

STAR COURIER

A. Bertram Chandler

Prologue

The Rim Worlds Confederacy would not be what it is today were it not for Rim Runners, the merchant fleet of our lonely and isolated planets. It is true that the first landings on the worlds to the galactic east, as well as the discovery of the anti-matter systems to the galactic west, were made by Faraway Quest, the Rim Worlds survey ship, an auxiliary cruiser of the Rim Worlds Navy. But Quest was never during her long and honourable career under the command of a regular naval officer. Her captain and crew-with the exception of the Marines whom she sometimes carried-were invariably reservists.

The most famous of her captains was John Grimes who, in addition to holding the rank of commodore in the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, was chief astronomical superintendent of Rim Runners. Grimes was a typical rim runner of his period inasmuch as he was not born a Rim Worlder and was of Terran origin. He came out to the Rim when, it was said, a valid certificate of astronomical competency counted for far more than any past record, no matter how black. In those days the Rim Runners' fleet was captained and officered by refugees from shipping lines from all over the galaxy-the Interstellar Transport Commission, Waverley Royal Mail, Cluster Lines, Trans-Galactic Clippers, the Dog Star Line . . . And when spacemen resign or are dismissed from the service of companies of such high standing only an employer desperate for qualified personnel would be anxious to engage them.

Grimes differed in one respect from his contemporaries. He was not initially a merchant spaceman. He had resigned his commission in the Survey Service of the Interstellar Federation rather than face a court martial. Nonetheless he, like all the others, had come out to the Rim under a cloud.

It is difficult to paint a detailed picture of the commodore's childhood as many records were destroyed during the Central Australian Subsidence of 375 AG. It is known, however, that he was born in the city of Alice Springs on Primus 28, 259. His father, George Whitley Grimes, was a moderately successful author of historical romances. His mother-who, as was the custom of the time, had elected to retain her own family name-was Matilda Hornblower, a domestic solar heating engineer.

So far as can be ascertained no ancestral Grimes, on either his father's or his mother's side, was ever an astronaut. There are, however, seamen clambering in the branches of his family tree. One Roger Grimes, a minor pirate of the Seventeenth Century (old Terran reckoning) achieved the dubious distinction of being hanged from his own yardarm when Admiral Blake mounted his successful campaign against the corsairs who, at that time, infested the Mediterranean Sea.

Another Grimes, in the Twentieth Century, commanded mechanically driven surface ships trading up and down the Australian coast and across the Tasman Sea.

Neither seafaring Grimes, however, achieved the fame of that illustrious ancestor on the maternal side, Admiral Lord Hornblower.

In an earlier age young Grimes might well have decided to go to sea-but on Earth, at least, there was little or no romance remaining in that once glamorous profession. Had he been born on a world such as Atlantia he quite probably would have gone to sea. On that planet the mariners still maintain that men, not computers, should command, navigate and handle ocean-going ships.

So, as his ancestors would probably have done had they lived in his era, he wanted to become a spaceman. His own preference would have been the merchant service but his mother, conscious of her own family annals insisted that he try to obtain a scholarship to the Survey Service Academy in Antarctica.

The once proud Royal Navy was no more than history but the Federation's Survey Service had carried its traditions into Deep Space.

Chapter 1

Grimes came to Tiralbin.

Little Sister, obedient to the slightest touch on her controls, dropped through the dark, soggy clouds of the great rain depression to Port Muldoon, finally touching down almost at the exact center of the triangle formed by the vividly scarlet beacon lights.

Aerospace Control commented, "A nice landing, Captain."

Grimes grunted. It should have been a nice landing, he thought. He was used to handling ships, big ships, and setting them down gently on their vaned tails; the careful belly flop that he had just achieved would not have been beyond the competence of a first trip cadet. Little Sister, as he had decided to call her, wasn't a real ship. She was only a pinnacle. A deep-space-going pinnacle with all the necessary equipment and instrumentation, and everything of very high quality, but a pinnacle nonetheless.

"Is that some sort of bronze alloy you're built of, Captain?" asked Aerospace Control.

"No," replied Grimes. "Gold."

"Gold?" came the incredulous query from the transceiver. "You must be a millionaire!"

"I'm not," replied Grimes glumly.

"But you said, when you made your first contact, that you're Owner-Master . . ."

"I did. I am. But the previous owner of this dreamboat wasn't a millionaire either . . ."

"No?"

"No. She was-and still is-a trillionaire."

"It figures," said Aerospace Control enviously. "It figures." Then, in a businesslike voice, "Please have your papers ready. Port Health and Customs are on their way out to you."

Grimes stared out through the viewports to the low-apart from the control tower-spaceport administration buildings, gleaming palely and bleakly through the persistent downpour. There was nothing else to look at. There were no other ships in port and whatever scenery might be in the vicinity was blotted out by the heavy rain. A wheeled vehicle nosed out from a port in an otherwise blank wall, sped out to the pinnacle in a cloud of self-generated spray.

Grimes got ready to receive the boarding officers. His papers-even to the gift deed making him owner of Little Sister-were in order but he was well aware that alcohol is the universe's finest lubricant for the machinery of official business. Luckily the Baroness had been generous; the pinnacle's stores were even better stocked with luxuries than with necessities. Whether or not they continued to be so would depend to a great extent upon his business acumen.

The Chief of Customs-a fat, bald man bulging out of his gaudy uniform-was thirsty. So was the Port Health Officer, who would have passed for an ill-nourished mortician if members of that profession were in the habit of wearing enough gold braid for a Galactic Admiral. Both of them told Grimes, more than once, that they never got real Scotch on Tiralbin. After he opened the second bottle Grimes decided that real Scotch would soon be once again as scarce on this planet as it ever had been.

The officials were, naturally, curious.

"A gold pinnacle . . ." murmured the Customs man. "Solid gold . . ."

"Modified," said Grimes. "A most excellent structural material."

"Most excellent indeed. I'm surprised, Captain, that you didn't give her a more fitting name. Golden Girl. Golden Lady. Golden Princess. Golden anything . . ."

"Sentiment," said Grimes. "The mother ship, The Far Traveller, had a pilot-computer. An intelligent one. Bossy. We called it-sorry, her-Big Sister. So . . ."

"And you were master of this Far Traveller," went on the Customs officer. "Owned by Michelle, Baroness d'Estang, of El Dorado . . . That must be a world! Better than this dismal dump . . ."

"Better," said Grimes, "if you happen to be a billionaire. But not for the likes of us."

"You didn't do too badly, Captain," said the doctor. "This Baroness must have thought quite highly of you to give you a present like this pinnacle."

"In lieu of back pay and separation pay," Grimes told him.

"And so you brought the pinnace here to sell her," said the Chief of Customs. "Her value as scrap would be quite enormous. Remarkable how gold has remained the precious metal for millenia. So I'm afraid that you'll have to make out a fresh set of papers. She's classed as an import, not as a visiting spacecraft to be entered inwards." He began to look really happy. "Her value will have to be assessed, of course. And then there'll be the duty to pay."

"I didn't bring her here to sell her," said Grimes. "I want, if I can, to earn a living with her."

The two officials looked around the tiny cabin. Their eyebrows rose. Then the Port Health Officer said, "I'm no spaceman, although I did do a passage-working trip in Cluster Lines, years ago, just after I qualified. But I know how spacemen do earn their livings. They carry cargo. They carry passengers. And I just don't see how you could carry either in this flying sardine-ha! ha! goldfish!-can . . ."

"There are mails," said Grimes.

"What's sex got to do with it?" asked the Customs Officer. "Oh. Mails, not males. Letters. Parcels. It'll have to be bloody small parcels, though, and precious few of them."

He drained his glass and held it out for a refill.

Chapter 2

Grimes' decision to make Tiralbin his base for operations had been influenced by his memory of an officer whom he had known while he was in the Survey Service. This gentleman—a Tiralbinian by birth and upbringing—had complained continuously about the infrequency of mail from home and the long, long time that it took to reach him. "It's that damn Interstellar Transport Commission!" he would say. "It has the contract with our local government for the carriage of mails, but does it lug them a mere five light years to Panzania, the mail exchange for that sector of the galaxy? Like hell it does. Not it. Those bloody Epsilon Class rustbuckets drop into Port Muldoon when they feel like it, which isn't often. And then they're never going anywhere near Panzania . . ." Grimes recalled especially a parcel that his colleague had torn open with great indignation. According to the postmark it had taken just over a year to reach Lindisfarne Base. It contained a not readily identifiable mass that looked as though it would have been of interest only to a geologist. It was, in fact, a birthday cake that had been baked by the disgruntled lieutenant's fiancée. (Grimes had wondered briefly if that cake ever had been any good . . .)

So here he was on Tiralbin, John Grimes, ex-Commander, Federation Survey Service, Owner/Master of a little ship hardly bigger than a lifeboat but one capable of taking him, in fair comfort, anywhere in the galaxy. And here he was, in the company of the Chief of Customs, the Port Health Officer and the Port Captain (who had joined the party as soon as pratique had been granted and before the expensive Scotch had run out), sitting at a table in the Gentlemen's Club in Muldoon. Tiralbin, he was learning, was a planet on which class distinctions were maintained. Only those who could claim

descent from the passengers of the First Ship could become members of a club such as the Gentlepersons'. Any guests, such as himself, must be vouched for by at least two hosts. As the trio of port officials were all First Shippers, Grimes was admitted after signing his name in four books and on six forms.

The club was dull. The decor was archaic. Grimes, on Earth, had seen quite a few examples of mock Tudor. This was mock mock Tudor. There was music, of the canned variety, orchestral melodies that were as trite as they were sedate. There were no dancing girls. Some of the female gentlepersons drinking at the bar, seated around the tables, could have been attractive enough had they not been so dowdily dressed. The men, even those not in uniform, affected a flamboyance of attire; the women, almost without exception, wore neck-high, ankle-length grey. As for Grimes himself, he was a sparrow among peacocks. The only dress uniform he had aboard the pinnace was the gaudy purple livery that the Baroness had required him to wear aboard The Far Traveller and his only civilian suit-into which he had changed from his shipboard shorts-and-shirt working gear-was as drab as the ladies' dresses.

There were a few, a very few, exceptions to the feminine drabness. One of these was drinking at the bar, not far from Grimes' table. She was a tall woman, made taller yet by the lustrous black hair elaborately coiled on top of her head. She was strong featured, her nose too large and chin too firm for mere prettiness. Her wide mouth was a scarlet slash across her pale face. Her eyes were a startling green. She was wearing a black, high-collared shirt, gold-trimmed, black, sharply creased trousers tucked into glossy, black, calf-high boots.

"And who is that?" asked Grimes in a low voice. "The general of your women's army?"

The Chief Customs Officer laughed. "Not quite, although it is a uniform she's wearing, and her rank is roughly equivalent to that of general." He raised his voice. "Tamara! Why don't you join us?"

The tall woman came across from the bar, set her glass down on the table, lowered her generously proportioned body into the chair that the Port Captain found for her. She looked at Grimes and smiled slightly.

"So you're the famous John Grimes," she said. "I've heard about you. My sister is engaged to an officer in the Federation Survey Service."

"The famous cake baker," said Grimes.

She laughed. "So you know about that silly business. I got blamed, of course."

"But how?" asked Grimes.

"Tamara," said the Customs Officer, "is our Superintending Postmistress."

"In person," said that lady. She continued to address Grimes. "And you, Captain, held the rank of Commander in the FSS. You were captain of Discovery at the time of the mutiny. You were left on the newly

discovered-or rediscovered-Lost Colony of Botany Bay when the mutineers left for parts unknown in your ship, wrecking the destroyer Vega in the process. You resigned your FSS commission rather than face a court martial, but Commander Delamere, captain of Vega, had other ideas. He tried to arrest you, but you were rescued by the Baroness d'Estang, of El Dorado, who just happened to have blown in in her spaceyacht, The Far Traveller. And now-with no Baroness, no spaceyacht-you bob up on Tiralbin in command of a glorified lifeboat." She laughed. "Very glorified. The thing's built of solid gold, they tell me." She looked hard at Grimes. "Quite a story, Captain. Would you mind filling in the gaps?"

"The Baroness and I split brass rags," Grimes told her. "She gave me Little Sister-the pinnacle-in lieu of back pay and separation pay."

"A literally golden handshake," she said. "And now what do you intend doing?"

Grimes said, "I was thinking of starting a courier service."

"You were, were you? Or you are, are you? You've come to the right shop. In my official capacity I know just how lousy the mails are out of and into this world. Unfortunately we have no ships of our own and must rely upon the service, such as it is, provided by the Commission."

"I'm surprised that you don't have ships," said Grimes.

"We did, once," the Port Captain told him. "Three, very second hand Epsilon Class tramps. Tiralbinian King, Tiralbinian Queen, Tiralbinian Prince. The King's inertial drive packed up when she was coming in to a landing at Port Chaka, on Panzania and the auxiliary reaction drive did more harm than good; blew the arse off her. Luckily there were no fatalities, although she was a structural total loss. The Prince? Nobody knows what happened to her-except, perhaps, her crew. It's assumed that her Mannschenn Drive went on the blink when she was on passage from Tiralbin to Atlantia. As for the Queen-her operating costs were astronomical. Repairs, maintenance and more repairs. We had a chance to sell her to Rim Runners and grabbed it with both hands. And that, Grimes, is the short, sad history of the Tiralbinian Interstellar Transport Commission."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. He made a major production of lighting and filling his pipe. "So there's a chance that a small, private operator based on this planet might make a go of things."

"A chance," conceded the Postmistress. "As far as I'm concerned, there are escape clauses in our contract with ITC. For example, if ITC cannot provide a ship to carry mails directly from Tiralbin to their planet of destination I can place such articles aboard any vessel making such a voyage. Mind you, it's not very often that such a vessel is here when we want one."

"The last time," said the Port Captain, "was five years ago."

"It was," she agreed. She frowned slightly. "It so happens, it just so happens, Captain Grimes, that there's an urgent consignment of parcel mail for Boggarty. Would you be interested?"

"I would," said Grimes, without hesitation.

"How much would you charge?" she asked bluntly.

"I'll have to do my sums first," he told her.

"Do that," she said, "and let me know by tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Epsilon Corvus is due in the day after tomorrow, and by some minor miracle she's actually proceeding from here direct to Panzania-and Panzania, as you know, has the mail exchange."

"Boggarty's well off the trade routes," said Grimes. "Even from Panzania the consignment would travel by a very roundabout way."

"Feed that factor into your computer with the others," the Postmistress said.

Chapter 3

The Port Captain, who lived out at the spaceport, ran Grimes back to the pinnace in his shabby little tricar. It was still raining. It would go on raining, Grimes was told, for three more weeks. And then there would be the dry season. And then the winter, with its high winds and blizzards. Grimes allowed himself to wonder why Tiralbin didn't go in for weather control to spread the meteorological goodies and baddies more evenly through the year. He was told sternly that Tiralbin was a poor world with no money to spare for useless luxuries. And, in any case, Tiralbin's main export was an indigenous fruit, the so-called Venus strawberry, prized on quite a few planets both by gourmets and by those few to whom it was an aphrodisiac. Its low, tough bushes flourished in the local climatic conditions; it was a case of leave well enough alone.

The ground car stopped by Little Sister's airlock. The Port Captain declined Grimes' invitation to come aboard for a nightcap-which was just as well; after that afternoon's session stocks of liquor were running low. Replenishments would have to be laid in-and paid for.

Grimes managed to cover the short distance between the car and the airlock without getting too wet. He was thankful that he had thought to lock the inner door only, leaving the outer one open. He let himself into the pinnace-his ship, his home. In the tiny galley he set coffee a-heating and helped himself to a couple of soberup capsules. Back in the main cabin, which was also bedroom, sitting room and chartroom, he sipped his coffee and watched the screen of the little playmaster, which instrument was, in effect, his library. (Big Sister, before setting the Baroness and Grimes adrift in the pinnace, had seen to it that the small spacecraft was fully equipped from the navigational as well as other viewpoints, and had contributed generously from her personal memory banks.)

Boggarty, read Grimes on the little screen.

Then followed the astronomical and geophysical data, the historical information. It was an Earth-type planet, fourth out from its primary. It had been colonized from a ship of the First Expansion, which meant that the First Landing post-dated First Landings on other worlds classed as Second

Expansion planets. But the First Expansion vessels-the so-called Deep Freeze Ships-had proceeded to their destinations at sub-light speeds. Boggarty was even further removed from the main trade routes than Tiralbin. Its exports consisted of very occasional shipments of native artifacts, consigned mainly to museums, art galleries and private collectors. As a result of these infrequent but lucrative sales, Boggarty had built up a large credit balance in the Galactic Bank, which maintained its headquarters on Earth. There was ample money for the human colonists to pay for any of the goods they ordered, by the practically instantaneous Carlotti radio, from anywhere at all in the known universe. The main trouble, apparently, lay in persuading any of the major shipping lines or even a tramp operator to deviate from the well-established tram-lines to make a special call. The only company to make regular visits was the Dog Star Line which, every three standard years, sent a ship to pick up a worthwhile consignment of objets d'art.

The planet, Grimes learned, was named after the indigenes, whom the first colonists had dubbed boggarts. Looking at the pictures that flickered across the little screen he could understand why. These creatures could have been gnomes or trolls from Terran children's fairy stories. Humanoid but grossly misshapen, potbellied, hunchbacked, the males with grotesquely huge sex organs, the females with pendulous dugs . . . Curved, yellow tusks protruding from wide, lipless mouths . . . Ragged, spiny crests in lieu of hair . . .

If the boggarts were horrendous, what they manufactured was beautiful. They worked with wire, with gleaming filaments of gold. Their gnarled, three-fingered, horny-nailed hands moved with lightning dexterity as they wove their metal sculptures, complex intricacies that seemed to be (that were?) at least four dimensional. And these, Grimes learned with some amazement, were no more than adaptations from the traps-in which they caught large, edible, flying insects-that the boggarts had been weaving at the time of the First Landing. (But some spiders' webs are works of art, he thought.)

He wondered what the boggarts got paid for their work. There was no explicit information, but in one shot of a cave workshop he saw, in a corner, bottles and plastic food containers, and some of the females were wearing necklaces of cheap and gaudy glass beads.

He was wasting time, he knew, viewing what was, in actuality, no more than a travelogue-but he liked to have some idea of what any world to which he was bound was like. He looked at mountainous landscapes, at long, silver beaches with black, jagged reefs offshore, at mighty rivers rushing through spectacular canyons, flowing majestically across vast, forested plains. He saw the towns and the cities, pleasant enough but utterly lacking in architectural inspiration, too-regular cubes and domes of metal and plastic. He saw the cave villages of the boggarts.

He had seen enough to be going on with and turned his attention to navigational details. The voyage from Tiralbin to Boggarty would, he (or the computer) calculated have a duration of thirty-seven subjective days, well within the pinnacle's capacity. Food would be no problem-although he would, in effect, be getting his own back. The algae tanks, as well as

removing carbon dioxide from the spacecraft's atmosphere and enriching it with oxygen, would convert other body wastes into food. The little auto-chef, he had learned from experience, could use the algae paste as the raw material for quite palatable meals. That same auto-chef, he had discovered, was capable of distilling a flavorless spirit that, with the addition of various flavorings, was a fair substitute for gin. Tobacco? Luckily Tiralbin was one of the worlds on which smoking was a widespread habit. He would have to make sure that he had an ample stock of fuel for his battered pipe before he lifted off. Fuel? No worries there. The small hydrogen fusion unit would supply ample power for the mini-Mannschenn, the inertial drive, the Carlotti radio, the Normal Space-Time radio, light, heat, cooking, the playmaster . . . And would it be possible for him to lay in a stock of spools for this instrument in Muldoon? He hoped so. Thirty-seven subjective days of utter solitude is quite a long time, but not too long if it is not compounded with utter boredom.

And then he came to the calculations for which his past training and experience had not fitted him. How much would it cost? How much should he charge? On the one hand, he was not a philanthropic institution, but, on the other hand, he was entitled to a fair profit. What was a fair profit? He supposed that he could regard Little Sister as an investment. A deep-space-going pinnacle is a very expensive hunk of ironmongery . . . A return of 10%? But Little Sister was not a hunk of ironmongery. She was the outcome of miscegenation between a goldsmith and a shipbuilder . . . And how much had she cost? How much was she worth?

Grimes didn't know.

All right, then. How much would the voyage cost him? His port dues here on Tiralbin, for a start. Hospitality to the port officials. Such stores-luxuries as well as necessities-as he would have to purchase before lift-off. Such stores as he would have to purchase after arrival at Boggarty. Depreciation of ship and fittings during the round trip. (But depreciation in a vessel such as Little Sister, built of almost everlasting materials, was negligible.) Insurance? That was something he would have to go into with the local Lloyd's Agent. Salaries? There was only one salary, and that was his own, paid (presumably) by himself to himself. What was the Award Rate for the master of a vessel of this tonnage? Did the Astronauts' Guild have a representative in Muldoon?

It was all quite simple, he realized. He would charge on a cost plus basis. The only trouble was that he did not know what the costs were likely to be. There was no way of finding out until various business offices opened in the morning.

