of the winch, a small L shaped rod of metal on a wooden handle. He asked, "Do you know how this works?"

I didn't. I'm a spaceman, not seaman.

"This," he told me, "is the feeler. Normally there's a good lea from the sounding machine so th! the wire runs horizontally from the reel to a block on the taffrail or to the end of the sounding boom. Whoever's working it holds the feeler in one hand, pressing down on the wire—and he knows when the sinker has hit bottom by the sudden slackening of tension. The he brakes. Obviously we can't do that here. So you, George, will have to exercise a lateral pull with the feeler. Yell out as soon as you feel the wire go slack."

We took our positions, myself crouching and holding the feeler ready, he grasping both winch handles. He gave them a sharp half turn forward and

the sinker dropped, and the wire sang off the drum. It was plain that we hadn't found bottom on the floor of the temple. Out ran the gleaming wire, out, out. .

I heard Grimes mutter, "Fifty. One hundred. . . One fifty. . And what would happen when we came to the end of the wire?"

It went slack suddenly. "Now!" I shouted as I went over backward! Somehow I was still watching Grimes and saw him sharply turn the handles in reverse, braking the winch. When I scrambled to my feet he was looking at the dial "One hundred and seventy three fathoms," he said slowly. "One hundred and seventy three fathoms straight down. . ." He grinned ruefully. "That was the easy part. Gravity was doing all the work. The hard part comes now!"

I didn't know what he meant until we had to wind up all that length of wire by hand. We waited a little while, hoping that Mayhew and Clarisse would be able to attach a message of some kind to the sinker, and then we took a handle each and turned and turned and turned. The pointer moved anti-clockwise on the dial with agonizing slowness. We had both of us worked up a fine sweat and acquired blisters on the palms of our hands when, at long last, the plummet lifted slowly through the hole in the roof. There was more than just the sinker attached to the wire. There was a square of scarlet synthesilk that, I remembered, Clarisse had worn as a neckerchief at the throat of her khaki shirt. And knotted into it was the box of matches that Grimes had dropped into the altar.

There was something wrong with it. It took me a little time to realize what it was—and then I saw that in order to read the brand name—PROMETHEUS—one would require a mirror.

THE THORNES had a pad and a stylus among their equipment. We used the sounding machine wire to bring these up to the roof, then attached them to the sinker and sent them down to wherever Mayhew and Clarisse were trapped. This time Grimes applied the brake when he had one hundred and sixty fathoms of wire down and walked out the rest by hand. Then we waited, Grimes smoking a pipe—his matches still worked in spite of the odd reversal—and myself a cigar. This would give the psionics time to write their message and, in any case, we felt that we had earned a smoko.

We thought of asking Sonya to use the boat that we had left in the plaza to bring others of the party up to the roof to lend us a hand, then decided that, for the time being, it was better to have them standing by on the ground. To begin with, there was the problem of radio communication with the ship to be considered.

Our rest period over, we sweated again on what the commodore had so aptly called the Armstrong Patent machine. At last the sinker rose into view. Attached to it was a sheet torn from the pad. Grimes detached it carefully but eagerly, then grunted. Mayhew's handwriting, at the best of times, was barely legible, and a mirror image of his vile caligraphy was impossible. And nobody had a mirror. I suggested that Grimes hold the sheet of plastic up against the sunlight. He did so, then muttered irritably, "Damn the man! If he can't write, he should print!"

Squinting against the glare I looked over Grimes' shoulder. At least, I thought, we should be thankful for small mercies; Mayhew had written on only one side of the sheet. I could just make out: Safe, so far, but no communication. It—the "it" was heavily underlined—will receive but not transmit. I can't get inside its mind. It wants to know about us but does not want us to know about it. It's draining us. Can you get us out?

(It took us far longer to read the message than it has taken you.)

"This piano-wire is strong," Grimes told me. "The weight of a human being is well below its safe working load, let alone its breaking strain. But I don't fancy winching Ken or Clarisse—Clarisse especially—up by hand."

I was inclined to agree.

Grimes wrote a short note to Mayhew, using the reverse side of the sheet on which the telepath's message had been penned. He printed in large block capitals, HELP BEING ORGANIZED. GRIMES. We sent it down attached to the sinker.