He let down the folding bunk that he had been using-the other one, intended for the Baroness, had never been used-took a sleeping tablet to counteract the effects of the soberup, told the computer to wake him at 0600 hours local, and turned in.

Chapter 4

Grimes had a busy morning. He was able to arrange a hook-up between the pinnacle's NST transceiver and the local telephone exchange, so was able to

carry out most of his business by telephone. This was just as well, as it was still raining heavily and he had no local currency with which to pay for cab hire. As he accumulated data he fed it into Little Sister's computer. The insurance premium demanded by Lloyd's was amazingly high, but not so amazing, he realized, bearing in mind the fact that his spacecraft was built of a precious metal. He was rather surprised that the figure should be quoted with so little delay, but, of course, Lloyd's records would contain all details of The Far Traveller, including her pinnace.

Finally the estimated cost of the round voyage appeared on the screen. It was, inevitably, frightening. After he realized that his master's salary was included in the total he decided to add only a modest 10%. He put through a call to the Superintending Postmistress. After a short delay her face appeared on the screen, as his would be appearing on the one at her end.

"Yes, Captain?" she asked.

"I've done my sums," he replied. "I don't think you'll like the result."

"Tell me."

He told her.

Her fine eyebrows arched, but the rest of her face remained impassive.

She said, "I'm not buying your pinnace."

He said, "If you were it would cost quite a bit more."

She smiled. "I suppose so. And, after all, I'm not paying the bill. Neither is my government. The Boggartians want the shipment no later than yesterday, and if it's sent through normal channels it could take a year to reach them. I'll punch through a Carlottigram and find out if they're willing to pay the charges. I'll call you back."

Grimes brewed coffee, filled and lit his pipe, settled down to watch what passed for entertainment on Tiralbin on his playmaster, which, in port, could function as a tridi receiver. He watched without much enthusiasm a local version of football being played in pouring rain. One team was male, the other female, but the players were so thickly coated with mud that it was impossible to determine their sex.

The transceiver chimed.

It was the Superintending Postmistress.

She said, "They must be in a hurry on Boggarty. They wasted no time in replying. They have agreed to pay your figure, half, before departure, to be placed to your credit in the Galactic Bank, the other half to be paid on delivery. There is only one slight snag . . ."

"And what is that?" asked Grimes.

"They demand that our Postal Service send one of its own officials to travel in charge of the parcels, to hand them over in person. You have passenger accommodation, don't you?"

"Of a sort," he said. "Not too uncomfortable, but no privacy."

"As long as I don't have to share a bunk . . ."

He doubted that he had heard her correctly. "As long as you don't have to share a bunk?"

She laughed. "I'm overdue for a long leave. I want to travel, but travel is damned expensive-as you should know."

He said, "I'm finding out."

She told him, "I thought that I might temporarily demote myself to postwoman . . ."

He said, "I thought that I, as a courier, would be a sort of a postman."

She said, "But you're not an employee of our government. You're a private individual, a hired carrier. You have still to build up a reputation for reliability."

Grimes felt his prominent ears burning. He exclaimed, "They have only to check my Survey Service record!"

She laughed. "And what sort of marks will the FSS give you for reliability? Apart from the way in which you lost your last ship, you had quite a few enemies among the top brass, and not too many friends. You're on the run from a court martial."

The angry flush spread all over his face, then slowly subsided. He had to admit that she was right. As an officer of the Federation Survey Service he was finished. As a merchant officer, a shipmaster-or even a shipowner of a sort-he had yet to prove himself.

She demanded, "Well, Captain Grimes, do you want the job or not?" She grinned engagingly, "Would my company be so hard to put up with? Or would you rather have some hairy-arsed postman? I could arrange that, you know . . ."

He looked at her face in the screen. He decided that she would be preferable to a postman, but remembered the last time that he had been cooped up in a small spacecraft-a lifeboat-with an attractive woman. It had been great fun at first, but they had finished up hating each other. However, Little Sister was more, much more, than a mere lifeboat. There would be, with the erection of a plastic partition in the main cabin (and who was going to pay for that?) far more privacy. The food would be much better, even though it had its origin in the algae vats. And there would be a foreseeable conclusion to the voyage, as there had not been on that past occasion.

He smiled back at her. He said, "All right. It's on. But you'd better come out to the spaceport to see what you're letting yourself in for."

"It's a date," she said. "Expect me half an hour from now."

She was punctual.

A scarlet, post office car, with a uniformed driver, drew up in a cloud of spray by the pinnace's airlock exactly twenty-nine minutes after the conclusion of the call. He had occupied the time with housekeeping—a hasty tidying up, the programming of the auto-chef with a lunch for two, one of the few remaining bottles of El Doradan Spumante put to cool in the refrigerator, gin of the ship's own manufacture decanted from its plastic container into a much more attractive glass flagon.

Enveloped in hooded, transparent rainwear she walked from the car, which turned to return to the city, to the airlock. Grimes helped her off with the water-slick coverall, then ushered her into the little cabin. She seated herself at the small table. She looked at the flagon, the glasses, the little bottle of flav, the bowl of ice cubes.

"So," she remarked, "this is how the poor live."

He poured drinks, raised his glass, said, "Down the hatch."

"Down the hatch," she repeated. She sipped. "H'm. You don't do yourself badly. One thing we can't do here is make decent gin."

The auto-chef chimed. Grimes got up to get disposable napkins and—a legacy from The Far Traveller—gold cutlery. Her eyes widened as he laid the table. He went through into the galley-workshop-engineer room, returned with the meal on gold-rimmed china. It was 'steak', with 'mashed potato' and a puree of 'peas.' Appearancewise and flavorwise it passed muster, although the texture of the 'meat' left much to be desired. (So, he realized, did his choice of a wine to accompany the meal; a still red would have been more suitable.)

His guest patted her lips with her napkin. "Congratulate the chef for me, Captain. Tissue culture beef?"

"Not in a ship this size," he told her. "She's too small to run to a farm. Just algae, from the vats, processed, colored and flavored."

She said, "I'll not ask what nutrients your algae subsist upon. I'm not altogether ignorant of spaceship ecology. I'm not squeamish either. After all, the sewage of every town and city on this planet is processed and fed back into the land. Do you have coffee, by the way?"

"Coming up," said Grimes.

"You've got yourself a passenger," she told him.

Chapter 5

Epsilon Corvus came in while Grimes, standing in Little Sister's airlock to keep out of the persistent rain, was receiving the stores that he had ordered. The transfer of funds to his account with the Galactic Bank had been made with quite amazing promptitude and, for one of the few times in his life, he felt rich. He was having to restrain himself from spending money like a drunken spaceman.

The Commission's ship dropped down through the grey overcast, glimpsed fitfully through the slowly drifting veils of rain, the arrhythmic clangor of her

inertial drive muffled by the downpour. Finally she sat down decisively in the center of the triangle formed by the marker beacons. The driver of the ship chandler's truck which delivered the stores remarked sourly, "She's here. At last. And much good will she be to us."

"Who's us?" asked Grimes politely.

The driver gestured to the name painted on the side of his vehicle. "Bannington and Willis, that's who. I'm Willis. Those cows . . ." he jerked his thumb towards the freighter " . . . don't buy a single item here apart from private orders. Bloody Venus strawberries. Tiralbin's one claim to fame. Ha!" He brightened slightly. "You didn't order any, Captain. I'll be back at the spaceport before you push off, I'll be delivering aboard the Old Crow, so what about putting you down for a couple of dozen cans?"

"No thank you," said Grimes.

"Don't need 'em, hey? You're lucky. Mind you, they don't work on everybody. Not on me, for one. If they did I wouldn't be selling them! Ha! Well, sign here Cap for what you've got." Grimes signed. "Sure you won't change your mind about the strawberries? From what I hear you may be needing them after all . . ."

"No thank you," said Grimes again. He was mildly annoyed by the assumption that a man and a woman alone together in a small spacecraft must inevitably fall into each other's arms. Since his appointment to his first commercial command, The Far Traveller, he had studied the Space Shipping Act. He had learned that any master or officer forcing his attentions on a female passenger or crew member was liable to the suspension or cancellation of his certificate of competency. Grimes possessed a civilian master astronaut's certificate, having been required to pass that examination before his promotion to Lieutenant Commander in the Survey Service. He had no desire to lose it.

The truck drove off and Grimes went inside the pinnace to stow his stores. He was still finding it strange to have to do everything himself but was rather enjoying it. He sang untunefully:

"Oh, I am the cook and the captain bold

And the mate of the Nancy brig . . ."

A strange voice called, "Ahoy, Little Sister! May I come aboard?"

Grimes stowed a carton, then turned towards the airlock. He said, "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

His visitor was a small, wiry man in grey working uniform with master's epaulettes on the shoulders. He introduced himself. "I'm Halley, from the Old Crow, as they call her here. I couldn't help noticing your little ship when I came in and thought I'd like a closer look at her. The port officials told me that she's built of gold . . ."

"She is, Captain," said Grimes. He waved his visitor to a chair, took one himself. "Coffee?"

"Thank-you."

Grimes got up again, went through to the galley and returned with two steaming mugs.

"Ex Survey Service, aren't you, Captain?"

"Yes, Captain."

"And now you're one of us, more or less."

"I'm trying to be."

The other man grinned. "I'm afraid that you haven't tried quite hard enough. As well as being Master of Epsilon Corvus I'm an official of the Guild. A Committee-man, as a matter of fact. You, sir, are about to embark on a commercial voyage in a ship not commanded by a Guild member. I have to tell you that members of the Guild and of the space-associated unions have no option but to declare you black."

"Which means?" asked Grimes.

"Which means that you will receive no clearance to lift from Aerospace Control, for a start."

Grimes shrugged.

"It means, too, that Aerospace Control on Boggarty will be informed that you are black if you do, illegally, lift from Port Muldoon . . ."

"Call me Ishmael," muttered Grimes.

"What? Oh, yes. Ha, ha. I'm sorry, Captain, but that's the way of it. As a Survey Service type you've led a sheltered life. You've no idea of the struggle we've had, and are still having, to maintain and to improve conditions." He grinned. "I understand that you're owner as well as master, so your own conditions are up to you. But if you were, as an employee, in command of this spacecraft you'd be entitled to hard-lying money and short-handed money. You've no cook or steward, no engineer . . ."

I should have included hard-lying money and short-handed money in my estimated costs, thought Grimes. I will in future.

His guest pulled a sheaf of papers from the inside breast pocket of his uniform coveralls. "I'm not holding a pistol at your head, Captain, but I do strongly advise you to join the Guild. Apart from anything else we guarantee you full legal protection-as master, that is, not owner. But it's as a master that you're always liable to come up against a court of enquiry. So, if you'll just fill in the details and sign here . . ."

Grimes sighed. "How much?" he asked.

"Joining fee, five hundred. Annual dues another five hundred."

It wasn't much compared to the profits that Grimes hoped soon to be making, compared to the salary that he was paying himself on paper. And,

he reluctantly admitted, Guild membership was an essential to a merchant spaceman. He filled in the forms and signed them. He made out a check for one thousand credits to the Interstellar Astronauts' Guild, signed that. He received a small plastic card, with his name already printed on it, in exchange.

Business over, Halley was once again quite affable. He said, "Well, that was quite painless, wasn't it? Welcome aboard and all that." He relaxed in his chair, cast an appraising eye around the cabin. "You know, Captain, I rather envy you. No owners to get on your back. No crew to get in your hair, no passengers . . ."

A female voice called from the airlock, "May I join the party?"

"Meet my passenger, Captain Halley," said Grimes.

Halley and Tamara Haverstock were already acquainted. Neither much liked the other. The Superintending Postmistress was, to the shipmaster, yet another officious official to make his life a misery, with her unreasonable demands, each and every time that he was in Port Muldoon. Halley, to Tamara Haverstock, was the unobliging representative of the cordially disliked Interstellar Transport Commission.

"Are you actually travelling in this, Miss Haverstock?" Halley asked.

"Your ship, Captain Halley, seems never to be proceeding in a direction suitable to my requirements. And now, if you will excuse me, I have business to discuss with Captain Grimes."

Halley rose to leave. "Bon voyage," he said. "And don't do anything that you couldn't do riding on a bicycle. Remember Paragraph 118 (c) of the Space Shipping Act. If you do fall foul of it, the Guild will back you up."

"What was he talking about?" asked the Postmistress after he was gone.

"I don't know," said Grimes. Actually he didn't, but strongly suspected that Paragraph 118(c) was the one setting out the penalties for rape, or alleged rape.

Miss Haverstock looked at her watch. She said, "The consignment of parcel mail, together with my baggage, will be here very shortly. Are all your stores on board? Good. Have you paid your port dues and obtained Customs clearance? Good. If you have no objections we will lift as soon as the mails and baggage have been stowed."

Grimes said, "This was certainly a quick turn-around. I was hoping to see something of Tiralbin. Apart from one evening in the Gentlepersons' Club in Muldoon I haven't been off the ship."

She told him, "You haven't missed anything. As far as we are concerned here in the south it's monsoon weather over the entire damned hemisphere, and winter's set in north of the equator. As you may have noticed, we have no land masses at all in the tropical and sub-tropical zones. So it's a choice between getting soaked or frozen."

"Frankly," said Grimes, "I've often wondered why people live on some of the

worlds that they do . . ."

"Are you getting in a nasty dig at this one? Well, Grimes, I was born here. I'm used to it. At times I even like it, but I don't suppose I'd like much the planet that you were born on. Earth, wasn't it? I thought as much. You Terries always contrive to convey the impression that you own the whole damn galaxy but don't think much of it anyhow . . ."

Grimes laughed. "Surely we aren't as bad as that."

"Aren't you?" She grinned at him. "Anyhow, much as I love Tiralbin I want a change of scenery. And my leave does not officially start until I have delivered the mail to its consignee on Boggarty, so, by the time we get there, I shall still have several standard months due . . ."

A man in a drab blue uniform came into the cabin without first announcing himself. He accorded the Postmistress a grudging salute then turned to Grimes. "You the skipper?"

"Yes."

"Mail's here, an' some travellin' bags. Where do you want 'em?"

Grimes saw the single mail sack-it was heavy, and obviously held square boxes or cartons-stowed in the locker that he had cleared for the purpose. Tamara Haverstock's baggage went into a storeroom off the galley-cum-engineerroom. He signed the receipt for his cargo. The man left.

The high-ranking postwoman said, "What's holding you, Captain? The mail must fly!"

"I suppose I'd better think about getting upstairs," admitted Grimes.

Chapter 6

Grimes took Little Sister upstairs. It was his first lift-off in her-his first lift-off, that is, prior to a deep space voyage. While the pinnacle had been attached to The Far Traveller she had been used mainly as an atmosphere flier. This occasion seemed wrong, somehow. In a spaceship down and aft should be co-directional. Here-unless the interior of the pinnacle were entirely rearranged-the little spacecraft's progress in space would always be along her short axis.

He would get used to it, he supposed. With the inertial drive hammering healthily he lifted through the pouring rain, losing sight of Port Muldoon when he was less than a kilometer up. He missed the auxiliary reaction drive that was a standard fitting in most spaceships. It was supposed to be for emergency use only, but the majority of Survey Service Captains employed it, blasting off, when they were a safe distance from the ground, like an archaic rocket. He was not sure that he liked having a woman, even an attractive woman, in the seat by his, watching his every move with intelligent interest. Still, he grudgingly admitted to himself, she wasn't as bad as the Baroness had been. She did not object to his smoking. He noticed that she had a cigarillo between her full lips, its acrid fumes competing with the incinerator reek of his pipe. She should have asked

permission before lighting up, he thought, but was not prepared to make an issue of it.

Little Sister broke through into the clear air above the cloud cover. The light-from Tiralbin's sun and reflected from the cloudscape--was briefly dazzling until the ports automatically polarized. She drove up through the thinning atmosphere, through near-vacuum, into the almost complete vacuum of outer space. Below her Tiralbin could have been a giant pearl displayed on black velvet, the surface featureless save for the occasional rift in the overcast, the spiral pattern, near the equator, of a revolving storm.

Up she drove, up. Lights flared briefly on the console marking the pinnacle's passage through the Van Allens. Grimes adjusted his seat so that he was almost on his back, looking straight upwards through the transparency now uncovered in the roof of the control cab. He had no trouble finding the first target star; it was a blue luminary in the constellation called on Tiralbin Muldoon's Cat. He was rather surprised that the Tiralbinians had ever gotten around to naming their constellations, but supposed that the skies would be clear during the Dry Season.

He asked, "Who was Muldoon?"

"Huh? Muldoon? Oh, I see what you mean . . ." She had adjusted her own chair so that her body was parallel to his. "That Muldoon. He was captain of the First Ship, the Lode Caravel. The story goes that he had a pet cat . . ."

"Such is fame," said Grimes.

He concentrated on bringing The Cat's Eye into the center of the cartwheel sight engraved in the overhead port. In a real ship he would have been employing gyroscopes to swing the hull about its various axes, here he was having to do it by adjusting the thrust of the inertial drive. It was a ticklish job. Finally he had the target star centered, then allowed it to fall a degree off to port.

"You had it right," she complained. "Now you'll have to do it again."

"Galactic Drift," he said, "has to be allowed for. Now, stand by for free fall. I'm cutting the drive."

"Why?"

He ignored her. The drumming of the inertial drive fell silent, was replaced by the humming of the ever-precising gyroscopes of the mini-Mannschenn, the humming that rapidly rose in pitch to a thin, high whine. Grimes was used-as much as anybody can get used-to the distortions of light and sound, to the crazy perspective, to the uncanny sensation of *deja vu*. Sometimes there was prevision, a glimpse of the future, or of a possible future, sometimes only a haunting unease. This time there was only, for him, the unease.

Things snapped back to normal. He touched the control that brought the back of his chair upright and, with the other hand, restarted the inertial drive. There was acceleration again, substituting for gravity. Up was up and

down was down.

He looked to his passenger. She was still in the reclining position. Her face was very pale. He said, "Don't look through the ports if it frightens you." He touched the switch that opaqued the transparencies. He went on, "Space from a ship under interstellar drive is a scary sight, especially for the first time . . ."

She said, "But I haven't looked out of the ports. It was just a . . . It was . . . real. What happened . . ." She looked at him, then down at herself. "But it couldn't have been, could it?"

He said, "I should have warned you. Quite often when the interstellar drive is started, when the temporal precession field is building up, there are these . . . flashes of precognition." He smiled reassuringly. "But don't worry, it may never happen. From every now there's an infinitude of futures."

She said, "I'm not worried. I was just . . . startled. Now, if you'll unshield the ports, I'll have a look at what space is like when it's warped out of all recognition."

She stared out at the dim, coruscating nebulosities that should have been hard, bright stars and then, when Grimes rolled the pinnace slightly, down at Tiralbin, which had the appearance of a writhing, roughly spherical, luminescent amoeba.

She shuddered. "Don't you spacemen," she asked, "usually celebrate the start of a voyage with a stiff drink?"

"It has been done," conceded Grimes, letting her precede him into the main cabin.

Chapter 7

He busied himself with the drinks and a tray of savories.

He raised his glass, "Here's looking at you."

She was worth looking at. Her severe blue and gold uniform suited her. It could almost have been painted on to her splendid body.

She said, "Here's looking at you, Grimes." She sipped. "I hope you have enough of this excellent gin to last out the voyage."

He said, "I make it myself. Or, to be more exact, the auto-chef does."

She said, "A versatile ship. As versatile as her master."

"Versatile?" he asked.

"Aren't you? Survey Service officer, yacht skipper, ship-owner, courier . . ."

He laughed. "I'll try anything once."

"Will you?" There was something odd in the way she said it.

Grimes finished his drink, said, "Now I'll get on with the minor modifications that we shall require. I should have done it before lift-off, but the plaspartit sheets didn't come down until this morning, with the rest of the stores."

"Plaspartit sheets?" she asked, lifting her eyebrows.

"You know the stuff. Sticks to anything. Used for erecting temporary partitions."

"What for?" she asked.

"I just told you."

"But what for?"

"To make a light, longitudinal bulkhead in this cabin. The folding bunk on the starboard side is mine. The one on the port side is yours . . ."

She faced him over the table, looking into his eyes. Her own seemed preternaturally large, hypnotic in their intensity. She said, "I rather thought that it would have to happen, sooner or later. You're a man, not unattractive. I'm a woman, with all the right things in the right places. When you turned on that Time-Space-twister of yours I had a sort of preview-a very vivid one. So now I know that it's going to happen. Why put it off?"

Why indeed? Grimes asked himself.

He had not seen her touch any fastenings, but her shirt was open. Her breasts were large, firm, the pink nipples prominent and a stippling of color against the pearly pallor of her skin. She stood up and, moving with slow, deliberate grace, almost as though she were doing it to music, took off the shirt then pushed trousers and undergarments down her long, straight legs. She practiced all-over depilation, Grimes noted with almost clinical interest-or, perhaps, the lack of body hair was the result of some minor local mutation.

He had always preferred his women with sun-darkened skins and with luxuriant rather than otherwise pubic growths, but . . . Why look a gift horse in the pussy? he asked himself.

She moved lithely around the table and-it was the only possible word for her action-pounced, enveloping him in warm, naked femininity. As gently as possible he broke away. She stared at him incredulously. She almost snarled, "You're not . . ."