And then Taylor appeared with additional equipment, bringing the boat down to a landing almost at the edge of the roof. Also with him were Thorne's assistants—Trentham, Smith, Susan Howard and Mary Lestrangle. The mousey quartet showed signs of pleasurable excitement. A few turns on the hand winch, I thought sourly, would wipe the silly grins off their faces. Betty was with them. She had brought a sound-powered telephone set, a large reel of light cable and a tape recorder. And there was the second sounding machine, to which a motor from the engineroom gantry had been attached. Porky Terrigal, the Reaction Drive Engineer, had come along with it to make sure that nobody misused his precious machinery. There were also thermo-containers of hot and cold drinks and boxes of sandwiches, a couple of coils of strong plastic line that Bindle had sent along thinking that they might come in useful (they did) and a spidery looking folding ladder that would give us access from the roof to the ground, and vice versa.

The boat had to stay in position, as the power to the sounding machine winch would be fed from its fusion unit. Luckily the rooftop was wide enough to accommodate all the extra people and gear without crowding. Sonya and Sara came up to join the party, leaving the Thornes standing watch below.

Grimes turned the four young scientists to on the hand winch. By the time they got the sinker up to roof level they had lost their initial enthusiasm. The message was easier to read this time. To begin with, Mayhew had taken the hint and printed the words and, secondly, Susan Lestrangle produced a small mirror from her shoulder bag. It said: WOULD LIKE A LITTLE MORE TIME. CAN YOU SEND TELEPHONE? KEN.

We sent the telephone, and with it some food and drink. Betty hooked an amplifier up to the instrument at our end of the line. We waited anxiously, far from sure that things would work. What if what had been happening to the written word also happened to the spoken word? Then, after what seemed an eternity of delay, we heard Mayhew's voice. "Thanks for the

tucker, John! It's very welcome. All the others seem to have died of thirst and starvation. . ."

"What others?" asked Grimes.

"Clarisse here," came the reply. "Ken can't talk with his mouth full. We're safe, so far. But I'll try to put you in the picture. It feels like a huge control room, like a ship's, but much, much bigger. Only there are no controls as we know them, no banks of familiar instruments ... This is a great, cavernous space with lights shifting and pulsing.. . We know that it all means something, that it isn't mere, random activity, but what? But what? Maintaining stasis over uncountable millenia. . . Staying put in Time and Space while the Universe around it dies and is reborn. . ." A note of hysteria crept into her voice. "It. . . It has sucked us dry, of all we know, even of knowledge that we did not dream that we owned.

And now It isn't interested in us any more. We can take our places with the . . . others. . ."

"What others?" demanded Grimes.

Mayhew came back on the line. "There are bodies here. Not de cayed but. . . dessicated. Sort of mummified. Some human. Some. . . not. There's. . . something not far from us with an exo-skeleton. Something not from this Universe. And there are two things like centaurs. . . The arthropod thing is holding a machine of some kind ... It could be a complicated weapon. . . And there's all the time the slow, regular pulse of the coloured lights washing over everything, and there's something that's like a gigantic pendulum, but not of metal, but of radiance. . . I can feel it rather than see it. . ." He paused. "It's like being a tiny insect in the works of some vast clock, only the wheels and the gears and the pendulum aren't material. . ."

Clarissed cried, interrupting, "But can you imagine a clock ticking backwards?"

Thorne had climbed up the rooftop. He said, "I heard all that. We must try to bring up some. . . specimens."

"All that I'm concerned with," Grimes told him, "is bringing our friends up."

"It would be criminal," said the scientist, "to miss this opportunity."

"It will be criminal," said Grimes, "to risk two lives any further. How do we know that the. . . gateway will stay open? No; we get Clarisse and Ken out of there now."

The wire of the hand-powered sounding machine had been reeled in by this time and, under Grimes' supervision, the one with the electric motor was set up in its place. To the sinker the commodore attached one of the coils of light plastic rope. He said into the telephone, "You remember that book of mine you borrowed on bends and hitches and knots and splices, Ken? You should be able to throw a secure bowline on the bight with the line I'm sending down to you. . . Yes, you sit in it. . ."

"But can't he send up something, anything, first?" pleaded Thorne.

"No, Doctor." Grimes was adamant.

"I overheard some of that," came Mayhew's voice. "I think we should. That lobster thing, and the contraption it's holding in its claws. . . I could carry it up with me. . ."

"Mayhew is speaking sense," commented the scientist.

There was a long wait. Then, "It's heavy," came the voice from the speaker. "Damned heavy. We can't shift it."

"Then leave it," Grimes ordered. "The sinker and the plastic line are on their way down to you now. I'm using the electrically powered machine, so I'll have you and Clarisse up in no time."

"You have two machines?" asked Mayhew.

"Yes. Why?"

"I'll send Clarisse up first. Send the wire down again, and I'll have made a sling with what's left of the line and put it round the. . . thing. Then you bring me up with the hand-powered winch, and you can use the stronger one to lift the specimen. . ."

"Well?" demanded Thorne.

"All right," Grimes agreed reluctantly.

It took no time at all to extricate Clarisse. Grimes had sent Taylor down to the temple, accompanied by the two girl scientists, to pull her clear of the altar and then down to the floor as soon as she emerged. She joined us on the roof. I looked at her and tried to remember on which of her cheekbones that beauty spot had been ...

We sent the wire down again. Mayhew telephoned that he had the end of it, was making it fast to the sling that he had managed to get around the body of the weird alien. We then shifted the electric winch to one side, replacing it with the hand-powered one. Grimes was worried that the two sounding wires might become entangled, but the sinker dropped with the same speed that it had done on the prior occasions.

Mayhew said that he was seated in the bowline and ready to come up. Trentham and Smith manned the winch handles. It was brutally hard work; the winch was not geared. After a while Grimes and I had to spell them. And then Thorne and Terrigal took a turn. Mayhew was bringing his end of the telephone up with him and was keeping us informed. "Like swimming up through a sort of grey fog. . ." he said. "I'm putting my hand out, but there's nothing solid. . I can see the other wire. . . I can touch that, but it's all that I can touch. . . Looking up, I can see a sort of distorted square of white light. . . It's a long way off. . ."

Yes, it was a long way. A long way for him, and a bloody long way for those of us who were doing all the work. I hoped that Dr. Thorne was enjoying his turn at the winch; it had been his idea that a specimen be brought up. If he hadn't insisted Mayhew would have been whisked to safety with the same speed as Clarisse.

We heard Taylor's shout from below at last, just as Mayhew himself reported that he was being lifted into the temple. We came back on the winch after the Third Mate had caught his swinging feet and was lowering him safely to the floor. Once he was out of his harness he came up the ladder to join us on the rooftop.

Now that the operation was almost over I realized, suddenly, how time had flown. It was almost sunset, and a chill breeze was blowing from the east. In a matter of minutes it would be dark. Kinsolving has no moon and here, on the Rim, there would be precious little starlight.

Grimes said, "I think we should defer any further operations until tomorrow morning."

Thorne said, "But there are lights in the boat. A searchlight. . ."

Mayhew said, "John, do we want that. . . thing? I've a feeling that the gateway may be closing again, at any second."

"Oh, all right," said Grimes resignedly. He turned to me, "Let's get the electric winch back on to the platform."

We did so. Then he told me, "It's your equipment, George, operated by your personnel. Over to you."

I thought, You buck-passing old bastard! But what he had said made sense. I gestured to Terrigal at the winch controls, made the Heave Away! signal. The piano wire tightened. I looked over Terrigal's shoulder and could see the pointer on the dial begin to move. I visualised that bundle of-something—being dragged across the floor of the. . .Cavern? Control room? The winch hadn't got the weight yet.

Then it took the strain and almost coincidentally the sun set. The light breeze was chillier still and there was almost no twilight. Somebody switched on the lights in the boat, including the searchlight, which flooded the rooftop with a harsh, white radiance. The winch groaned. Terrigal complained, "I can't be held responsible for any damage to the machinery. . ."

"Keep her coming!" I told him. I was more concerned about the baulks of timber upon which the sounding machine was resting than with the machine itself. But engineers, in my experience, always tend to be slaves to rather than masters of their engines.

There was an acrid taint in the air from overheated metal and insulation and the wire, a filament of incandescent silver in the searchlight beam, was beginning to sing. But the pointer on the dial was moving—slowly, slowly, but moving.

I asked, "Can't you go any faster?"

"No, Captain. I'm on the last notch now. And I don't like it."

"Better get people cleared away from here, George," Grimes told me. "If that wire parts it's going to spring back. . ."

"And what about me?" demanded Terrigal.

"If you're scared. . ." I began.

"Yes, I am scared!" he growled. "And so would you be if you had any bloody sense. But I wouldn't trust any of you on this winch!"

All right, all right—I was scared. And it was more than a fear of a lethally lashing end of broken wire. It was that primordial dread of the unknown that has afflicted Man from his first beginnings, that afflicts, too, the lower orders of the animal kingdom. The darkness around the brilliantly lit rooftop was alive with shifting, whispering shadows. Most of our party, I noticed, had already taken refuge in the boat, a little cave of light and warmth that offered shelter, probably illusory, from the Ultimate Night that seemed to be closing around us. Only Grimes, Sonya, Sara and myself remained in the open—and, of course, Terrigal at the winch controls.