He said, "Don't worry. I'm heterosexual. But there's just something I have to do in the control cab first . . ."

He made his way forward. He switched on the internal recorder. He had remembered Paragraph 118(c) of the Space Shipping Act. It was extremely unlikely that it would ever be evoked, that there would be need to prove that there had been no rape, but a videotape of this occasion would be a pleasant souvenir of the voyage, a felicitous parting gift when the time came for farewells.

When he returned to the main cabin he saw that she had found out how to lower his folding bunk from the ship's side and, stretched out on the pneumatic mattress, was waiting for him.

He shed his clothing and joined her.

Chapter 8

Grimes was a competent spaceman but he was no engineer.

During his Survey Service career he had subscribed to the belief commonly held by spacemen officers regarding routine overhauls of machinery in port by those of the engineering branch. "They're so surprised that their toys are working properly that they have to take them apart to find out why!" All Little Sister's machinery had been functioning well when Grimes and his late employer, the Baroness d'Estang, had been cast adrift from The Far Traveller. It had still been functioning well when the pinnacle had been intercepted by Drongo Kane's Southerly Buster. After the Baroness had decided to embark on Kane's ship, leaving Little Sister to Grimes as a parting gift, all had functioned well on his lonely voyage to Tiralbin. Grimes had lifted from Port Muldoon without a worry in the universe-at least insofar as his ship and her equipment were concerned. He had set his initial trajectory for The Cat's Eye. From that starfall he would adjust course to head towards the Boggarty sun, homing on the Carlotti Beacon on Boggarty, obtaining fixes as required from that beacon and those on Jones-world and the uninhabited Z314U.

So-he thought in his innocence-there was nothing to do but enjoy the voyage. Tamara was a good shipmate. This was a holiday for her and she was making the most of it. She played & good game of chess. Her tastes and Grimes' coincided regarding the entertainment spools for the playmaster. She could coax the auto-chef into producing dishes that Grimes had never dreamed could be concocted from such unpromising raw material as sewage-fed algae. She improved on Grimes' homemade gin and persuaded the mechanized mini-galley to distill a brandy that Napoleon himself (after a hard battle and with nothing else to drink) would not have sneezed at, a liqueur that the Benedictine monks might have recognized as a distant cousin to their own famous after dinner drink, a Tia Maria that, topped with synthetic cream, was-in the absence of a potable yardstick-indistinguishable from the real thing.

And, he told himself with a certain smugness, he was getting paid for all this. No doubt he and Tamara would say goodbye without heartbreak when the time came, but meanwhile . . .

Little Sister fell steadily down the dark dimensions, through the warped continuum. Her inertial drive hammered away steadily and healthily. There was light, and there was warmth. Meals were cooked and served. Entertainment of high quality was available from the play-master at the touch of a finger. And it would be a long time before Grimes and Tamara tired of each other's company, before each fresh coupling of their bodies failed to engender some fresh refinement of sensation . . .

And yet it came to pass.

She moved under him sinuously, rotating her navel against him, contracting her vaginal muscles and, somehow, caused her erect nipples to titillate the skin of his chest while her eager tongue explored his mouth . . .

The orgasm was explosive.

She moved under him sinuously, rotating her navel against his, contracting her vaginal muscles and, somehow, caused her erect nipples to titillate the skin of his chest while her eager tongue explored his mouth . . .

The orgasm was . . .

Was . . .

Implosive.

She move under him . . .

But although his body responded his mind was suddenly cold, frightened.

The orgasm . . .

Exgasm . . .

Ingasm . . .

She moved . . .

He tried to roll off her, but it was as though some fantastic acceleration were holding him tight to the yielding cushions of her body.

Her erect nipples . . . her eager tongue . . .

The explosive/implosive orgasm . . .

She moved under him sinuously . . .

And, he realized, the thin, high whine of the mini-Mannschenk was no longer steady, was oscillating . . .

He tried to break free from the strong cage of her arms and legs-and with startling suddenness, at the very moment of implosion, did so. He fell from the wide bunk to the deck, looked dazedly about him, at the crazy perspective, at the colors sagging down the spectrum. He heard her cry out but the words were gibberish. He ignored her, got unsteadily to his feet. The doorway, aft, of the engine-room-cum-galley was incredibly distant, at the end of a long, convoluted tunnel, the walls of which throbbed and quivered as though this were a duct in the body of some living creature.

He took a step-it was though he were wading against the current through some viscous fluid-and then another. Somehow the entrance to the engineroom seemed more distant than it had at first. He took a third step, and a fourth-and he was looking down at the casing of the mini-Mannschenk and felt his brain being scrambled by the weird warbling of the machine, alternating from the ultrasonic to the subsonic. He dropped to his knees and began to loosen the butterfly nuts holding the casing in place. He put a hand on each of the grips, prepared to lift the cover.

In the very nick of time he realized what he was doing. To look directly at a normally functioning Mannschenn Drive unit, a complexity of spuming, ever-precussing gyro-scopes, is bad enough. To be in the near vicinity of one that is malfunctioning can be suicidal-and eversion is a far from pleasant way of suicide.

Luckily the master switch for the machine was within arm's length. Grimes reached for it, threw it. The crazy warbling subsided, died, stopped.

"Grimes! What's happening?"

He turned to look at her. She was a naked woman. He had seen naked women before. She was a beautiful naked woman. He had seen beautiful naked women before. And her skin was too pale and the hairless jointure of her thighs made her look absurdly childish. Somehow the magic was gone out of her.

She said, "That-what we had just now-was what I foresaw at the start of the voyage. But what has happened?"

He said, "The mini-Mannschenn's on the blink."

She asked, "What's wrong with it?"

He said, "I'm not an engineer . . ."

He remembered how one of the overhaul jobs done by a starship's engineroom staff is a complete check of the Mannschenn Drive, including examination of every hollow ball bearing. He had blandly assumed that the ball bearings in this mini-Mannschenn, presumably of the same super-gold as the rest of the pinnacle and her fittings, would be immune to normal wear and tear.

"I'm not an engineer," he repeated. "No, that wasn't meant to be an excuse. It was self-accusation."

He lifted the cover from the machine, looked down at it. Even though he was no engineer he could see at a glance what was wrong. The spindle of one of the little rotors had slipped, at one end, from its mounting, was free to oscillate. He poked it with a tentative forefinger and it wobbled. Somehow this motion was just not quite enough for it to foul the other rotors. Had it done so the mini-Mannschenn could have been, probably would have been, irreparably wrecked.

There was a scattering of golden beads on the baseplate of the machine-the ball bearings. There was a scattering of gold beads and a little heap of curved, golden fragments. So he should have checked those bearings before lifting off from Port Muldoon, or hired one of the Port Captain's technicians to do so.

So he hadn't.

So what?

He hoped that there were spares, and tools.

There were.

There was no instruction manual.

There wouldn't be, of course. Big Sister, the electronic brain of The Far Traveller, had needed no such literature. But, he remembered, she had transferred much of her knowledge to the pinnacle's computer.

He went back to the main cabin, switched on the play-master.

Tamara said, "This is no tune to watch some trashy operetta."

He ignored her, said to the instrument, "Information on mini-Mannschenk maintenance and repairs . . ."

The diagrams and pictures succeeded each other on the screen. He said, "Hold it!" Then, "Play that sequence again."

While he watched he filled and lit his pipe.

She said, "Did anybody ever tell you that a naked man smoking a pipe looks ludicrous?"

"No," he said. "And if they did, I shouldn't believe them."

She asked, "And how long shall we be stuck here? The consignee of the mail paid Special Delivery rate-which means that the Post Office, my Post Office, is liable to a penalty for every day's delay over the specified time."

He said, "Be quiet, please, and let me watch this sequence."

She shut up.

It should be quite simple, thought Grimes. Once the proper number of bearings was in the channel, the race, the end of the spindle would lock automatically into place. Until this was done Little Sister would, of course still be proceeding in the right direction-but she would be going a long way in a very long time. Once the mini-Mannschenk was fixed she would be going a very long way in a short time.

There was one snag, as Grimes realized after the passage of about three frustrating hours. The instructional film had shown the maintenance of a full-sized Mannschenk Drive unit-a job for a team of engineers. The maintenance of a mini-Mannschenk is a job for a watchmaker.

And Grimes was even less of a watchmaker than he was an engineer.

Somehow he had contrived to unseat four other spindles and the deck of the engineroom-cum-galley was littered with golden ball bearings.

But he worked on with dogged determination, wishing, now and again, that Tamara would get off her big, fat arse and do something to help. He was vaguely conscious of her pale form at the forward end of the pinnacle, in the control cab, and supposed that she was either sulking or admiring the scenery.

Or both.

Chapter 9

She was talking to herself, he thought not very interestedly. He heard her voice but could not be bothered to try to make out the words; he was too engrossed in his ticklish, frustrating task. Then one of the little golden wheels, the spindle of which he had just pressed home into its mountings, sprang out again as soon as his hand was removed. It clattered to the deck and trundled forward through the main cabin. He ran after it, pounced on it just before it got as far as the control cab.

She looked up and around at him.

She said, "It's all right, Grimes. We shall soon have some real engineers to put your time-twister together again."

"What?" he demanded.

"You heard me." She gestured with the golden microphone that she was holding. "I could see that we were liable to be stuck here, in the very middle of sweet damn all, for the next ten standard years, so I put out a call for assistance on the Carlotti . . ."

"You did what?"

"You heard me."

"By whose authority?"

"My own. I may be only a passenger in this toy ship of yours-but I am also the Superintending Postmistress of Tiralbin. It is my duty to ensure that the mails arrive at Boggarty within the specified time."

He snatched the microphone from her hand, slammed it back into its clip on the control panel with unnecessary violence. He said, "Do you realize that this could lead to a salvage claim against me? Do you know that a salvage award is based on the value of a ship and her cargo? The cargo's worth damn all, but a pinnacle constructed of solid gold . . . I could never pay out that sort of money . . ."

She said sullenly, "That's a very valuable consignment of parcel mail that we're carrying. And I have my responsibilities."

He told her what she could do with them. Then he asked, "Did anybody answer your call?"

"A ship called Baroom."

Shaara, he thought, with a name like that. He said hopefully, "But you weren't able to give her our coordinates-"

"No. But they said that it wouldn't be necessary."

"They're homing on our Carlotti transmission I suppose."

"No. They said that they had us in the screen of their Mass Proximity Indicator."

And what the hell, he wondered, was a Shaara ship, a ship under any flag, doing in this particular sector of space, hundreds of light years away from any of the established trade routes? (The Shaara Queen-Captain might well be wondering the same about Little Sister.) Anyhow, it was pointless switching off the Carlotti radio which, to comply with regulations, had been in operation, maintaining a listening watch, ever since the lift off from Port Muldoon. Baroom had Little Sister in her MPI screen and, unless and until the mini-Mannschenk was repaired, could close her with ease.

Grimes lifted the microphone from its clip.

"Little Sister to Baroom . . ." he said.

"Baroom to Little Sister." The voice from the speaker could almost have been that of a robot; the arthropodal Shaara, telepathic among themselves, were obliged to use artificial voice-boxes when speaking with beings dependent upon sound waves for communication. "Do not concern yourself. We are approaching you with rapidity."

Grimes' own MPI screen was still a sphere of unrelieved blackness, but, of course, his equipment did not have the range of that carried aboard the bigger ship.

He said, "Please cancel my earlier call. I no longer require your assistance."

"But it is apparent," came the voice from the speaker, "that you are not yet proceeding under interstellar drive."

"I no longer require your assistance," repeated Grimes. He noticed that a tiny spark had just appeared in the MPI screen. "You may resume your voyage."

"We shall stand by you," said Baroom, "until you have completed your repairs."

"I think," said Tamara, "that that is very generous of them."

Grimes muttered something about salvage-hungry bastards, realizing too late that the button of the microphone was depressed. But no comment came from the other ship. He returned his attention to the screen, set up calibration rings, fed the data obtained into the pinnace's computer. He did not like the way the sums came out.

"Two and a half hours minus . . ." he muttered.

"What does it matter?" Tamara asked. "They'll just stand by until you admit that you're licked, and they'll send engineers aboard to do your job for you."

"But that's a Shaara-ship," said Grimes.

"And so what? I may not be a spacewoman, but even I know that the Federation is on friendly terms with the Hive. Hallichecki, or even some of our own people, like the Waldegrenans-we might have cause to worry. But the Shaara . . . They're civilized."

"I haven't time to explain now," said Grimes. He picked up the rotor from where he had put it, hurried back to the mini-Mannschemm. He must, he knew, get the thing operative before Baroom came alongside. The only Shaara vessel likely to be traversing this sector of space would be one under the command of a rogue queen.

Chapter 10

He had the thing together again. It looked all right—a complexity of gleaming, fragile golden wheels, the spindles of which were set at odd angles one to the other, an instrument rather than a mere machine, a work of abstract sculpture rather than an instrument. A work of mobile, abstract sculpture . . . He put out a tentative ringer, gently pushed the rim of one of the rotors. It moved under his touch, as did, in sympathy, the other components of the device. He felt a momentary dizziness, a brief temporal disorientation, as precession was briefly initiated. So it worked. No one part was fouling any other part.

So he had proved his capabilities.

So who needed engineers?

He called out cheerfully, "Stand by for temporal precession!"

He reached out for the master switch—there should be no need to reset the Mannschemm Drive controls on the console forward—pressed it down. There was a sputtering, a brief, brilliant coruscation of blue sparks, a wisp of acrid smoke.

Damn!

He must have scraped a wire clean of insulation with a probing screwdriver.

He switched off.

Yes, that was the wire, or, to be more exact, that had been the wire. Luckily he would be able to replace it without disturbing the rotors. He heard Tamara cry out, ignored her. She called out again.

"Yes?" he replied irritably.

"Grimes! They're here! You'd better get some help before you do any more damage."

"All I have to do is replace a lead."

There was another voice. That woman must have switched on the Normal Space Time radio, Grimes realized. "Baroom to Little Sister. Stand by to receive us aboard."

He called out, "Tell them that I don't need assistance."

"Grimes! That looks like a warship! There are guns, pointing at us!"

He hurried forward. Through the control cab ports he stared at the Shaara ship. She was a huge, truncated cone surmounted by a transparent

hemisphere. She looked like an enormous, metallic beehive. And, thought Grimes, staring at the extruding muzzles of laser and projectile cannon, these bees had stings . . .

He spoke into the microphone, "Little Sister to Baroom. Thank you for standing by us. But, I repeat, we do not require assistance."

"But you do, Little Sister, you do. It is obvious that your interstellar drive is not operative. By the time that you arrive at your destination you will be dead of old age."

Grimes doubted that. With a steady acceleration of one gravity, which could be increased if necessary, it would not be all that long before a respectable fraction of the speed of light was attained. And then there would be the time dilation effects . . . Nonetheless, planetfall would be made at Boggarty a long time after, a very long time after the expiry date of the contract. But the problem was purely academic. Once that wiring was replaced Little Sister would be on her way with time to spare.

"Baroom to Little Sister. Stand by to receive our boarding party."

"I do not require assistance," repeated Grimes stubborn.

He saw a flash of blue flame from one of the menacing guns and flinched. This was it. But the projectile exploded a good half kilometer from the pinnacle in a dazzling pyrotechnic display. Nonetheless, Grimes could recognize a warning shot across the bows when he saw one.

He said, "All right. I can take a hint. I'm opening the airlock door now." He pressed the necessary button on the console. He told Tamara, "Get dressed. The Shaara are only glorified insects, but we have to keep up appearances. Put on something with as much gold trimming as possible. And jewelry." Then again into the microphone, "You will have to wait a few minutes, I'm afraid. We have to do some minor housekeeping before we can receive guests."

"Do not attempt any treachery, Little Sister. And I warn you that our engineers are standing by to synchronize should you succeed in restarting your interstellar drive."

They possibly could, too, thought Grimes. With the two ships practically alongside each other Baroom's space-time-warper would be the master and Little Sister's the slave . . . He hurried aft, opened the locker that he was using as a wardrobe, practically threw on to his body the hated gold and purple livery that was a relic of his servitude to the Baroness d'Estang. As he fastened the last button he turned to see Tamara looking at him. She had attired herself in a long robe of dark blue velvet down the front of which sprawled a dragon worked in gold and jewels, its snout practically nuzzling her throat, a gleaming claw over each breast. Rings glittered on her fingers, pendants that were almost miniature chandeliers dangled from her ears. A golden tiara, set with diamonds, was dazzling against the blackness of her hair. He grinned, "You'll do."

She grinned, "And so, Grimes, will you. Anybody would think that you were a Galactic Admiral."

"Now," he told her, "we put out a fine display of booze and sweetmeats on the table. Those liqueurs of yours . . ."

"Anyone would think," she said, "that you like the Shaara."

"I get along with them-when I have to. And I know them, and their weaknesses . . ."

When they had put the liquor and candy on display they went back forward. Looking through the control cab ports Grimes saw that an airlock door was open in the side of the other ship. He said, "We've tidied up. You can board now."

"We are boarding," came the reply. "The Princess Shree-la and Drones Brrell and Boorong are on their way . . ."

Through his binoculars Grimes watched three figures, clad in cocoon-like Shaara spacesuits, emerge from the airlock, saw a puff of vapor from the rear of each almost featureless sack.

He said to the girl, "In their ships the captain is a queen. The princesses are her officers. The drones are, more or less, like the marines in our warships. The workers are the engineers and technicians." He paused. "I notice that the Queen-Captain isn't sending any workers across. Doesn't look as though she's in any hurry to help us to get the drive fixed."

"Then what does she want?" asked the Superintending Postmistress.

"Loot," said Grimes bitterly. "She's a Rogue Queen. She and her swarm are on a flight to try to find a suitable planet on which to settle down and found a new colony. They'll not be too concerned about the rights of any indigenes who may be in residence. Meanwhile, they snap up anything left lying around. Like us . . ." He paused, watching the three cocoons drawing closer and closer. "And this ship, this pinnace, will represent untold wealth to them. Their instruments will have told them what she's built of. And they love precious metals-for themselves, not only just for their monetary value."

"And the liquor? I've heard that they . . . er . . . tend to overindulge . . ."

"You heard right. With any luck at all the princess will dip her proboscis into a bottle, and the drones will follow suit. And when they've passed out I'll replace that burned out wire."

"But the Queen-Captain said that her ship would be able to synchronize temporal precession rates . . ."

"Yes. But I think that I shall be able to set my controls for random precession . . ." He hoped that he would be able to do so. He had seen the technique demonstrated during a Survey Service engineering course for spaceman officers. It involved hooking up the Carlotti antenna with the Mannschenn Drive controls, thereby engendering a sort of unholy mechanical hybrid. "They're here," she said.

"They're here," he agreed, watching the tell-tale lights on the panel that showed that the airlock was occupied.

From the NST transceiver came the voice of the Queen-Captain. "The princess is in the chamber. You will admit her to your ship, and then, one by one, the drones."

"Wilco," replied Grimes briefly.

The airlock, he saw was re-pressurized. He opened the inner door. The princess came through into the main cabin, looking like a sheeted ghost out of some old story of the supernatural. Anything at all could have been under the folds of that white shroud. Then the protective garment fell away from her, dropped to her taloned feet. She stood there, a splendid creature, as tall as Tamara, taller than Grimes, regarding the two humans through her glittering, faceted eyes. Her gauzy, iridescent wings hung down her back like a flimsy, bejewelled cloak. Golden filigree gleamed in the rich, chocolate brown fur that covered her body and bracelets of fine gold wire encircled, between every joint, her four slender arms. Her voice box, strapped to her thorax, was also of gold.

"Which of you is the captain?" she asked.

"I am," said Grimes. "And this is Madam Tamara Haverstock, the Superintending Postmistress of Tiralbin."

"And your name, Captain?"

"Grimes. John Grimes."

"We have heard of you." Although the artificial voice was without inflection Grimes could detect disapproval. He had become involved with an alcoholic Shaara princess some years ago and the news must have gotten around. "Now, please to admit my escort."

Grimes admitted them. They were smaller than the princess, each about half the size of a grown man. Like her they were lavishly bedecked with personal jewelry. Even their gun-belts and holsters and the butts of their laser pistols were as much ornamental as functional.

"May we offer refreshments, Highness?" asked Grimes politely.

The two drones started towards the laden table; the princess put out two long arms to restrain them. Then she walked slowly towards the display of refreshments. From her complex mouth a long, tubular tongue slowly uncoiled. She dipped it into one of the bottles, that containing the homemade Benedictine. Grimes, watching carefully, saw that the level of liquid fell, at the most, only half a millimeter.

She said tonelessly, "It is a pity that I must do what I must do." Her orders to the drones were telepathic. They approached the table, picked up the bottles, carried them through to the galley-cum-engineer room. Then, with obvious reluctance, they poured the contents into the waste-disposal chute. Grimes wondered what would happen to the algae in the vats-but, of course, all sewage and galley refuse was processed before being used as nutriment for the primitive but especially bred organisms.

"So you do not accept our hospitality," said Grimes.

"But I do," replied the princess. She picked up a little fondue in a dainty claw, lifted it to her busy mandibles. "This is quite excellent."

One big advantage of an artificial voice box, thought Grimes, was that it allowed its possessor to talk with her mouth full.

"I believe," she went on, "that your interstellar drive is inoperative."

"It requires only a few minutes' work, Highness, to make it operational," Grimes told her. "Work that I am quite capable of carrying out myself."

"And are you a qualified engineer, Captain?"

"No."

"Then I strongly advise against any tinkering, on your part, with that delicate piece of machinery. It would be a pity if this very valuable little ship were hopelessly lost in a warped continuum. Our technicians will put matters to right."

"I am quite capable of making the necessary repairs," said Grimes.

"You are not," stated the princess. "And now I extend to you and your distinguished passenger an invitation to repair aboard Baroom."

"Thank you," said Grimes, "but I regret that we must decline."

"Perhaps," said the princess, "I should not have used the word 'invitation'."

The drones, Grimes saw, had drawn their pistols. They looked as though they knew how to use them. And they would be bad tempered at being deprived of the free drinks that had been so temptingly displayed."

"What do you want with us?" Grimes demanded.

"That, Captain, is for the Queen-Captain to tell you if she so decides."

"Do something, damn you, Grimes!" shouted Tamara. "If you won't, I will!"

She snatched from the golden belt at her waist something that Grimes had assumed was no more than decoration, that was, in fact, a shin dagger. She sprang towards the princess. One of the drones fired, and she was nursing her scorched right hand, looking down at the hilt that, with a mere centimeter of still-glowing steel protruding from it, had fallen to the deck. The other drone fired. The crystals of her right ear pendant shattered. Blood trickled down her face from a dozen tiny wounds.

Grimes went to her. "We have to do as they say," he told her. "Even if we did overpower these three pirates their ship would vaporize us in a second."

"But the contract . . ." She was actually weeping, from pain or humiliation, or both. "The contract . . . The parcel mail . . ."

"It won't be the first time in the history of Man," said Grimes, "that the mail's been late or has never arrived at all."

He should not have been surprised when the open palm of her uninjured

hand almost knocked his head off its shoulders.

Chapter 11

Under the watchful eyes of the three Shaara they divested themselves of their finery-and much good had it done them!-climbed into their longjohns and then their spacesuits. The one that Tamara put on had belonged to the Baroness. She had told Grimes, "You may as well keep it. You may be carrying a passenger some time. And, all too probably, you'll be getting into a situation where life-saving equipment is essential . . ."

"You will leave the ship first, Captain," said the princess. "And then your passenger. You will assist her to make the jump."

"Did you ever try to teach your grandmother to suck eggs?" asked Grimes. It was obvious that no passenger could make a space jump without guidance.

"I do not understand," said the princess. "But do not delay any further. Go. I shall be quite capable of operating your simple airlock controls."

Grimes sealed his helmet. The suit radio was working; he could hear Tamara's ragged breathing. He checked the seals of her spacesuit then made his way to the airlock. The inner door closed behind him. He watched the needle of the pressure gauge on the bulkhead drop to zero. The outer door opened. He clambered from the chamber into the emptiness, being careful to keep a grip on one of the recessed handholds. Little Sister was still accelerating and if he cast adrift too soon he would follow a weird trajectory relative to her and might well expend all the reaction mass in his suit propulsion unit trying to get back.

The outer door closed.

While he was waiting for it to open again he looked across to the Shaara ship, a huge, menacing hulk against the starry blackness. All her lights were on, making it easy to see her. That inside the open airlock door was green, slowly flashing.

Tamara emerged from Little Sister.

She whispered, and even the distortion of the helmet phones could not hide the shakiness of her voice, "I've never done this before."

Grimes said, "And I don't make a habit of it."

And another voice-the princess aboard the pinnacle? The Queen-Captain aboard Baroom?-ordered, "Do not delay. Make the jump."

"Hang on to me," said Grimes. "You'll have to let go of the hand-holds first."

And that latter went for him too. He realized that Little Sister was falling up away from him. He got his left arm around her and both her arms went about his body. He could see her face through the transparency of her helmet. She was very pale, and blood was still oozing from the cuts on her cheek. He was lucky, he thought. Looking over her space-suited shoulder he

could see that he was lined up for the flashing green light. With his left hand he thumbed the button of the propulsion unit at his waist. He felt the not-quite-violent nudge at the small of his back as the miniature rocket fired. Had neither ship been accelerating he would have cut the drive at once, completing the journey under free fall. But in these circumstances he was obliged to maintain his own personal acceleration.

Deceleration would be the problem, although not an insuperable one.

He said, "Hang on to me."

She muttered, "I somehow can't see myself letting go . . ."

He took his right arm from about her shoulders. The grip of her arms about him tightened at once. With his right hand he found the propulsion unit control at her left side and was thankful that the Baroness had spared no expense in the equipping of her yacht; the space-suit gloves were of the very latest-and most costly-pattern, with fingertip sensors. Had it not been so he might never have found the button in time.

He made a slight adjustment of trajectory so that he was now aiming for a lighted port ahead of the airlock door. The Shaara ship was big now, very big, an artificial planetoid hanging in the void.

Now!

He released the pressure on his own firing button and, simultaneously, pressed the one on Tamara's suit. He was expecting the sudden pressure of deceleration; she was not. He heard the air whoosh explosively from her lungs.

And they were in the green-lit chamber, still moving fast but not dangerously so. By the time they made contact with the inner door they had slowed almost to a halt.

They thudded against the metal surface. He cut the drive of Tamara's suit. They dropped the few centimeters to the deck.

He said, "You can let go now."

She let go.

He watched the outer door shut. On a dial on the bulkhead a little yellow light began to move slowly clockwise. It stopped, changed to red. The chamber was repressurized.

The inner door opened. Beyond it a princess was standing in a dimly, ruddily illuminated alleyway, towering above a half dozen drones. These latter swarmed over Grimes and the woman, hustling them out of the airlock. Two shrouded figures brushed past them, looking and moving like competitors in a sack race with large bags over their heads as well as covering the lower parts of their bodies. The door closed after them.

Workers, thought Grimes. Two technicians to make up the prize crew . . .

The princess lifted the claws at the ends of her two forearms up to her

head, made a twisting motion. Grimes understood the gesture, unsealed his helmet.

The Shaara officer said, "You will follow me to the queen."

The air inside the Shaara ship was warm, too warm, and laden with smells that were not quite unpleasant. There was a cloying sweetness intermixed with frequent hints of acidity. There was the acridity of hot machinery and the subdued hammering of the inertial drive, the thin, high whine of the Mannschenn Drive that the Shaara manufactured under license for use in their vessels, having found it more reliable than their own dimension warping device-which Grimes had heard described by a Terran engineer as 'a pigknot of pendulums'. In a human ship the sounds of voices, laughter, music would have drifted through the alleyway, the combination of tunnel and spiral staircase. Here there was only a subdued humming, vaguely ominous. Luckily there were no obstructions underfoot; the lighting was too dim for human eyes.

Up they climbed, up, up, and round and round, the princess in the lead, the armed drones surrounding Grimes and Tamara. Up, up . . . And then they came into a huge, hemispherical chamber, more a conservatory than the captain's quarters aboard a spaceship. Moss covered was the deck and every pillar was entwined with broad-leaved vines, the darkness of the foliage relieved by huge, fleshy flowers. Grimes wondered briefly what it would have looked like in normal (to him) lighting; as it was the leaves were almost black and the blossoms glowed a sickly pink.

In the middle of this compartment was the queen-captain. Flabby, obese, she reclined in a sort of hammock slung between four pillars, sprawling among huge cushions. Two princesses stood by her, and a quartet of workers, as tall as their officers but with much broader bodies, fanned her with their wings.

"Captain Grimes," said the queen.

Grimes wondered whether or not to salute, decided to do so. Perhaps the capture of his passenger and himself was not piracy but only the result of some sort of misunderstanding.

Perhaps.

Nonetheless, he brought his hand up to his helmet.

"Captain Grimes; Superintending Postmistress Haverstock. You understand, Captain, and Superintending Postmistress, that your lives are forfeit. Always it has been the way with our people, long before we flew into Space, that any organism so hapless as to be in the path of our swarms has died."

"Royal Highness," said Grimes stiffly, "we were not in the path of your swarm. Your ship would never have passed close to mine if you had not made a deliberate alteration of trajectory."

"I should not have made an alteration of trajectory if you had not attracted attention to yourself," said the flat, mechanical voice.

"Even so," said Grimes, "I demand that Madam Haverstock and I be returned to our ship and allowed to proceed on our voyage."

"You demand, Captain? Only those with sting may demand."

"The Survey Service has sting."

"From what I have heard, Captain Grimes, I do not think that the Survey Service, even if it knew of your predicament, would lift a claw to save you. But you will not be killed at once. I may find uses for you and your companion. Go."

Telepathic orders were given and the swarming drones hustled the two humans from the Presence.

Chapter 12

They were herded through a maze of dimly lit tunnels, down ramps that were too steep for human comfort, towards, Grimes thought, the stern of the great ship. Suddenly the princess, who was leading the party, stopped. Four workers appeared as though from nowhere and speedily divested the humans of their spacesuits. To have resisted would have been futile. No attempt was made to strip them of their longjohns, not that it much mattered. The Shaara, although addicted to jewelry, did not wear clothing and the nudity or otherwise of their prisoners meant nothing to them.

A circular doorway expanded in what had been a featureless bulkhead. Grimes and Tamara were pushed through it. The door closed. They were standing in a cubical cell, the deck of which was softly resilient underfoot. Dim red lighting came from a concealed source, barely bright enough for them to be able to make out the details of their prison. On one padded bulkhead two spigots protruded over a narrow drip tray. Against the bulkhead at right angles to it, just above deck level, was a trough through which ran a steady stream of water.

Grimes remembered one of the courses that he had taken while still an officer in the Survey Service, a series of lectures regarding the general lay-outs of the vessels owned and operated by the spacefaring races of the Galaxy, the Shaara among them. This cell was no more-and no less-than an officer's cabin. One spigot was for water, the other for food. The trough was for general sanitary use. He realized that he felt thirsty. He went to the taps, pressed the button of one of them, looked at the blob of pink paste that was extruded on to the drip tray. He stuck his forefinger into it, raised a sample to his mouth. The stuff was bland, slightly sweet, almost flavorless. No doubt it was as nutritious as all hell but would be a dreadfully boring diet from the very start. Small wonder that the Shaara so easily became addicted to highly flavored Terran liquor! The other spigot yielded water-flat, lukewarm, unrefreshing.

Tamara joined him at the nutriment dispenser. She said, "At least, we shan't starve . . ." She did not sound overly enthusiastic. "But where do we . . . ?"

"There," said Grimes, pointing to the trough.

Even in the dim lighting he could see her angry flush. "This is insufferable! Surely they realize that we must have privacy!"

"Privacy," he told her, "is a concept meaningless to a social insect."

"But not to me," she said. "You're a spaceman, a captain. Tell these people that we demand to be housed in conditions such as we are accustomed to."

He said, "I've no doubt that this cell is bugged. But bear in mind that our accommodation is, by Shaara standards, first class."

"Not by mine," she said stubbornly. "And now, would you mind standing in the corner with your face to the wall? I have to . . ."

After an interval, during which he tried not to listen, she said, "All right. You may turn round now."

Their accommodation was first class by Shaara standards, but they were not Shaara. The food was nourishing, although very soon they were having to force it down, eating only to keep up their strength. They exercised as well as they were able in the cramped quarters when they realized that they were putting on weight. Before long they decided to go naked; the air was hot rather than merely warm, and humid, and their longjohns were becoming uncomfortably sweaty. After a struggle they managed to tear the upper portion of Grimes' garment into strips for use as washcloths. An estimated twelve days after their capture Grimes sacrificed the lower legs of his longjohns so that Tamara could use the material for sanitary napkins.

Now and again, although not very often, there was a flare-up of sexuality, a brief and savage coming together that left them both exhausted but strangely unsatisfied. Always at the back of their minds was the suspicion, the knowledge almost, that alien eyes were watching. Also, Grimes missed, badly, his pipe as a sort of dessert after intercourse. (He missed his pipe. Period.) And Tamara complained every time about the roughness of his face; there were no facilities in the cell for depilation. (He noted, with a brief flicker of interest, that her body remained hairless.)

Fortunately for their sanity both of them could talk-and listen. The trouble there was that Tamara, when Grimes was telling stories about his past life, would interrupt and say, "But you handled that wrongly. You should have . . ."

And after the first few times he would snap, "I was there, and you weren't!" and then there would be a sulky silence.

It was squalid, humiliating-but the ultimate humiliation was yet to come.

Without warning the door of their cell opened and a swarm of drones burst in and chivvied them out into the alleyway, along tunnels and up ramps until they came to a huge chamber that must have occupied almost an entire deck of the Shaara ship.

Chapter 15

It was, Grimes supposed, a recreation room-although it would have passed muster as an indoor jungle. There was the moss-covered deck, pillars so

thickly covered with flowering vines that they could have been trees, real trees the uppermost branches of which brushed the deck-head and, in the center of the compartment, was a seemingly haphazard piling of smooth rocks down which glistening water tinklingly trickled. And there was Baroom's crew-a scattering of bejewelled princesses, a rather larger number of gaudily caparisoned drones, a horde of comparatively drab workers.

The two humans were dragged to the pile of rocks, up it to a platform on the top of it. The drones returned to deck level leaving a princess there with them. Suddenly a bright spotlight came on, playing over their naked bodies. The princess extended one of her upper arms. The taloned "hand" at its extremity touched, first, Tamara's left breast, then her right, then descended to her groin. It hovered there briefly, then moved to Grimes' penis. Instinctively he tried to swat the claw away but, with lightning rapidity, another claw caught his arm, scratching it painfully.

"Do not struggle," said the princess. "You will not be harmed. We are instructing our crew. And now you and the female will perform for us your generative functions."

"Not a hope in hell!" snarled Grimes.

"I do not understand. Please to repeat."

"No," said Grimes definitely.

"You mean that you will not perform for us?"

"Yes."

"It does not matter," said the princess. "We have obtained certain records from your ship. Perhaps you will find it amusing to watch. We shall find them instructive."

Records? wondered Grimes-and then he remembered.

Not only his prominent ears were burning with embarrassment-the angry flush spread over his entire body.

To one side of the circular chamber the wall was clear of vegetation. It glowed suddenly with light-not the red illumination that was the norm for this ship but bright, white, with splashes of color. The scene was the cabin of Little Sister. There was a cast of two, Grimes and Tamara Haverstock. There was hardly any dialogue but there were gasps and little screams. There was an intertwining of naked limbs, an undignified, vigorous pumping . . .

"You bastard!" whispered the woman-the actual woman, not the one on the screen-viciously. "You bastard!"

"I can explain . . ." muttered Grimes.

"There are questions," said the princess. "Not many of our crew are familiar with humans and their ways. There are those who ask how many eggs the female will produce after the mating."

"You bastard." repeated Tamara Haverstock.

Chapter 14

For the rest of his life Grimes tried to forget the details of the remainder of the voyage. Thinking of it as a preview of hell might have been an exaggeration, but it was most certainly not a foretaste of heaven, and in purgatory (we are told) there is hope. Hope was a quality altogether absent from this cramped cell with its boredom, its savorless food, the hateful company of the hating woman who spoke only to snarl at him, who had lost all interest in her appearance and who had become a compulsive eater, whose once trim body had become a mass of unsightly bulges, whose breasts were sagging, whose hair fell in an unsightly tangle about her sweaty, fattening, sullen face. Even so small a comfort (small comfort?) as his precious pipe with a supply of tobacco would have made conditions slightly less intolerable, but he was denied even this.

But every voyage must have its end.

And then, at long last, came the time when Grimes woke from an uneasy sleep. The light in the cabin was changing, shifting, deepening from pink to violet and its perspective was no longer that of a cube but a tesseract. Tamara's sprawled, naked figure was as he had first known it, long-legged, firm-bodied, with the fine bone structure of her face prominent. She was snoring, but even that normally unlovely sound was musical . . .

Abruptly perspective, light and color were again as they always (for how long? for too long) had been. But sound was different. There was something lacking-and that something was the all-pervasive thin, high whine of the Mannschenn Drive. So, thought Grimes, Baroom was making planetfall. So in a matter of a few hours, or even less, it would be landing stations.

He touched the woman on a fleshy shoulder. Her eyes slowly opened. She looked up at him with an expression that at first was oddly eager but that almost immediately became one of extreme distaste.

She muttered, "It's you. I was dreaming, but . . . Lemme sleep, damn you."

He said, "Tamara, we've arrived. Or almost arrived. They've just shut down their Mannschenn Drive . . ."

"And so bloody what? Take your filthy paws off me!"

He snarled back at her, "For the love of the Odd Gods of the Galaxy pull yourself together, woman! We shall be landing shortly. I don't know on what world but we're liable to be meeting strangers. And you're a mess."

"And you're no oil painting yourself, Grimes!"

He ignored this. "You're a mess. The way you are a sex-starved second mate of a sixth rate star tramp wouldn't look at you!"

She glared at him, heaved herself to her feet. She shuffled to the drip tray on the bulkhead, used a scrap of rag to stop the outlet and then, using another piece of the rag from Grimes' longjohns, washed herself all over.

Somehow after the ablutions she was beginning to look as she had looked before the imprisonment. She struggled into her longjohns and the elastic fabric moulded and constrained her figure. Then, using her long fingernails as a comb, she tried to arrange her hair. Without proper treatment it would not regain its lustre but the worst snarls were out of it

She snapped, "Am I fit for parade, Captain?"

He admitted, "It's an improvement."

"Then may I suggest that you do something about yourself?"

Grimes tried, but without depilatory cream it was an almost hopeless task. He pulled on the trunks that were all that remained of his space underwear.

He sat down in a corner of the cell to wait.

She sat down in the opposite corner to wait.

At last a variation of the beat of the inertial drive told them that they were coming in to a landing.

There was a very gentle jar. The inertial drive fell silent.

There was a mechanical hooting sound that began suddenly, that stopped as suddenly.

There was a brief thudding that could have been a burst from an automatic cannon. There was silence.

She raised her eyebrows, asked, "Well?"

He said, "I don't know."

She sneered, "You're the expert."

There was more silence.

Suddenly the door opened, admitting six drones. Careless of the minor wounds they inflicted with their sharp claws they stripped the humans, dragged them out into the alleyway, down ramps to an airlock, both doors of which were open, admitting bright sunlight, a cool breeze. Instead of a ramp extending from the outer door to the ground there was a platform. On this was a cage—a light yet strong affair with aluminum bars. Grimes and Tamara were thrust into this and the door was slammed shut after them with a loud clicking of the spring lock. The deck of interwoven metal swayed under their feet, throwing them off balance.

Grimes looked up, saw through streaming eyes (the sunlight was painfully bright after the dimness to which they had become accustomed) a blurred shape like a fat torpedo. It was a blimp, he realized, one of the non-rigid airships that the Shaara invariably used inside an atmosphere in preference to inertial drive powered craft. He looked down and back.

Baroom had landed in a wide meadow, a field under cultivation, crushing beneath her bulk row upon row of low bushes. Close by her was the

gold-gleaming Little Sister, dwarfed by the huge Shaara ship. Over and around both vessels flew the bee people-princesses, drones, workers-rejoicing in the exercise of their wings. There was another blimp in the air, motionless.

He turned, barely conscious that his naked skin brushed Tamara's bare breasts, looked ahead. There was a town or a village there, buildings of almost human architecture. Between this settlement and the spaceships was a charred patch on the ground, an untidy, cratered patch of dark grey in the yellow grass (or what passed for grass), a scattering of angular, twisted wreckage. A ground vehicle? The burst of a cannon fire that they had heard?

"Where are they taking us?" she demanded. "Where are they taking us?"

"To that town," he replied.

"But why? But why?"

He made no answer. There was none that he could give. He looked up to the strong escort of armed drones that was accompanying the blimp. He looked ahead again. The air over the town was alive with swarming mote's. He knew that these were more drones. And yet it was no Shaara city that they were approaching. Such a center of population would have consisted of domes great and little, not buildings that, in the main, were like upended rectangular blocks.

The blimp flew slowly over the town, finally stopped and hovered over a wide central square. There was a new looking structure in the middle of this, a metal platform around which were standing Shaara-two princesses, twenty drones, a half dozen workers. Above the cage a winch hummed and rattled. Grimes and Tamara were lowered swiftly to the platform where the workers caught the bars around them in their claws, positioning the portable prison. The winch cable was unhooked from its ring-bolt. The weight released, the blimp lifted rapidly, turned and flew off in the direction of the spaceships.

One of the princesses started to call, her voice box turned up to maximum amplification. It was in no language that Grimes had ever heard although she seemed fluent enough in it. By ones and twos and threes the people emerged timorously from the buildings and streets around the square. They were more human than merely humanoid although blue-skinned, bald-headed without exception and with horn-like protuberances above where their eyebrows would have been, had they been a hairy race. They were clad, men, women and children alike, in drab grey robes, neck-high and ankle-length, with sleeves falling half over their three fingered hands.