The winch was making an eery whining noise. The smell of hot metal and scorching insulation was much stronger. And the wire itself was keening—and was . . . stretching. Surely it was stretching. Surely that shining filament was now so, thin as to be almost invisible.

"Enough!" ordered Grimes "Avast heaving!"

The engineer brought the control handle round anti-clockwise, but i ' had no effect. He cried, "She won't stop!"

"Mr. Taylor!" shouted Grimes into the boat, "switch off the power to the winch!"

"The switch is jammed!" came the reply.

"She won't stop! She won't stop!" yelled Terrigal, frantically jiggling his controls.

The light was dimming, sagging down the spectrum, and outlines were wavering, and frightened voices sounded as though they were coming from an echo chamber. The thin high keening of the overtaut wire was above and below and through all other noises. Sonya and Sara were wrestling with the power cable, tugging at it, worrying it like two dogs fighting over a bone, trying to drag it out of its socket in the boat's hull. It resisted all their efforts.

"Let's get out of here!" snapped Grimes. "Into the boat, all of you!"

Terrigal abandoned his winch, but not before aiming a vicious kick at the control box. He scurried into the little airlock. The two women followed. Grimes and I made it to the door in a dead heat; he pushed me inside then followed hard after me. As soon as we were all in, Taylor, forward at the controls, slammed the inertial drive into maximum lift, not bothering to close the airlock doors first. We started to rise, then stopped with a jerk, heeling alarmingly to port. The power cable to the winch was holding us down. But it would soon part, I thought. It must part. It was only a power cable, not a heavy-duty mooring wire.

It didn't part. It ... stretched. It shouldn't have done, but it did. And we

lifted again, slowly, with the inertial drive hammering like a mechanical riveter gone mad. I clung to the frame of the open door and looked down. I saw the sounding machine dragged up and clear from the circular hole in the roof, with the shining filament of wire still extending straight downwards.

Terrifyingly the city around the temple was coming to life—but it wasn't the city that we had explored. The human colonists had laid out their streets in a rectangular plan; these streets were concentric circles connected by radial thoroughfares. And there were the tall, cylindrical towers, agleam with lights, each topped with a shining sphere. Unsubstantial they seemed at first, but as I watched they appeared to acquire solidity.

Grimes saw it too. He shouted to Taylor, to Terrigal, to anybody who was close enough to the fusion generator to do something about it, "You have to cut the power to the winch! We're dredging up the Past—and we shall be in it!"

"Just show me how, Commodore!" cried the engineer. "Just show me how! I've done all that I can do—short of stopping the jenny!"

And if he did stop the generator we should fall like a stone. If he could stop it, that is.

An aircraft came slowly into view, circling us warily. It was huge, a cylindrical hull, rounded at the ends, with vanes sticking out at all sorts of odd angles. It was like nothing that I had ever seen and possessed a nightmarishly alien quality. There were tubes protruding from turrets that could have been, that almost certainly were guns, and they were trained upon us. What if the alien commander—I visualized him, or it, as being of the same species as the lobsterlike being whose body we had been attempting to recover—should open fire? What would happen to us?

Nothing pleasant, that was for sure.

But we had weapons of our own; we could, at least, defend ourselves if attacked. Sara, I was sure, would enjoy being able to play with her toys. And Sara, I suddenly realized, was beside me in the cramped little airlock, holding her sub-machine gun. I said to her, "What use do you think that will be? What's wrong with the heavy armament?"

She replied obscurely, "I can't bring it to bear." I couldn't see why she couldn't. That blasted flying battleship was staying well within the arcs-of-fire of the laser cannon and the heavy machine gun, and a guided missile would home on her no matter where she was relative to us.

Sara opened fire. Bright tracer flashed out from the muzzle of the gun, but not towards the huge flying ship. It may have been the first round of the burst that hit the power cable, certainly it was one in the first half dozen. There was an arcing sputter of blue flame and the boat, released from its tether, went*, up like a bat out of hell.

And below us the weird city out of Time flickered and vanished.

I TURNED TO GRIMES. "You said sir, that the things that happen or

Kinsolving's Planet shouldn't happen to a dog. And they shouldn't happen, either, to respectably employees of the Dog Star Line."

He managed a grin, then went, "Arf, arf!"