The princess continued her incomprehensible spiel, the people stared stolidly through dull crimson eyes. The princess waved a contemptuous claw at the captives. The people stared. Then a man broke out from the small crowd of which he had been a member. A metallic object gleamed in his hand, a cumbersome pistol. Two of the drones fired simultaneously, slicing him into smoking collops. The stench of burned meat was sickening. A sort of moan went up from the assembled natives. The princess delivered a last peroration, then fell silent. At last, obviously dreading that they would

meet the same fate as the dead man, three women lifted the blood-oozing pieces into a small, two-wheeled hand-cart, trundled it away.

The sun blazed down.

There was no shade.

There were almost invisible, sharply biting, flying things.

Tamara sagged heavily against Grimes, slumped to the deck of the cage. She had fainted. Grimes clung to the bars, his head whirling, his vision dimming, fighting down his nausea. He knew that he could not long hold on to his own consciousness.

And then two of the workers produced from under the platform a light, folding framework that they set up about the cage, that was topped by a sheet of opaque plastic. The shade, briefly, was as welcome as a draught of ice-cold water. Another worker pushed a jug and a bowl of the sickly pink pabulum into the cage at Grimes' feet. The surface of the latter was soon black with the tiny flying things.

He looked from it to the huddled, unconscious woman. Should he try to revive her? She seemed to be breathing normally enough. It would be kinder, he decided, to leave her in oblivion.

From the direction of the spaceships came two bursts of automatic gunfire. The crowd moaned. A blimp flew overhead, in no hurry, going nowhere in particular.

Without too many contortions Grimes managed to sit down, avoiding contact with the woman's perspiring skin. He took a sip from the jug. The water was as flat and lukewarm as usual. He looked with distaste at the contents of the bowl.

He would have sold his soul for a smoke.

He was awakened by Tamara shaking him. When he had dropped off to sleep he had been too hot; now he was uncomfortably chilly. And yet it was still light. He blinked, realized that the glaring illumination came from three floodlights trained upon the cage.

She was babbling, "All these people, staring at us . . . But have something to eat. I saved you some. It tastes better than usual."

Grimes could guess why but only said, "Not just now, thank you. Any water left?"

"Yes."

He rinsed his mouth, swallowed. He got carefully to his feet, his joints creaking. In spite of the glaring floodlights he could see that the Shaara guards-or their reliefs-were still on duty, that the square was still crowded with citizens who must be prisoners as much as the two humans, although not as closely confined.

Then the lights went out.

Almost immediately a great oblong of bright illumination appeared on the wall of one of the tall buildings surrounding the square, down the facade of which a huge white sheet had been stretched. After a flickering second or so a picture appeared.

Grimes had seen it before.

Tamara had seen it before.

Again they watched themselves writhing in naked abandon on the deck of Little Sister's main cabin, again they listened to their wordless cries. But they were hearing more than the noises that they had made on that long ago occasion. The crowd was . . . growling. Its front ranks surged inwards, towards the cage, hesitated when the amplified artificial voice of a Shaara princess boomed out, when a drone machine gunner fired a noisy but harmless burst into the air.

But their guards made no attempt to stop the natives from throwing things, may even have ordered them to do so. As one the Shaara buzzed aloft, above the trajectory of the missiles-the rotten fruit, the garbage, the ordure. They returned to earth when the barrage had spent its fury, fired more machine bursts into the air while the princess in command ordered the mob to disperse. A worker threw a couple of rough blankets into the cage, another one pushed in a fresh jug of water, another bowl of the pabulum.

The princess said, "You will sleep."

Grimes and Tamara huddled together in their misery. Neither said anything. Neither slept.

The sun was well up when the blimp came to carry the cage back to the ship. With first light the mob had turned out in force to stare at the prisoners, to make threatening gestures, held at bay only by the Shaara display of weaponry. Grimes and Tamara were almost happy when their swaying prison was lifted high above the hostile crowd, thankful when they were set down on the platform outside Barooms airlock. They submitted with near-cheerfulness to the ordeal of a hosing down before they were released from the cage and dragged inside the vessel.

Their familiar cell was almost homelike.

She asked in a frightened voice, "Grimes, what was all that about?"

He replied, "I don't know . . . But . . ." He ransacked his memory. "I have read reports on this planet-I think. I have seen films . . . Those blue-skinned people, with the odd horns . . . And, as I remember, odd ideas. It's off all the trade routes, but the odd tramp calls here-Shaara, Hallichecki, as well as those from the human worlds . . ." The memories were coming back. "There was an incident-a Dog Star Line ship, and four of the officers, two men and two women, bathing naked in a lake. They were mobbed, stoned. Three of them died. The Dog Star Line screamed to the Admiralty. One of our-sorry, one of the Survey Service destroyers was sent here-not quite a punitive expedition, although it could have developed into one. But all that came of it was a directive to all Survey Service commanding officers and to all shipmasters that local prejudices, such as

the nudity taboo, were to be respected. But there was, I believe, a show of force now that I come to think of it. The village near which the murders happened was razed to the ground, but with no loss of life . . ."

A snore interrupted him.

He saw that she was curled up on the padded deck, sleeping soundly.

He sighed, tried to sleep himself.

At last he did, but not before his memory had supplied him with more details about this unimportant planet, this world just waiting to be snapped up by one of the major powers but so poor, so far from anywhere that only a Shaara Rogue Queen would be tempted to seize the prize . . .

Darijja . . .

Dominant race, mammalian humanoids . . .

Major religion, Darajjan, the worship of the god Darajja . . . Puritanical, condemning all sensual pleasures, sexual intercourse especially . . .

Older religion Deluraixsamz, worshipping fertility deities Delur and Samz. Adherents now persecuted minority . . .

Grimes thought, And now they have a new persecuted minority-us.

He drifted into a twitching, nightmare-ridden sleep.

Chapter 15

They were given time to recover from their ordeal and then they were flown to another town where they suffered a repetition of degradation and humiliation. Another brief respite, then another exposure to the abuse of the mob.

How long would it be, Grimes wondered, before they lapsed into gibbering idiocy? How long would it be before the Queen-Captain decided that their usefulness to her policy of conquest was at an end? And what would happen then? A swift and merciful slaying by their Shaara captors or a handing over of them to a bloodthirsty rabble?

But he was stubborn. While there was life there was hope. During every excursion from the ship he watched everything, observed, made mental notes. If they ever did escape, unlikely though this eventuality was, a knowledge of the country and its people would be essential to survival. The culture of Darijja, he decided, was early industrial revolution. There were railways, with steam trains. On the rivers were paddlewheel steamships. Once, in the distance, he saw what looked like a dirigible airship. He was almost certain that it was not one of the Shaara blimps; it was too long, too slender. The cities were gas-lit.

And the people? Regarding their hostility, he was no longer so sure. In every crowd gathered in every square or marketplace there was the majority who growled with rage and who pelted Tamara and himself with noisome missiles-but there was also a substantial minority that held aloof, whose

expressions seemed indicative of pity rather than of hatred or contempt. But this was only a guess, a wildly optimistic one. After all, on Earth, a ferocious baring of the teeth may be misconstrued as a friendly smile.

Tamara was holding up surprisingly well. The torture-for torture it certainly was-seemed to have snapped her out of her squalid apathy. In the cage she held herself proudly erect, staring disdainfully both at the natives and the Shaara guard. She did not look away from the screenings of her and Grimes' erotic games in Little Sister's cabin but, he was beginning to realize, watched with an odd combination of wistfulness and pride. Once she whispered, "You know, Grimes, I hope that this record survives us. It might even teach these joyless bastards what life is all about . . ."

She no longer over-ate. She reproved Grimes when he helped himself too liberally from the food spigot in their cell aboard the ship. She insisted that the pair of them resume their regular exercise sessions. But it was only in the cage that they could talk freely; it did not seem likely that the portable prison would be bugged, as their cabin most certainly was. They compared notes, discussed what they had seen and experienced.

"It makes a horrid sort of sense," Grimes said to her. "The Queen-Captain, the Rogue Queen, wants this world. Once she establishes her colony, once she goes into her egg-production routine-she may already have done so-the Shaara will multiply and only a few of the natives will survive, as slaves. Some of the natives must realize this. Some of them will want to fight. Some of them may be hoping that the Federation will intervene on their behalf. What the Shaara are doing to us, with us, is to show the Darijjans that humans are a decadent, degenerate people, inferior to the Shaara in all ways. I wish I knew their language. I wish I knew what that blasted princess is telling them every time that we're put on show . . ."

They looked out through the bars at the sullen, blue-skinned, grey-robed crowd, at the vicious, gaudy drones, the stolid workers, at the glittering princess whose words, booming out from her voice box, had become hatefully familiar although still utterly incomprehensible.

Chapter 16

The sun set behind the high buildings, the first gas lights flared in streets and alleys. The glaring spotlights came on, bathing the naked bodies of the prisoners in the harsh radiance. A worker standing by the projector switched it on and the screen stretched over a facade came alive with the all too familiar rendition of the erotic fun and games aboard Little Sister. When it was over there came the barrage of spoiled fruit and other garbage. Grimes and Tamara stood there, trying not to flinch, determined even in these circumstances to show that they were, after all, superior to their captors, their persecutors.

Somebody once said: It is a proud and lonely thing to be a man.

It was lonely all right, thought Grimes. As for the pride, he and Tamara were doing their best.

Then the show was over. The sullen worker threw their coarse blankets into the cage. The guards took up their stations for the night. The mob melted

away. A light drizzle started to fall but the canopy over the cage protected the prisoners. Grimes did not feel sorry for the Shaara guard who were exposed to the precipitation. He said as much to Tamara.

She said, "There's something . . . odd . . ."

"Odd?"

"The . . . smell . . ."

Yes, there was a strange odor in the air, carried on the slowly writhing tendrils of mist, a sweetish aroma, intoxicating almost. Almost? Grimes was beginning to feel light headed. He laughed foolishly. He muttered, "Come to Darijja, the vacation planet, where it rains gin . . ."

She nipped his arm painfully. "Snap out of it, Grimes! Something is happening!"

"And it can go on happening," he said happily.

"Look!" she said.

Dimly seen grey-cloaked figures were creeping into the square, converging on the platform on which stood the cage. The guards, standing like statues, ignored them. One of the natives approached a drone, raised his right foot, pushed rather than kicked. The Shaara toppled over, lay there with all four arms and both legs in the air, twitching slightly. The other drones, the workers and the princess paid no attention.

Two Darijjans clambered on to the platform, approached the cage. Grimes saw the gleam of metal, tensed himself for an attack. But none came.

A heavily accented voice whispered, "We . . . friends. We Deluraixsamz . . . We to you make bow . . ."

He suited the action to the words.

The other man was busy with a file, muttering to himself as he worked. A trickle of glittering, metallic dust slowly grew to a tiny pile on the platform. Losing patience he grasped the bar with both hands, jerked. It parted. The second bar was a tougher proposition but at last it was filed through, bent out and sidewise.

"Come," urged the speaker. "Come!"

Grimes wriggled through the opening, helped Tamara out. They wrapped the blankets about themselves like togas then jumped down from the platform. The cobblestones were hard and cold underfoot.

He started to walk toward the fallen drone but his guide grasped his garment roughly. "Come! Come!"

"Weapons," said Grimes.

"We take. Come."

Grimes saw that the grey-robed figures were busy about the motionless

Shaara. He saw the flash of a knife. So this was turning out to be a minor massacre. He said, "You've gone too far. There will be retaliation."

"We not here in morning," said the native.

Grimes sighed inwardly. It had always happened. It would always be happening. Guerrillas would stir up a hornets' nest-a very apt analogy-and citizens who had no wish for anything but a quiet life would pay the penalty. But in troublous times those who do nothing to resist the invader might well deserve all that comes to them . . .

He and Tamara hurried across the slimy cobblestones in the center of a small crowd of the devotees of Delur and Samz, whoever and whatever they might be.

They walked rapidly through deserted, gas-lit streets. It was still drizzling, although the light precipitation was now devoid of artificial additives.

They came to a large building with an ornate, pillared facade. The huge main doors were shut but they passed through a small side entrance, made their way through a great hall dimly illumined by a few flickering gas-jets, decorated with huge pictures that, as far as Grimes could see in the uncertain light, were crudely painted landscapes. Another small door admitted them to a long platform, beyond the edge of which parallel lines of metal gleamed faintly.

A railway station . . .

But where was the train?

There was no locomotive, no string of carriages. But there was a vehicle that was little more than a platform on wheels surmounted by a framework from which projected two cranks.

"Come!"

That seemed to be the only word that their guide knew. Grimes and Tamara jumped down from the edge of the platform on to the car, a half dozen of their rescuers followed. The cranks were manned and the crude vehicle rattled out of the station, picking up speed. Two others came behind it; all the guerrillas were making a getaway. Through the misty darkness they moved, picking up speed, through the town, out into the countryside. They clattered over a bridge, toiled up a steep incline with extra hands at the cranks, rolled down the other side with the driving mechanism out of gear. There was a deep cutting, a tunnel smelling of damp and soot.

Nocturnal animals cried in the bush to either side of the track-a weird ululation, a harsh cackling. Something clattered overhead, shrilly keening. Somebody started to sing aboard the rear rail car, a rhythmic chant that sounded as though it should have been accompanied by throbbing drums and squealing fifes. Other voices took up the chorus. The leader shouted loudly and angrily and there was silence-apart from the natural noises and the rattling of their progress-again.

Ahead there was a dim, flickering light. The cars slowed, halted. "Come!"

They scrambled down on to the rough gravel beside the track. Grimes cursed as the sharp stones cut the tender soles of his feet, heard the girl cry out softly. Once they were away from the ballast the footing was better, soft moss by the feel of it. By the faint light of the lantern the humans watched the natives working around the rail cars. They were rocking them, pushing them, grunting and panting. The first one, finally, was off the track. It was shoved away from the opposite side of the track, moving reluctantly as its wheels bit first into the gravel and then the soft, mossy soil. Then, suddenly, it seemed to leap away from the men shoving it. It vanished to the sound of an oddly subdued and soft crashing that abruptly ceased. Some rudely disturbed animal screamed.

The second car followed, then the third. They had been disposed of, Grimes realized, down a deep ravine—one that, Grimes thought and hoped, was masked by thick vegetation. "Come!"

The dim, yellow lantern, stinking of partially consumed animal oil, was bobbing away into the bush on the side of the railway track away from the gully. There was a path, of sorts, barely wide enough for the party to proceed in single file. There were wet, feathery growths that brushed their faces, spiny twigs that reached out for them from all sides. The going was hard, uphill. Grimes was sweating inside his makeshift garment, wished that he could discard it, but by this time he had acquired a healthy respect for the nudity taboo of these people.

Ahead of him Tamara's blanket was snagged on a thorn, was snatched from her. Her pale body was almost luminescent. A low cry went up from the natives. "Delur . . . Delur . . ." There was no menace in it. She retrieved her covering from the bush, slowly wrapped it about herself. "Delur . . . Delur . . ." There was still worship, but mixed with it was . . . regret?

"Come!"

The upward trudge continued.

And there was another light ahead of them, a flickering red flame set in the mouth of a cave. There were figures around the small fire who raised their arms to bring them sweeping down in a salaam-like gesture, who cried, "Delur . . . Delur . . . Samz . . ."

"We here," said the guide.

At least it made a change from "Come!" . . .

Chapter 17

Once again they were on display, but this time there was no overt compulsion, this time they were not in a cage, this time they were not facing a hostile mob. They stood on a stone platform at the end of a vast cavern, an ovoid chamber in red, igneous rock formed by long-ago volcanic action. Around the walls gas torches flared, giving heat as well as light. Behind Grimes and Tamara hung a huge, silken screen on which, in bright colors, glowed depictions of the loves of Delur and Samz.

Before them the women danced to the throbbing drums and the squealing

pipes, the deep-throated chanting of the worshippers. They were naked, these dancing girls, save for golden anklets and bracelets hung with little, tinkling bells. With their blue skins, their bald heads, their spidery limbs and their glowing red eyes they should have been grotesque, but they were not.

They were beautiful.

The tempo of the music changed, became slower, languorous.

On to the stage, stepping in time to the beating of the drums, swaying, walked a man and a woman. Each was bearing a golden chalice. The man bowed before Tamara, preferred the drinking vessel. She took it in both hands. The woman stood before Grimes, looking him up and down. Then she bowed and imitated the actions of her male companion. Grimes accepted the offering.

He looked at Tamara.

She looked at him.

Her eyebrows arched in tacit enquiry.

In reply he raised his goblet, said, "Down the hatch!"

She smiled slightly, raised her chalice to her lips.

He sipped from his.

The wine-if wine it was-was deliciously cold, aromatic.

Almost without conscious volition he drank deeply. The golden bowl fell from his hands as did the one that Tamara had been holding. The utensils rang like gongs, shrilled like coins being spun on a hard surface. Freakishly they came together, one nesting inside the other.

"Delur . . . Delur . . . Samz . . ."

The insistent throbbing of the drums, the high, sweet piping of the flutes . . .

She dropped her blanket . . .

"Delur! Delur!"

He cast his from him.

"Samz! Samz!"

And there was a rightness about what happened that had been altogether lacking from the erotic exhibitions before the assembled Shaara, before the jeering crowds in the market places.

Chapter 18

Grimes drifted slowly up from deep unconsciousness.

He opened his eyes, had difficulty in getting his bearings. On the ceiling, at which he was at first looking, was a painting in explicit detail of a pale-skinned naked god about to make love to an equally pale-skinned and enthusiastically receptive goddess. It reminded him of the erotic carvings in a cave near Bombay, in India, on far away Earth.

A cave . . .

He remembered then.

"You are awake, Captain Grimes?"

The voice was a pleasant one, speaking with only the slightest of accents. Grimes turned his head, stared at an elderly native man with wrinkled skin, with protuberant horns over his crimson eyes, dressed in a sort of scarlet sarong on the material of which, in gold, the motif of copulatory deities was repeated over and over. In one hand this individual held a lantern, with pressurized gas hissing incandescently in a mantel, in the other a wooden tray. He set the tray down on a low table beside the wide bed, hung the lantern from a hook protruding from the drapery covered wall.

Grimes turned over, then back again.

"Where is Tamara?" he demanded. "Where is my . . . companion?"

"Do not concern yourself, Captain Grimes. She was taken to her own . . . chamber. At this moment her hand-maidens will be awakening her, as I am awakening you. It is the custom of your people, I believe, to start the day with a cup of tea . . ." A very prosaic looking metal teapot was poised over an earthenware mug; the steam from the dark amber fluid issuing from the spout was fragrant and on any of Man's worlds would not have been exotic. "Sugar, Captain? Milk?"

It was real tea all right. Grimes sipped the hot fluid gratefully.

"A smoke, Captain? Or is it too early in the day?" Grimes stared at the packet being extended by a three-fingered hand. Caribbean Cublets . . . The trade name of the cigarillos was offensive but their quality could hardly be bettered. He took one, struck it on his thumbnail, inserted the unlit end into his mouth. He inhaled deeply. It was not as good as his beloved pipe, but it was much, much better than nothing.

"Now," he said, "please tell me . . . What is all this about?"

His visitor made himself comfortable on a three-legged stool. He lit a cigarillo, began to smoke with obvious enjoyment. He said, "My name is Lennay Torith Lannanen." "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Lannanen." "Mr. Lennay, please, Captain Grimes. Lennay is my father's family name, Torith that of my mother's family. But no matter. For many years now I have been the Agent on this world for the ships of the Dog Star Line. It is not a frequent service that they maintain-our exports are few and our imports fewer-but I have become a man of moderate wealth. Also I have acquired tastes for essentially Terran luxuries . . ." He waved his cigarillo towards the tea tray. "But not only am I a successful businessman. I am also . . . High Priest? Yes, High Priest of the Old Religion, Deluraixsamz.

"For at least three generations the devotees of Deluraixsamz have been persecuted, driven underground. But still we meet in secret, in temples such as this. We are . . . qualified to form the nucleus of resistance to the Shaara invaders, just as you and your companion are qualified to be our figureheads."

"Do your people love Earth so much, then?" asked Grimes.

"To most of the population Terrans are no more than not very pleasant aliens. But have you looked closely at the pictures on the walls and ceiling?"

"Mphm?"

"Delur, you will observe, is depicted as being white-skinned, not blue-skinned. Also-as is not the case with our women-she has a full head of hair, although elsewhere she is hairless. Her eyes are a most unnatural green, not red. She has only one pair of mammary glands. Need I continue?"

"Mphm."

"And now, her consort. The Lord Samz. He is exceptionally well-endowed."

Grimes looked down at himself. "I'm not."

"But, sir, you are-compared to our men. Even in repose you are a veritable giant."

Grimes could sense what the other was driving at and didn't like it. "But," he demurred, "I have a beard." He fingered his unsightly facial growth. "Your god Samz does not."

Lennay laughed. "Captain Willard of Sealyham honored me by staying at my home when his ship was last here. Inadvertently he left behind him a tube of the cream that you Earthlings use to remove unwanted hair. When I was obliged hurriedly to vacate my premises-as you can well imagine, almost the first act of the Shaara was to destroy my sun-powered Carlotti transceiver-I swept valuables into a carrying bag before fleeing. By mischance-as I at first thought-the depilatory was among the contents of a drawer that I emptied into the sack."

"The whole idea is crazy," snapped Grimes.

"But it is not, Captain. Insofar as our common enemy is concerned it will be a case-as your great playwright Shakespeare has observed-of the engineers being hoist with their own petard. You were paraded and humiliated as proof that Earthmen are only-as Captain Wong Kuan Yung of Lucky Star would say-paper tigers . . ."

"Lucky Star?"

"A very small tramp vessel. She was chartered to the Dog Star Line. Her crew were interesting people, somehow different from you others. But you obliged me to digress. The Shaara paraded you, degraded you. They put it about that you had been captured in battle and that you might not have

been captured had not you been deeply involved in an orgy of unbridled fornication. After the exhibition of that most excellent film the devotees of Darajjan will associate Earthmen with the proscribed Deluraixsamz and will hesitate to ask for the aid of such depraved beings even if they should find the means to do so.

"Mphm."

"But there is more, Captain Grimes. There is more. There is the prophecy." Until now Lennay had been talking quietly but now a note of fanaticism was creeping into his voice. "Is it not written in the Elder Chronicle that it shall come to pass that monsters shall fly over the land and the people be sore afflicted? Is it not written that in those times the mighty Delur and her consort Samz shall return, and shall be mocked and stoned by the unbelievers? Is it not written that Delur and Samz shall be succored by the faithful and will then arise in their burning wrath to scatter the demons from the sky?"

There was a silence, on Grimes' part an embarrassed one. He asked at last, "Do you really believe all that?"

"Of course," came the simple reply.

"May the Odd Gods of the Galaxy save us all!" said Grimes.

"Amen," said Lennay.

Chapter 19

Lennay called out in his own language and three of the native women came in. They made low salaams and murmured something. The only word that Grimes could recognize was "Samz".

"Go with them, Captain," said Lennay.

Interesting, thought Grimes. He seems to believe all this Delur and Samz nonsense, yet he still calls me "Captain" . . . The habits of a lifetime as a shipping company agent must be hard to break.

He was escorted by his attendants to an ablutions chamber. This was a small cave in which a natural hot spring cascaded down into a trough, lit by a flaring gas jet. A sub-cavern opened off this. There was another trough with a steady flow of water which vanished down a sinkhole. Its purpose was obvious, but was a god supposed to defecate and urinate? And was he supposed to do so watched by his worshippers? To his great relief the women did not accompany him into the natural water closet but waited outside. When he emerged, however, they took his hands and led him to the shower, went to work on his body with a strongly scented soap and a soft brush. When they had finished one of them handed him the tube of depilatory cream. They all watched with interest as his whiskers melted away under its application. Then there was a mirror, and a comb for his head hair and, after they had dried him with big, fluffy towels, a plain, dark blue sarong.

God or not, he was beginning to feel human.

Ablutions over, the women attired themselves in garments similar to that worn by Lennay, decorated with the Delur and Samz motif. They led Grimes along a gas-lit alleyway-this temple, so-called, was assuming in his mind the proportions of a minor city-to yet another chamber in the rock where Tamara was awaiting him. She, too, was sarong-clad, although hers was gold. An elaborate, pagoda-like golden crown surmounted her lustrous black hair and intricate pendants, interlocking rods and rings, dangled from the lobes of her ears.

She smiled.

She said, "We seem to have been promoted, Grimes. I thought that as Superintending Postmistress I'd reached the very pinnacle of ambition, but . . ."

He grinned.

"I got a kick out of regarding myself as Master under God. But now . . ."

She said, "Deities or not, we have to eat." She gestured towards a stone table at which were two throne-like chairs.

They seated themselves. The serving women brought in the meal. It was, fantastically, eggs and bacon, with toast and butter and sweet preserve, a pot of hot, strong coffee. The eggs, however, had a subtly fishy flavor, not unpleasant, and whatever animal had contributed the meat from which the bacon had been processed was not a pig, the toast had a nutty taste and the preserve, although slightly acid, was not marmalade, but the coffee was genuine.

She told him, "I have had a long talk with Dinnelor. She is the wife of Lennay, the High Priest and Dog Star Line Agent. They're real Terraphiles. This meal . . ."

"And these cigarillos-Smoke?"

"Thanks."

Lennay came in accompanied by his wife, a woman apparently younger than himself, her blue skin unwrinkled, the little pseudo horns on her bald head less prominent. The High Priest (the Dog Star Line Agent?) made a gesture. The serving women cleared the table, came back with fresh coffee and four mugs, two more chairs.

"You are ready for the day's work, Captain?" asked Lennay politely.

"What is a god supposed to do?" asked Grimes, then regretted the words. An agnostic himself he had always tried to avoid giving offense to sincere believers.

Lennay frowned sorrowfully. "Captain Grimes, please do not jest. I do not believe that you and Madam Tamara are actually Samz and Delur in person. But I do believe that the god and the goddess are using you as their instruments. I know that you are-or were-a member of the military profession . . ."

"How do you know?" demanded Grimes.

"The Dog Star Line captains and officers have told me about what happened on Morrowvia, have shown to me pictures of the people who were involved. I recognized you. Surely there is only one spaceman Grimes with such splendidly outstanding ears . . ."

Those prominent appendages flushed angrily. Tamara Haverstock laughed.

Grimes said, "All right, I was in the Survey Service. I held the rank of Commander when I . . . resigned. But I'm no expert on land warfare."

"But you are familiar with weaponry, Captain Grimes. For example, laser pistols. My chief clerk acquired six of them when you and the Lady Delur were rescued."

"Mphm. Have you any means of recharging them?"

"Regrettably, no. My Carlotti transceiver was solar-powered and, in any case, it was destroyed by the Shaara. But there were also four machine pistols and two light machine guns . . ."

"Ammunition?"

"Only the cartridges that were in the magazines."

"Mphm." Somehow that all-purpose grunt was not as satisfactory when delivered around a cigarillo rather than around the stem of a pipe. "Do you people have weapons of your own? Oh, you do have. When we were first put on show a man ran out waving what looked like a pistol and the Shaara cut him down . . ."

"One of us," said Lennay. "He-how do you put it?-jumped the gun. But, to answer your question, we do have weapons. Unfortunately there are, now and again, wars between our nations. I could have made a huge fortune by importing sophisticated killing devices but I always refused to do so. Now I am sorry. Well armed we would not have been a bleeng-a plum, that is-ripe for the picking."

"What do you have?" demanded Grimes.

"Cutting weapons. Stabbing weapons. Firearms. A variety of lethal and incapacitating gases and the means for their delivery. One of these latter, actually a potent insecticide, was used to effect your rescue."

"And do you, personally, the Deluraixsamz, have these weapons?"

"We have access to them. Unfortunately they are all relatively short range and the few attempts that have been made to fight the invaders have ended in disaster. Too, the high ranking military are all devotees of Darajja and fear a resurgence of Deluraixsamz and actually regard the Shaara as their natural allies. There was a Shaara ship here just over a year ago and the Queen-Captain ignored me but, to my certain knowledge, entertained and was entertained by Hereditary President Callaray and General Porron. They will learn, of course, that he who sups with the devil needs a long spoon, but by the time the lesson has sunk in it will be too late for

Darijja."

"Aircraft?" asked Grimes.

"None that are used for fighting. We do have airships for the carriage of passengers and urgent cargoes . . ."

"Buoyancy? What gas do you use for lift? Hydrogen, or helium?"

"I do not understand. Those words are not in my vocabulary."

Two of the very few that aren't, thought Grimes. He explained, "Both are gases, both are lighter than air. Hydrogen burns, explodes. Helium is an inert gas."

"Hydrogen," said Lennay.

"I take it, then," said Grimes, "that your Establishment is anti-Deluraixsamz, slightly anti-Terran, pro-Shaara inasmuch as they hope to use the Shaara . . ."

"Yes," admitted Lennay doubtfully.

"Also, you can give me weapons-the handful taken from the guards, a rather greater number from your own arsenals . . ."

"Yes."

"Then," said Grimes, "if I'm to be more than a mere figurehead in your revolt I shall want some idea of the tools that I shall have at my disposal. I shall want maps. I shall want artificers-the handgrips and triggers of the Shaara guns will have to be modified for a start-I shall want samples of your explosives. I shall want to meet your guerrilla leaders . . ."

"The Great God Grimes demands offerings," said Tamara sardonically.

"Dog-or bitch-shouldn't eat dog," Grimes told her. Lennay and his wife exchanged shocked glances.

Chapter 20

Grimes was not a soldier.

He possessed a fair theoretical grasp of space strategy and tactics but knew little of the principles of land warfare; throughout his Survey Service career he had always been elsewhere when courses in this subject were held at Lindisfarne Base. Nonetheless, he had glimmerings. He called for maps and a conversion scale. He demanded an inventory of arms and ammunition and explosives. He wanted to know how many members of the underground had military experience and how many, if any, were still serving in the Taraplan Army.

He got the maps first-a small scale one comprising the entire planet, other small scale ones for its continents, of which Taraplan was one, large scale charts of Taraplan's coastline and large scale maps of the inland regions. With Lennay instructing he soon got the hang of the various symbols, the

color coding that was used in conjunction with contour lines, the stipplings used to indicate population density and all the rest of it.

Lennay put him into the picture regarding probable future developments. It seemed certain that Hereditary President Callaray would soon sign a treaty of peace and friendship with the Shaara Queen and, shortly thereafter, would find some excuse, probably a manufactured incident, to declare war on Desaba, the island-continent-nation to the north. The Shaara would be his allies. First Desaba, then Kootar, then Raitu, then the Pinnerba Confederation . . . Finally, his ride on the tiger over, it would be President Callaray's turn to be eaten.

And that would be the way of it, thought Grimes. Even if Baroom were not employed as a flying fortress the Shaara would have command of the air. Their blimps were helium filled and would mount long range weapons; the native airships were hydrogen filled, pitifully vulnerable, and would be armed only with primitive, slow-firing, hand-powered machine guns. Too, the Shaara blimps could be-probably would be-used as carriers for platoons of drones, flying fighters who, with their laser hand guns, would make short work of the airships. And, he realized, there was his own Little Sister-a virtually invulnerable spacecraft also extremely maneuverable inside an atmosphere, a potential bomber, fighter, troop carrier, or all three.

So the Shaara would have to be stopped, now.

But how?

He studied the map on which the location of the cave-temple had been marked by Lennay, on which was Korong, the town from which he and Tamara had been rescued, and, further to the south east, Plirrit, near which the Shaara had landed, where their ship still was. Grimes was surprised to discover how close he was to what he regarded as enemy headquarters. Since the first landing he had travelled many kilometers by blimp, but, he realized, it had just been a case of there and back, there and back, there and back. This was the most thickly populated part of Taraplan with the major industries, the coal mines, the natural gas wells, the iron and the copper.

He picked up a pair of dividers, did some measuring off. As the crow flew it was just over five hundred drli from the temple to Plirrit. He consulted the conversion scale; that was three hundred kilometers almost exactly. The cave was a mere six drli from the railway track, the line between Korong and the copper mining town of Blit in the mountains to the north west. He assumed that his army-his army?-would have to be assembled in or near the temple and then would have to be transported to Plirrit. It was too far to walk, and a convoy of rail cars would be conspicuous. And, talking of rail cars . . .

He asked, "Mr. Lennay, has there been any sort of search for us? Has anybody found the rail cars that we abandoned?"

Lennay replied, "Very little time has passed since your rescue, Captain Grimes, and we have never, as a people, been in such a hurry as you Earthmen." He shrugged. "Often I have deplored this, but there are times,

such as now, when this leisurely attitude is to the advantage of the True Believer. We have had ample time to ensure that the rail cars can not be spotted from the air and that the marks of their precipitant passage through the bush have been erased. But there has been considerable activity by the Shaara flying patrols, up and down the railway line. And at least four square drli of the city of Korong have been burned, melted, vaporized with the marketplace as the focal point for the destruction."

"How many killed?" demanded Grimes.

Lennay shrugged again. "Only seventeen-in exact retaliation for the number of Shaara killed. There were none of our people among them."

"Wasn't that fortunate?" said Grimes.

"You have a saying," Lennay told him. "You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs."

It was Grimes' turn to shrug. He realized that a sarong is not a suitable garment in which to perform such a gesture. But it did not matter. The god Samz would go clothed or unclothed as he saw fit. He resumed his study of the map, jabbed the symbol for Blit with the points of his dividers.

"Copper mines . . ." he murmured. "Smelters, presumably."

"Yes, Captain Grimes."

"And the copper from Blit goes where?"

"Some to the householdware factory in Korong. Some to Plirrit, to the arsenal. Some to be transshipped to barges to Plirrit for passage to the coast, to Blargo, for export."

"Mphm." Grimes traced the course of the Kahar River with his dividers. At one point it was less than a drli from the field in which Baroom and Little Sister had landed.

He asked, "Do you have people in Blit?"

"Yes."

"In the railway service? But you must have. Those rail cars. The river steamer and barge crews?"

"Yes."

"I'm thinking out loud," said Grimes slowly. "Don't hesitate to shove your oar in, Mr. Lennay, if I'm getting too far off the beam . . ."

"Please?"

"Interrupt me if what I'm saying doesn't seem to make sense. What I have in mind is a consignment of copper ingots-it comes in ingots, doesn't it?-from Blit. It will be a normal shipment, up to a point. Korong will get their full quota. So will Plirrit. But the trucks that should be full of transshipment copper won't have any copper, although they'll have a full

load. Us."

"I begin to understand, Captain Grimes. Our forces will proceed down the Kahar River in the copper barges, will be disembarked at the closest point to the Shaara ships and then attack. But what can we do with our puny weapons against what is no less than a flying battleship?"

"Precious little," admitted Grimes. "But I do not intend to attack Baroom-or, if I do, it will be only as a diversion. My intention is to regain possession of my own ship, Little Sister. Once I have her I shall be able to do something."

"Is she armed?" asked Lennay.

"She wasn't when I was last aboard her, although the Shaara, by now, may have mounted a few cannon. But we must get her . . ." Another thought struck him. "How will you communicate with your people in Blit, in Plirrit? You have no radio, no telephones . . ."

"We have the railway," said Lennay. "There are pick-up points, known only to our people, along the track for messages."

"You were remarkably well prepared," said Grimes.

Lennay made one of his abrupt transitions from Dog-Star-Line-Agent-cum-guerrilla-leader to religious fanatic. He declaimed rather than merely said, 'This was all foretold in the Book of Deluraixsamz.'

"Mphm," grunted Grimes dubiously-but he had no intention of looking a gift horse in the mouth.

He discussed matters with his fellow deity.

She said, "We have to go through with it. It's the only chance we have to get the mail to its destination."

He could hardly believe his ears. Was she serious? He could not be sure. He said, "The mail? At this tune, of all times, you're worried about the mail!"

"Of course," she said.

"I'm the wrong god," he told her.

"What do you mean?"

"I should be Mercury, the Heavenly Messenger," he grumbled.

"As long as you can make out as Ares . . ." She grinned. "You don't do so badly as Aries."

He grinned back. "All right, Superintending Postmistress Delur. I'll get your bloody mail through. Eventually."

Chapter 21

A guerrilla band is not a ship's crew; inevitably there are too many chiefs and not enough indians. Fortunately there were only two gods and Grimes

was one of them. Unfortunately, as far as the worshippers were concerned, he ranked below Tamara/Delur, and she, as the top postal official of her planet, was convinced that she knew at least as much about running an operation as a mere spaceman.

It was an uphill struggle trying to lick the underground into some semblance of an army before the Shaara were too strongly consolidated. Like the majority of Survey Service spaceman officers Grimes had always rather despised marines, but at this period of his life he would have sold his soul for a tough sergeant major. He did have an ex-tarawon-a rank equivalent to first lieutenant-from the local army, but he had served in the catering branch and Grimes thought of him as a commissioned cook. He had three langaras-corporals-one ex and two still serving. One of these was employed in the arsenal at Plirrit and should have been useful. He was, at first, succeeding in sending a clandestine trickle of small arms and ammunition north west along the railway to the cave temple. His usefulness, however, abruptly ended. Having absented himself from his place of duty without leave he was put in charge of modifying the handgrips of the captured Shaara weapons. As an armorer he was naturally curious about these exotic killing devices. He tried to take apart one of the laser pistols to see how it worked. The resulting flare of energy killed him, destroyed three of the laser pistols and seriously injured his two assistants.

"You should personally have overseen the work, Grimes," said Tamara.

"I told Lannay to tell him not to tinker," Grimes said.

"I know from my experience," she stated, "that merely telling people is not good enough."

He found a carpenter who was able to fabricate wooden butts for the weapons. The trigger assemblies still were not quite right but they could not be fired either by Grimes or the natives without too much manual contortion. The main trouble was the limited life of the laser power cells, the lack of a supply of ammunition for the four machine pistols and the two light machine guns. The drum magazines for the former held two hundred rounds each and for the latter a thousand rounds. An experienced soldier would ration his firing to short, effective squirts; these enthusiastic amateurs would be liable to blow off an entire magazine in one wasteful burst.

There was a large cavern below the complex of caves used for the temple and for accommodation. This made an almost ideal firing range as the sounds of shooting could not be heard on the surface. The lighting-flaring natural gas jets-could have been better but the action, when it came, would be at night. Grimes sacrificed, in practice, one pistol magazine and part of another, leaving him only three of these weapons. He fired one short demonstration burst from a light machine gun, depleting its magazine from a thousand to nine hundred and fifty rounds. The three remaining laser pistols he did not demonstrate; there would be one for him, one for Tamara and one for Lennay who, as Dog Star Line Agent, had been allowed to play with such toys by one of the Dog Star masters who had been hoping to engage in arms dealing as a private venture.

Grimes was fascinated by the local weaponry, especially the heavy machine gun. This had six barrels rotating around a longitudinal axis and a gravity feed magazine. It was operated neither by recoil nor by surplus gases but was manually powered. All that the gunner had to do was point the piece in the right direction and crank a handle. The rate of fire was only about two hundred rounds a minute but the gun was sturdy and reliable. There was no shortage of ammunition-brass cartridges instead of the plastic ones to which he was accustomed, with heavy lead slugs.

There were pistols-primitive revolvers-and single shot rifles. There was a sort of mortar with a limited supply of gas shells. This Grimes could not try out in his sub-terranean shooting gallery because of its high trajectory, but with the projectiles that would be used extreme accuracy would not be necessary. There were rockets that would release a bright flare.

The lack of a common language, thought Grimes, would be the real problem; there was too little time for even a crash course in linguistics. Luckily Lennay and his wife were fluent in Galactic English and his chief clerk and three others of his office staff could understand and make themselves understood.

Meanwhile, there were the reports coming in from outside. A Shaara envoy to Kahtrahn, the capital of Desaba, had been mobbed and had escaped only by taking to the air, although not before her drone escort had inflicted heavy casualties on the natives. There had been an exchange of stiff notes between King Darrin of Desaba and President Callaray. Shaara blimps had flown over the archipelago of the Pinnerba Confederation and had been kept under close observation throughout by Pinnerban airships. In a world with no radio, no telephones or telegraphs, such news was old, brought in by the crews of merchant ships. More immediate information was that an unidentified airship, thought to be Desaban, had flown over Plirrit and that Grimes' own Little Sister, aboard which laser weapons had been mounted, had disposed of her with contemptuous ease. There had been neither survivors nor any readily identifiable wreckage.

"If we don't act soon," said Grimes to Lennay, "we shall miss the bus."

"Miss the bus, Captain Grimes? What is a bus . . . Oh, yes. A word rarely used now, but employed often by your Shakespeare. Buss. To kiss. But what has kissing to do with it?"

Grimes sighed. Tamara laughed and asked, "But isn't kissing what your religion is all about? Kissing, and . . ."

Lennay said stiffly, "Our rituals are symbolic."

Grimes grunted then said, "I suggest that we move against Plirrit as soon as possible. The men are as well trained as they ever will be. How soon can you arrange for the freight train to pick us up? And the river steamer and barge crews must be put into the picture."

Lennay told him, "Word will go down the line to Plirrit and up the line to Blit at once. Our supporters among the railwaymen and the rivermen have been standing by awaiting our orders. If all goes well, the freight train will make an unscheduled halt tomorrow morning. Arrival at Plirrit will be after

dark tomorrow evening. Late tomorrow night we attack."

But he was not ready, Grimes thought. He never would be ready. He was not a soldier.

But once he had the controls of Little Sister under his fingertips he would be once again in his proper element.

Chapter 22

Grimes was awakened by Lennay at an indecently early hour the next morning. He gulped tea, made a sketchy toilet, dressed himself in a knee-length black tunic, emblazoned back and front with the copulating deities, and a pair of heavy boots. It was better than the sarong, than nothing at all, but he did not feel at ease in this rig. He belted on one of the modified laser pistols. He followed the High Priest to the chamber where Tamara and Dinnelor were awaiting them. Tamara, too, was clad in a tunic although hers came only to mid thigh and left her smooth shoulders bare. Her belted pistol and the scabbarded sword over her other hip made her look more like a goddess of warfare than of love.

But goddess she was this morning, just as Grimes was a god. The two natives did not join them at their meal but humbly served them, anticipating their every wish, even to cigarillos when they were finished eating.

Then Lennay said, "Lady Delur, your people are waiting."

She looked at Grimes, who nodded.

She rose, saying, "Then let us go."

She led the way from the chamber, Grimes following, Lennay bringing up the rear. Dinnelor did not accompany them. They made their way along the tunnel. Ahead of them was a muffled thudding of drums, a subdued shrilling of pipes, a chanting of male voices only.

Delur . . . Delur . . . Delur . . .

There was no mention of Samz. Grimes began to feel miffed.

Delur . . . Delur . . . Delur . . .

The great chamber in which, not so long ago, they had performed their ritual lovemaking was now more parade ground than temple. Grimes was amazed at the martial appearance of those whom he had derided in his mind as the prize awkward squad of the entire Galaxy. In the front rank stood the three men who had been entrusted with the machine pistols, holding the weapons proudly at salute, flanked by the four men, two to each stretcher, with the light machine guns. Behind them was the crew of the heavy machine gun which had been dismantled-the carriage on one stretcher, the barrel assembly on another, magazines and ammunition on two more of the litters. Then there was the mortar, similarly broken down, with its projectiles, and two men each carrying a bundle of sticked rockets. Behind them were the ranks of the riflemen, the flaring gaslight reflected from their fixed bayonets. Unluckily these latter must be left behind; only

three freight trucks would be available.

Delur . . . Delur . . . Delur . . .

She looked at him questioningly.

"Get the show on the road," he told her spitefully.

She said, "You're the military expert, Grimes."

He said, "And you're the chief figurehead."

She shrugged almost imperceptibly. She asked the Dog Star Line Agent, "Mr Lennay, will you escort us down to the railway?"

"To hear is to obey, Lady Delur."

Lennay barked orders in his own language. With himself in the lead, with Grimes and Tamara following, the raiding party made its way from the huge chamber, through the tortuous approach tunnel, to the open air. It was dark still outside. A thin, warm drizzle was falling. It was very quiet but, from a great distance, came the muffled panting and rattling of a steam drawn train. Grimes doubted if any Shaara would be aboard at this hour; they operated, whenever possible, during daylight only. Of course one of the native airships might be overhead, silently drifting, but this was not likely. Unless there were traitors in the underground nobody would know of the location, the existence even, of the cave temple. Nobody would be expecting this attack.

Lennay led the way down the almost completely overgrown path, the light from his dimmed lantern throwing a pool of wan light around his feet. Grimes and Tamara kept close behind him to get the benefit of what little illumination there was. Behind them the men carrying the heavy weaponry were surprisingly sure-footed although their heavy breathing almost drowned out the noise of the approaching train.

They came at last to the faintly gleaming tracks. Lennay took his stance between the parallel lines of wet metal, adjusting his lantern so that the beam was shining uphill. Suddenly the locomotive came into view, its pressurized gas headlight throwing a glaring shaft of yellow radiance through the misty air. Ruddy sparks erupted from its high tunnel.

The thing was obviously slowing. It came to a halt, with a screeching of brakes and a strident hiss of escaping steam, just two meters short of where Lennay was standing. Somebody called out from the driver's cab. Lennay replied. A man jumped down from the engine, led the way to the first of the tarpaulin covered trucks. He tapped securing bolts with a hammer. A door in the side of the truck crashed down.

Grimes watched, saw the native machine gun lifted aboard, its ammunition, its carriage. The mortar followed it, then the crews of both weapons. The door was lifted up and re-secured. The Shaara light machine guns went into the second truck, the rockets, their crews and the three men with Shaara machine pistols. The third truck, obviously, was reserved for Delur and Samz and their High Priest. Although it was little more than an iron tank of

triangular cross section somebody had tried to make it comfortable. There were cushions-only sacking-covered pads of some vegetable fibre but far better than nothing. There was a big stone jug of wine, an almost spherical loaf of bread, a hunk of something unidentifiable in the dim light of Lennay's lantern but which Grimes later found to be strongly flavored smoked meat.

When they were aboard the railwayman bowed low. "Delur . . ." he murmured. "Samz . . ." The door was lifted back into place by two riflemen who, their escort duties over, would be returning to the cave. The securing bolts were hammered home. Almost immediately the engine chuffed loudly, there was a sudden jerk and the train had resumed its journey.

Chapter 25

It was not the first time that Grimes had travelled by railway. On such Man-colonized planets that favored this mode of transportation he had enjoyed being a passenger in the luxurious tourist trains, fully agreeing with their advertising which invariably claimed that the only way really to see a country is from ground level at a reasonable speed. But this was no superbly appointed tourist coach with skimpily uniformed stewardesses immediately attentive to every want. This was a dirty freight track-damp as well as dirty; the tarpaulin spread over the open top of it was leaking in several places. There were only rudimentary springs and the padding of the cushions was soon compressed by the weight of their bodies to a boardlike hardness.

They rattled on.

Lennay extinguished his lantern but there was now enough grey light seeping under the edges of the tarpaulin and through the worn spots for Grimes to be able to distinguish the faces of his companions. Tamara had adopted a pose of bored indifference. Lennay looked, somehow, rapt and was mumbling something in his own language. A prayer? Or was he calling down curses on the collective head of the management of the Blit to Plirrit Railway? Grimes looked at the wine and the food hungrily but waited for one of the others to make the first move. He was conscious of the fact that there were no toilet facilities in this crude conveyance.

They rattled on.

Abruptly Tamara rose unsteadily to her feet and said, "Turn away, both of you . . ." She went to the far end of the truck, after a short while returned. The smell of urine was sharp in the air. How was it, Grimes wondered, that the writers of the adventure stories that he had enjoyed as a boy, still enjoyed, could always so consistently ignore the biological facts of life? The bladder of the thriller hero was similar to the sixshooter of the protagonist of the antique Western films which, every now and again, enjoyed a revival; one never needed emptying, the other was never empty.

They rattled on.

Tamara actually slept. Lennay went on mumbling his prayers. Grimes went over and over again in his mind his plan of campaign. He would almost certainly have to play by ear, he realized, but he tried to work out courses

of action to suit all eventualities. He joined the others in a simple meal of meat and bread and the thin, tart wine. He smoked a cigarillo. He hoped that he would find his pipe and tobacco aboard Little Sister.

Late in the afternoon the train stopped at Korong. After fifteen minutes of bone rattling shunting it was on its way once more, bound for the riverside wharves at Plirrit. Tamara slept again, Grimes dozed. Lennay lapsed into silence. Darkness fell again but, as the drippings through the tarpaulin had ceased, it must have stopped raining.

Then, quite suddenly, came the final halt.

There were voices outside the truck, the sharp sound of a hammer knocking out the retaining bolts of the side door. It fell down with a metallic crash. There were men outside with lanterns, their red eyes gleaming eerily in the darkness. All of them made the salaaming gesture. Grimes put his hastily drawn pistol back into its holster; these were friends. Or worshippers. He heard them murmur, "Delur . . . Samz . . ."

Tamara got to her feet. Her long, pale legs, her smooth shoulders were luminescent in the near darkness. She raised her arms in blessing.

Grimes said to Lennay, "Is all in order?"

"Yes, Lord Samz. The steamer and the barges are waiting."

"Then the sooner we get moving the better."

He jumped down to the ground beside the railway tracks, staggered then recovered. He looked past the welcoming committee to what must be the wharf. He could make out a high funnel from which smoke was pouring and an occasional flurry of sparks, the humped profile of paddle boxes. Turning back to the train he saw that the arms were being unloaded and that the heavy machine gun crew already had their cumbersome weapon almost reassembled. The two Shaara guns and the mortar were being carried down to the edge of the wharf to a position somewhat abaft the steamer. He followed them, watched as a small crane with a hand winch lifted them, swung them out and lowered them on to a flat barge that was little more than a floating oblong box. The heavy gun was wheeled up on its carriage, sent to join the light weapons on top of the hatch boards.

"It is well, Lord Samz," said Lennay.

"I hope so," said Grimes.

He jumped down to the deck, stood there to catch Tamara as she followed him. Lennay used a ladder set between the wharf piles then made a brief check of personnel and equipment. He reported to Grimes that everybody and everything were aboard the barge, then shouted something to one of the men on the shore. There was more shouting back and forth, a brief toot from the whistle of the little steamer. Grimes, standing forward in the barge, saw that this vessel had let go her moorings, that the paddles were starting to turn. The bight of the towline lifted from the water but before it came taut the barge's lines were slipped. The wharf pilings began to slide slowly astern as the gap between the rivercraft and the bank widened. The

steady thunk, thunk, thunk of the paddlewheels became faster and faster; spray pattered down on the foredeck of the barge.

To port now was the city, poorly lit by the gas street-lamps, with only the occasional window showing a gleam of light. There were no signs of movement, no noise. Presumably patrols would be aboard but the passage of a regular copper shipment downriver would not excite their attention. Then, ahead and to starboard, there was a flashing of bright lights, the beat of mighty engines. Grimes cursed. It was obvious to him that Baroom was about to lift, was already lifting. The Queen-Captain was taking her ship to elsewhere on this continent, or on this planet. And with her would go Little Sister-and without a ship, even only a very small ship, the anti-Shaara forces would be able to do no more than fight a long delaying action with almost certain defeat at the end of it.

But was Little Sister accompanying the Shaara ship? Grimes could not hear the distinctive note of her inertial drive. He began to hope again.

"Captain Grimes, we are too late," said Lennay heavily. And was that relief or disappointment in his voice? Either way Grimes had been demoted; he was no longer the Lord Samz.

"What do we do now, Grimes?" asked Tamara.

He said, "We come in to the bank for a landing as has already been arranged. We stage a diversion." Then to Lennay, "Pass the orders, please."

"But, Captain Grimes, we are too late!" Lennay pointed upwards to Baroom, lifting fast and with her lateral thrust driving her northwards. Her shape was picked out by only a few sparse lights and she looked as insubstantial as one of her own blimps or one of the native airships.

But she was the only spaceship aloft, of that Grimes was certain. He said, "Baroom's away to raise hell some other place, but it stands to reason that the Rogue Queen will leave some sort of force here. A princess or two, a squad of drones, a few workers-and a ship. Little Sister. Things are much better than I thought they'd be."

"The eternal optimist," commented Tamara tartly.

"Too right," agreed Grimes cheerfully. His doubts, his misgivings were fast evaporating. He stared ahead. According to the chart that he had studied there should be a tall, prominent tree on the bank, just inshore from a spit extending into the river. The steamer, of course, would steer well clear of this hazard but the barge, by application of full starboard rudder, would sheer on to it at speed, at the same time slipping the towline. The paddle-boat would continue her noisy passage downstream with no cessation of the beat of her engines and any Shaara listeners would suspect nothing amiss.

He could see the tree now, in silhouette against a faint glow from inland.

"Starboard rudder," he ordered quietly. Lennay relayed the order.

The towline was now leading broad out on the port bow of the barge, the

tree was almost ahead. "Let go!"

Again Lennay passed on the order. The riverman standing by the bits cast off a couple of turns, then two more. The rope hissed around the posts, running out fast. Grimes had to step back to avoid being hit by the end as it whipped free, and then the barge was on her own, still making way through the water, still answering her helm-not that it mattered now; the current would carry her on to the spit.

She grounded gently. Her stern swung inshore so that she fell alongside the spit as to a jetty, held there by the stream. It could hardly have been better.

Grimes said to Lennay, "Just stay put, all of you. I'm going to have a look-see."

He stepped up on to the low gunwale, looked down. There was only a narrow ribbon of black water between the side of the barge and the pale sand. He jumped, landing on dry ground. He walked slowly inland, the sand crunching under his boots. He clambered up the low bank, through the scrub. He reached the top.

He looked across the cultivated fields with their neat rows of low bushes, slightly less dark than the soil from which they grew, to the Shaara camp. There was a low dome, probably a large inflatable shelter, quite brightly illuminated from within, looking like a half moon come down from the sky and sitting on the ground. But his main attention was focused on the slim, golden torpedo shape dimly gleaming a little to the right of the luminescent hemisphere.

Grimes made his plans-or, more correctly, made a selection from the several alternatives that had been simmering in his mind. The heavy machine gun, the two Shaara automatic guns and the mortar would have to be dragged up and trained on the enemy encampment. As the mortar had a high trajectory it could be fired from the cover of a low knoll but the machine gunners would have to take their chances. They should, however, be beyond the effective range of hand lasers and the gun was fitted with a shield heavy enough to stop bullets from the Shaara machine pistols. The signal rockets? Grimes had thought of using them to illuminate the scene of action but now considered that this would be more disadvantageous than otherwise to his own forces. But if a couple or three of them could be fired, on low trajectory, at the dome coincidentally with the commencement of machine gun and mortar fire they would contribute to the initial confusion.

He returned to the barge, told Tamara and Lennay what he had decided, bore a hand in the manhandling of the weapons up to the top of the bank. He wondered briefly what detection devices the Shaara might have then he decided that it was no use worrying about that now. He had become involved, more than once, with the bee people during his Survey Service career and knew that-in some ways-they were amazingly primitive. With any luck at all there would be only a handful of sluggish drones on duty with no electronic devices to do their work for them.

He went to some trouble over the positioning of the guns and found a bush

the forked branches of which afforded launching racks for the rockets. He made sure that Lennay's chief clerk, who was to be left in charge of the makeshift battery, knew what was expected of him. Then, accompanied by Tamara, Lennay and two men with Shaara machine pistols, he made his way upriver a little to where an aisle between the low bushes led almost directly to Little Sister. It was fortunate that so much light was being reflected from the overcast, both from the city and from the glowing dome. Had it not been so it would have been necessary to use the rockets for the purpose for which they had been designed, thus making targets of himself and his people.

"Now?" asked Lennay softly.

"Now!" whispered Grimes.

Lennay whistled sharply.

The rocketeers drew the friction strips over the striking surfaces. The machine gunner began to turn his handle. The mortar loader dropped a round into the gaping muzzle of his weapon.

The screaming roar of the big rockets, the whumpf! of the mortar, were drowned by the strangely leisurely yammering of the machine gun. The missiles streaked just above the low bushes trailing fire and smoke. Unluckily the Darijjan machine gun did not have tracer bullets so Grimes could not tell if the fire was accurate or not. And the gas shell fired by the mortar made no flash on bursting and the vapor, in this lighting, would be almost invisible.

The first rocket hit the ground a little to one side of and just beyond the dome, the second one freakishly swerved from its trajectory and screamed downriver. The flare, burning on the ground, threw the bushes into sharp, black silhouette. The mortar fired again, and again. The machine gun maintained its deliberate hammering.

Grimes started to run toward the distant Little Sister. It was heavy going; the damp soil between the rows of bushes clung to his boots, slowing him down. Too, he was badly out of condition; the period of imprisonment followed by the excesses in the cave temple had not left him in a fit state for a cross country run. Only his pride prevented him from allowing Lennay or the other two natives to take the lead. It was some small consolation to him that, to judge from the rasping gasps that he could hear behind him, Tamara was as badly off as he was.

Shaara were boiling out from the dome like bees from a disturbed hive. Those in the lead staggered, fell before they could spread their wings. Either the machine gun fire was taking effect or it was the gas from the mortar shells. There was a brief retreat, and when the Shaara emerged again they were wearing cocoon-like spacesuits. In these garments they could hold their weapons but would find it hard to fire them; more important, they could not fly.

Another rocket landed right at the base of the dome. Although the material was not inflammable it must have been melted at the point of impact by the heat of the flare. The structure began to collapse like a slowly deflating

balloon.

The Shaara were running now between the rows of bushes. Hampered by their suits they were moving as though in slow motion, looking more like huge amoeba than the highly evolved arthropods that they were. They were spreading out to get clear of the field of fire of the heavy machine gun; fortunately none of them seemed to have noticed Grimes and his party. Dispersed as they were they were no longer a good target for the mortar; as soon as any of them reached a gas-free area the hampering spacesuits would be shed and they would counter attack, viciously.

Three shrouded figures were hobbling towards Little Sister-one was comparatively large, a princess, the other two had to be drones. Grimes stopped running, pulled his hand laser from its holster. "Get them!" he gasped to Lennay. "Get them!"

He fired, the control of the weapon set to the power-wasting slashing beam. Lennay fired. Tamara fired. Bushes around the three Shaara flared into smoky flame but the bee people carried on doggedly, although their mode of progression was now a kangaroo-like leap rather than a sack-race hobble. Grimes was sure that he'd hit the princess; he saw her suit glow briefly as the laser beam whipped across it. But the material of a spacesuit is made to resist great extremes of temperature . . .

The Darrijans with the machine pistols each let off a burst. They did not ration their shots. The gun with only one hundred and eighty rounds in its magazine ceased firing first.

But one of the Shaara-a drone-was down. Another-the princess-was hit. She staggered, almost fell, but carried on, hobbling again, with the remaining drone helping her.

It was a race now for the open airlock door of Little Sister. It was a race that the Shaara won by rather more than a short nose, with Grimes running third. He hurled himself through both open doors, into the main cabin, just as the Shaara princess reached the control cab. Her intention was obvious; had Grimes been a microsecond later he would have been trapped by the closing inner valve. The drone turned to face him and, in spite of the hampering cocoon, managed to raise a claw holding a laser pistol. Grimes fired first. He did not aim for the body but for the unprotected weapon. It exploded dazzlingly. The drone, his suit and body pierced by sharp slivers of metal and crystal, slumped to the deck. The princess turned away from the controls. She was unarmed-but so was Grimes. His hand laser would have been effective if played across the stitching of bulletholes in the other's spacesuit, but the power pack of the weapon was dead. It had been his bad luck to select for his weapon the one in greatest need of recharging.

She came towards him, grotesque, frightening. Even with the limited play allowed to her limbs by the suit she had four arms against his two, a pair of arms to hold his immobile, the other two to crush, to strangle.

Grimes . . . kicked. The skirted tunic was more hampering than the shorts that were his normal wear would have been. He had aimed for the body but

his foot made contact with the upper part of the princess's left leg. He felt and heard chitin crumple under the blow. He stumbled backwards as the Shaara toppled forwards, all four of her arms flailing and clutching. One sheathed talon touched his ankle but failed to close about it.

And then, before she could recover from the fall, he was on her, kicking and stamping viciously, the tough exoskeleton shattering under the impact of his boots. He trampled over the long abdomen, jumped and brought the weight of both feet down on the thorax. He reduced the head to a pulp.

Abruptly he desisted.

Shame flooded his consciousness. He had been obliged to kill his enemy but there had been no need for him to make such a meal of it. Had he and Tamara not suffered such humiliations at the hands of the Shaara he would have acted like a Terran naval officer, not like a bloodthirsty savage . . .

The shame evaporated.

He realized that he did not feel sorry.

He went to the control panel-familiar but for the laser cannon trigger mechanisms that had been mounted above the other instruments-and pressed the button that would open the airlock doors. Then he started up the inertial drive.

Chapter 24

As soon as the others were aboard Grimes lifted the pinnacle, swinging her so that she was heading towards the river, towards their landing place. He could see the muzzle flashes of the heavy machine gun and, briefly, a flurry of fire from the two captured Shaara light automatics. Even as he watched, this evidence of resistance ceased. Then a rocket climbed into the dark air, burst. Its blue-white flare drifted slowly downwards, illuminating the fields with a scattering of motionless Shaara spacesuits-empty or occupied?-among the neat rows of bushes, with Darijjan bodies, some still moving, huddled around the useless guns. The surviving drones were airborne now, shooting down at the landing party, and there was nothing with which the crew of the battery could reply except the easily avoided signal rockets. The heavy machine gun could not be elevated. There had been one machine pistol but all too probably the entire magazine had been blown away in one futile burst

Another rocket went up, and another. There was an explosion at ground level, a great gout of orange fire and billowing, ruddy smoke, as a laser beam touched off the ammunition reserve of the heavy automatic.

Grimes had been given no opportunity to check the disposition of the twin laser cannon with which Little Sister was now armed. He assumed that they were on fixed mounts, pointing directly forward and could be aimed only by aiming the pinnacle herself. Luckily the Shaara firing and selector studs that had been added to the console were almost the same as those for Terran weapons of the same kind, modified to suit arthropodal claws rather than human fingers. Grimes snatched a stylus from its clip on the control panel, pushed it down to press the recessed firing button of what had to be the

starboard gun. Ahead of the pinnacle the almost invisible beam stabbed out and smoke and dust motes flared into brief scintillance. A drone, caught by the slashing fire, exploded smokily while another drone, a wing sheared off, tumbled to the ground.

To port a concentration of three drones was flying towards Little Sister as fast as their wings could carry them, firing at the pinnacle with their hand lasers. They could do no harm, Grimes knew; the super-metal of the hull was virtually indestructible. But, when he turned to bring the cannon to bear, a direct hit on the transparency of the forward viewport the flashes might well blind him, and it was a long, long way to the nearest hospital with organ transplant facilities . . .

He shouted urgently, "Look aft, all of you! Look aft!"

He heard Lennay translate, heard Tamara demand, "Why?"

"Don't argue! Look aft!"

The inertial drive hammered noisily as with his left hand he worked the directional controls. With his right hand he kept the stylus pressed firmly on to the firing stud. The continuous beam wouldn't do the synthetic ruby any good but, with his eyes not tightly shut, he could not wait to fire until he was on the target. Suddenly, through his closed eyelids, he was conscious of a fierce, ruddy glow that ceased abruptly. It had not been as bad as he had feared; the automatic polarization had cut out most of the radiation.

"You got them, Grimes!" Tamara shouted. "But there are more of the bastards to starboard!"

He corrected the swing, set the pinnacle turning the other way. He could see four drones in the light of what must have been the last rocket flare. They were not retreating. That was their funeral-or cremation-he thought viciously. Soon their exploded bodies would join the charred remains of their comrades.

Now! he thought, starting to shut his eyes, but checking the lids in half descent. Those drones were lifting, obviously intending to fly over Little Sister to attack from the other side. He stopped the run, steadied, began to swing to port-but the drones did not reappear. "The cows must be going straight up," he remarked conversationally.

"The cows?" repeated Lennay in a puzzled voice but Grimes ignored him. He pushed the button to snap aside the metal screen of the overhead viewport. He stared into two faceted eyes that were staring down at him. He saw the muzzle of a laser pistol coming into view. Hastily he brought the screen into place and then screened the other ports.

He could imagine the drones on top of the pinnacle, probably clinging to the two laser cannon. They might have grenades. They did have hand lasers and they were already using them; a tell-tale light indicated overheating of the upper hull. They were trying to burn their way through. They would never give up the fight; their lives were already forfeit because of their failure to protect the princesses. Nothing remained to them but to die with

honor.

Fleetingly Grimes felt sorry for them. They were doing what they had to do. Although not unintelligent they had very little free will, were little better than motile organs of the far greater organism that was the Shaara Hive.

And that was their bad luck.

He slammed on vertical thrust. The inertial drive unit hammered away nosily in response. With all the viewports screened he could not see where he was going but it was highly improbable that there would be anything to impede his upward flight, and if there were the radar would give ample warning. His instruments told him that, save for two spots on the upper hull, skin temperature was dropping rapidly, had already fallen from 20ø to 5ø, was still falling, as was the external air pressure. He would be above the overcast soon if not already. Skin temperature dropped from Zero to -10ø, the upper hull included.

He thought smugly, That should have done it.

He said, "We'll give our friends time to cool off, then well get back down."

"And what about my people, Captain Grimes?" asked Lennay.

"Those drones are more of a menace to them than to us," Grimes told him. "We have to be sure that all the Shaara are dead."

"Do you want these while you're waiting?" asked Tamara. I found them stowed in a locker in the galley . . ."

She handed him his pipe, his tobacco pouch and a box of the old-fashioned matches that he affected.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you." At that moment he really loved her.

Then she spoiled everything by saying, "I was looking for the mail bag, actually. They've opened it, of course and one of the parcels, but the rest of the consignment's intact."

Chapter 25

Grimes slid the screen of the upper viewport to one side, ready to snap it back at the first sign of hostile life outside. He did not expect that there would be such. There was not. He was reasonably certain that the drones were no more impervious to a lethal combination of almost hard vacuum and extremely low temperature than humans would have been. He turned to the others, said, "All right. We're going down."

"Please be fast, Captain," said Lennay. "My men . . . they are injured, dying . . ."

Or dead . . . thought Grimes. But as long as a spark of life remained in any of the raiding party speed was essential.

He threw the inertial drive into neutral, dropped like the proverbial stone. He heard Tamara gasp, the Darrijans moan in fear. He watched the fast

decreasing tally of kilometers on the radar altimeter screen—a diminishing numeration that very soon was that of meters only. At 30 he slammed on maximum vertical thrust. Little Sister was exceptionally robust; she could take this treatment but she didn't have to like it. She complained bitterly with an agonized creaking of structural members while a veritable galaxy of red warning lights flashed on the console. She quivered to a halt ten meters from the ground, started to rise again. Grimes adjusted thrust while looking into the screen. Yes, there was the river, with the sandspit. Concentrations of metal—the barge, the guns—showed up brightly. Grimes spun the pinnace like a top about her short axis, made for them.

Only one man had survived the Shaara counter attack. This was Tambu, Lennay's chief clerk. He was wounded, a laser beam having slashed away the flesh from his right shoulder; had the injury not been instantly cauterized he would have died from loss of blood. He was unconscious but, said Lennay, would survive if he were taken without too much loss of time to the cave temple.

Tamara asked, "How much time do we have, Grimes? How long before Baroom flies back to deal with us?"

He said, "I don't think that she'll be back until the Rogue Queen has finished her business to the north."

"But she must know what's happened here, that her people have been massacred."

"Not necessarily," he told her.

"But the Shaara are telepaths . . ."

"And their telepathy is short range. For longer distances they rely on radio—among themselves they speak in coded stridulations. If they had a transceiver in the dome they may—they probably will—have gotten word of our attack through to the ship. But I suspect that the only radio here is that in Little Sister—in which case we have time to get ourselves organized."

"Tambu must be taken to the temple," said Lennay stubbornly. "Also the bodies of our people must be carried there for proper crematory rites."

"They'll keep," said Grimes with a callousness that he did not feel. "So will Tambu. I've seen men recover from much worse wounds. If you like you can find some sterile dressings in the medicine chest for him. But we must make use of whatever time we have. First of all, I'm flying back to the dome. We must make a search, find out if there is a radio set inside it. If there is—it's battle stations again. If there's not, we collect up all the arms and ammunition, from the dome and from the Shaara dead, that will be of use to us. Then we fly back to the cave. But first of all," he looked with extreme distaste at the bodies of the princess and the drone, still oozing a greenish, foul-scented ichor over what had been the spotlessly clean deck of the cabin, "we get these outside . . ."

Lennay's two men put the unconscious Tambu on to one of the bunks, then dragged the Shaara corpses out through the airlock. As soon as they had finished Grimes lifted the pinnace, flew back to the ruined dome. The rest

of the ship cleaning could wait until later although, as soon as possible, he must disentangle those messily burst corpses from the twin laser cannon.

Grimes went into the dome with Lennay and the other two Darijjans leaving Tamara, to whom electronic equipment was not strange, in charge of the pinnace. Should Little Sister's radar show the approach of any space or aircraft she would let him know at once.

Fortunately the plastic hemisphere was not fully deflated. Grimes and his companions were able to crawl through tunnels and spherical chambers without too much difficulty, although even where there was headroom it was impossible to maintain an upright posture on the yielding floors. That odd diffused lighting was still on and through the almost transparent plastic of the interior walls Grimes could see the dark shapes of machines. Getting to them was the trouble; the inside of the dome was a three dimensional maze. But at last he was satisfied. One of those metallic shapes turned out to be a food dispenser and another doled out strictly rationed drops of some sort of syrup. The third and last one was only a drinking fountain. There were no weapons, although there were boxes of ammunition that would fit both the machine pistols and the light machine guns. To Grimes' disappointment there was nothing-either banked power cells or any sort of generator-that could be used to recharge captured laser pistols. But this did not matter, he suddenly realized. Little Sister had power a-plenty.

He made his way out of the dome followed by the Darijjans dragging their prizes. Back in the pinnace Tamara told him that there was still nothing on the radar screen and informed Lennay, who was making anxious enquiries, that Tambu was still sleeping. Everything was under control but for the passage of time. The night was almost over; the overcast sky was grey rather than black, was lightening with every passing minute. Sooner or later somebody would be coming down from the city to investigate the shooting-probably a military patrol, and the army leaders were pro-Shaara .

. .

But there were still things to be done. There were the weapons to be collected from the Shaara dead. There were the corpses of the killed guerrillas to be loaded aboard Little Sister. Grimes could appreciate Lennay's concern but still thought that this was a criminal waste of time . . . He arranged to have the two surviving Darijjan soldiers make their way to the river between the rows of bushes, picking up what they could during their journey, while he flew Little Sister to the wreckage of the battery and its crew.

Chapter 26

The sun was well up and the clouds had dispersed by the time that Grimes was almost ready to fly Little Sister away from the scene of the battle. The bodies of the Darijjans killed in the fighting had been loaded aboard, as had been the serviceable weapons taken from the Shaara corpses. All that remained was the clearing of the carcasses of the hapless drones from around the twin lasers. Grimes would not entrust this distasteful task to anybody but himself; a power connection could so easily be broken by anybody unfamiliar with such weaponry.

He clambered up to the upper hull of the pinnacle, using the handholds recessed into the shell plating just abaft the airlock. He looked with incipient nausea at the tangle of thin, hairy limbs, the tatters of chitin, the green ichor that was oozing disgustingly over the burnished metal. He gulped. But the job had to be done.

Before starting he took a good look around. There was no traffic on the river. There were no machines, either native or Shaara, in the sky (if there had been his radar would have given him ample warning). But there was noise-mechanical, but not the arrhythmic beat of an inertial drive unit, not the whine of the electric motor of a Shaara blimp, not the throbbing of the engines of a Darijjan airship. It was a peculiar, wheezing rattle and seemed to be coming from ground level.

Then Grimes saw them.

They were between the city and the Shaara landing place, coming slowly but steadily. The sunlight was reflected from bright metal, was illuminating clouds of dark smoke mixed with white steam. Four vehicles, Grimes decided, steam-driven, and behind them what looked like cavalry. He shouted down, "Lennay! Come up here! Bring a pair of binoculars with you!"

Lennay clambered up to where Grimes was standing with alacrity, handed him the powerful glasses. Grimes put them to his eyes, stared. There were four tall-funneled tractors, armored, rolling on huge, wide-rimmed wheels. Each towed behind it a truck in which men-soldiers almost certainly-were seated, stiffly erect, holding long rifles. The horsemen-although the beasts that they were riding were more like Terran camels-were similarly armed. Grimes switched his attention back to the vehicles. At the front end of each of them, forward of the engine, was a turret from which protruded the multiple muzzles of a heavy machine gun.

Grimes handed the glasses to Lennay.

"War wagons," said the Darijjan.

"It's time that we weren't here," said Grimes.

Lennay said, "Surely you have nothing to fear from our primitive weaponry, Captain?"

Grimes told him, "There's been enough killing. Too much. The Shaara, the Rogue Queen and her people, are the real enemies. Not your people."

Lennay said thoughtfully, "Perhaps you are right. If Samz is speaking through you, you are right, Captain Grimes. And it is possible that there are some of my men, of our men, among those soldiers . . . Perhaps if the gods deigned to display themselves . . ."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes dubiously. "Meanwhile, I'll just have time to clear this mess away from around the guns before we have to use them."

"No," said Lennay. "Leave the bodies there. They are proof that the sword of Delur is a mighty one . . ."

"Were you talking to me?" asked Tamara who had joined the two men a-top

the pinnacle.

"Yes, Lady Goddess." (Grimes thought, He doesn't address me in that tone of voice. But, of course, he's too familiar with space captains to believe that they're deities . . . Superintending Postmistresses are outside his past experience.) "Should you display yourself, standing triumphant on the torn carcasses of your foes, you will be a sign unto the faithful . . ."

"You mean that you want me to ride on top of the pinnacle? I suppose that if I stand between the two guns I shall be safe enough-as long as Grimes doesn't indulge in aerobatics . . ."

"Yes, Lady, between the cannon. Your feet on the bodies of your enemies. Your sword unsheathed. Your glorious body unclothed."

"That should not be necessary," said Grimes.

"But it is," Lennay told him. "The Goddess Delur is always depicted naked in moments of triumph."

She said, "All right. I'll go through with it. After all, those bastards have already seen me without a stitch on, and this time I shall at least have boots and a sword belt . . ."

"Boots?" asked Grimes.

"Boots. I'm not going to stand on that . . . mess in my bare feet." She unbuckled her pistol belt, handed it to Lennay. Her sword belt followed. She whipped off her tunic. She was naked under it. The sword belt she put back on. She drew the weapon from its sheath, held it aloft. She asked, "How do I look?"

"The very incarnation of Delur, my Lady," said Lennay reverently.

Like somebody out of a nude version of a Wagner opera, thought Grimes. Nonetheless, the effect was decidedly erotic.

"I shall stay with you, Lady," said Lennay. Grimes felt jealous but he was the only one capable of piloting the pinnacle.

"It will be necessary for me, as High Priest, to call out to the multitude."

If they can hear you over the clatter of the inertial drive, thought Grimes.

"And now, Captain, if you will take your post at the controls and fly us towards the war wagons . . ."

"I don't like this," said Grimes.

She turned to face him, nude, imperious, her skin shining like gold in the sunlight reflected from the burnished hull of the pinnacle. She said, "Fly towards the city, slowly, not too high. I want the people to see me."

"Suppose they shoot at you?"

"They have no anti-aircraft weapons," she said.

But rifles can be aimed upwards, he thought.

"Do as I say," she commanded.

It was a crazy idea, Grimes thought, but on this crazy planet it might just work. He resolved that if anything should happen to her he would exact bloody vengeance. He took one last look at her, standing between the twin cannon, her back to him, that absurd sword uplifted in her right hand, dazzlingly glittering, then clambered down to ground.

He took his seat in the control cab, watched by the two Darijjans, both of whom had made themselves comfortable among the corpses of their late comrades. He decided to leave the airlock doors open; after all he would not be proceeding at any great speed or altitude. As the pinnacle rose he saw that the forces from the city were just topping a low rise. Now was the time for them to open fire on him, if they were going to. But, of course, they would not know yet that the pinnacle was not still under Shaara control. The armored tractors came into full view as he lifted-the locomotives and the troop trucks and, behind them, the cavalry. He flew towards them. He wondered what the soldiers were thinking. Perhaps they would assume that this was just another show put on for their benefit by the Shaara, yet another public humiliation of the Terrans. But they would soon realize that this was not so. The spectacle of the woman with the drawn sword, trampling on the crumpled bodies of those who had been her persecutors, was such obvious symbolism.

He flew on, looking ahead and down. He could see that Tamara had been noticed (and who could fail to notice her?) by the soldiers. There was commotion in the open trucks being towed by the tractors. There was a burst of fire from one of the heavy machine guns with the bullets passing harmlessly below the pinnacle. A cavalry officer had drawn his sword, was waving it, pointing it upwards. Some-by no means all-of the mounted men aimed their rifles at Little Sister, at Tamara. Grimes could only just see the muzzle flashes but the black powder smoke was visible enough.

All right, he thought. You've asked for it. Now you get it. A slight touch on the controls would dip the pinnacle's nose and bring the laser cannon to bear. But he hesitated. Such a maneuver could well throw Tamara off balance and topple her from her airborne pedestal to the ground; the transition from Winged Victory to broken corpse would be sudden and irreversible. He wished that he had been able to rig some system of communication between himself and those on top of the pinnacle, but there had been no time.

Then he realized that the cavalymen, although still firing, were fighting among themselves. The sword-waving officer fell, was trampled by the broad, splayed hooves of his rearing mount. Troopers toppled from their saddles. The infantrymen in the trucks were struggling hand to hand. One of the tractors peeled away from the line abreast formation, turned with surprising nimbleness and opened fire, with its heavy machine gun, on the one which had been its next abeam. There was a sudden cloud of steam as the boiler was ruptured.

Grimes heard Lennay's voice. And how, he wondered, was the Darijjan able

to speak to him? But the High Priest had clambered down the hull to the open airlock doors and was in the control cab. He was saying, "They are with us, Captain Grimes. They are with us. Fly on to the city, slowly. Let the goddess's soldiers precede you . . ." Grimes cut fore-and-aft thrust, hovered. Looking down he could see that the three surviving tractors were turning, that the ground was littered with dead cavalymen and the bodies of those who had been thrown from the troop trucks. He watched the depleted force regroup, proceed back to where they had come from. He saw two fast riders gallop ahead of the main body.

He said, "I am not making fun of your religion, but those soldiers were very easy converts."

Lennay said, "Many of them were already true believers. And now they have seen the glorious, living proof that Madame Tamara is indeed the incarnation of the Lady Delur."

"Mphm. She must be getting chilly up top. Or don't goddesses feel the cold?"

"Please not to jest, Captain Grimes. And please remember that the God Samz is working through you, just as Delur works through Madam Tamara-although not so strongly. I cannot help but feel that He could have chosen a more suitable vessel. You are capable, that I would never deny. But you lack the . . . divine aura."

"We can't all be Handsome Frankie Delamere," said Grimes.

"Your pardon, Captain?"

"I was just thinking out loud. Commander Delamere is an old . . . friend of mine. He's long on presence, but short on ability."

He adjusted thrust, slowly followed the soldiers to the city. Lennay left him, went to rejoin Tamara on top of the pinnacle.

Chapter 27

Through the open doors of the airlock, even above the arrhythmic clangor of the pinnacle's inertial drive, Grimes could hear the shouting, the singing, the screaming discordancy (to him) of trumpets, the boom and rattle of drums.

"Delur! Delur! Delur!"

He could see through the viewports the gathering crowds spilling out into the narrow streets, the scuffles that went breaking out between the adherents to the old religion, now openly declaring themselves, and those who still supported the church of the establishment. But there seemed little doubt that in this city, at least, the worshippers of Delur and Samz were in the majority-or, perhaps, any gods who were against the invading Shaara and the pro-Shaara president would do.

Little Sister was flying over a sea of upturned faces, of waving arms. Grimes could imagine what the people were staring at, regretted that he himself could not see Tamara standing there between the laser cannon, her

body golden in the golden light of the morning sun, her graceful curves in erotic contrast to the no less graceful angularities of the twin weapons.

"Delur! Delur! Delur!"

And what about Samz? he thought a little sourly.

He kept the pinnacle just above rooftop level, following the street, maintaining station on the three armored tractors, now in line ahead formation and leading the troop of cavalry and what seemed to be almost a full regiment of infantrymen. He watched as the column leader loosed off its machine gun at a crowd of men desperately attempting to set up a barricade of furniture and overturned wagons. Even now, he thought, the god Darajja possessed devotees willing to die for their beliefs.

And die they did.

The tractors rolled over the half-completed barricade, splintering beds and chairs and tables, crushing the bodies of its defenders. They clattered into the square, their iron wheels striking sparks, visible even in the bright sunlight, from the cobblestones. They steered for the metal platform that had been set up by the Shaara, upon which Grimes and Tamara had been exposed and humiliated. Grimes thought at first that the intention was to destroy this symbol of alien brutality but it was not so. Wheeling with quite amazing smartness the war vehicles took up stations about it, forming the three points of a triangle, their guns pointing outwards. Cavalry and infantry filled the gaps between the machines, making a menacing display of their rifles.

Lennay appeared in the airlock door, came to the control cab to stand just behind Grimes. He said, "This display has exceeded my wildest expectations, Captain. Even I had no idea that we have so many supporters . . ."

"God is on the side of the big battalions," Grimes told him. "We may not be a big battalion but, until the Rogue Queen returns, we have the superior fire power."

"These people," said Lennay soberly, "are with god, or the gods. The old gods. They know that we, with Delur to lead us, to inspire us, destroyed the Shaara."

Grimes grunted dubiously around the stem of his cold pipe. "And what was I doing while Delur was supposed to be leading and inspiring?" he asked.

"Delur and Samz always act as one," Lennay told him. "That dual principle worked through you and Madame Haverstock. She the inspiration, and you the . . . the . . ."

"The driver," supplied Grimes. "Oh, well, I suppose that this chariot of the gods has to have a chauffeur."

"You jest, Captain."

"Too right. Just a jesting pilot, that's me." He laughed at his play on words, his good humor restored.

"Can you land on the platform, Captain?" asked Lennay.

Grimes assessed the situation. "Mphm. I could, I suppose. There'll be considerable overhang, of course, and that structure could never support Little Sister's weight . . . But I can keep the inertial drive running, just kicking over . . ."

"Then land on the platform, please. Or appear to do so. After you have set down, the God Samz will appear beside his consort. It is necessary that you show yourself to the people. Delur without Samz is like . . . like . . . You Terrans have a saying . . . Yes: like coffee without cream."

"I prefer my coffee black," said Grimes.

He returned his attention to the controls, gently moving ahead until the platform was immediately below the pinnacle. Carefully he reduced vertical thrust. Little Sister dropped slowly, touched with an almost imperceptible jar. Grimes ran a practiced eye over the instruments on the console, was satisfied. As long as the inertial drive was kept running on this setting the golden ship would weigh no more than a few grammes relative to the surface upon which she rested.

"All right," he said. "I'll get up top with Tamara to take my bow. Don't touch anything on the control panel during my absence. We aren't ready to ascend into Heaven just yet."

He got up from his seat, made for the airlock.

"Wait!" said Lennay. "First you must remove your raiment."

"What?"

"You must remove your raiment. At a time of triumph the god, as well as the goddess, must be naked. So they have always been depicted in our religious art."

Grimes shrugged. After all, he asked himself, what did it matter? The day was warm enough, and even though he was not an exhibitionist he was no prude. He undid the simple fastenings of his tunic and let the garment fall to the deck. He left his boots on; he had a ladder to climb and those recessed rungs had not been designed to be negotiated by bare feet. He walked slowly to the airlock. As he appeared in the chamber a great shout went up from those of the people who could see him. "Samz! Samz!" Not only his prominent ears reddened in embarrassment; he could feel the angry flush spreading over his entire body. He bowed stiffly then turned to ease himself out of the chamber. He had to be careful; the forward part of the pinnacle (as was, too, the after part) was overhanging the edge of the platform and a fall to the cobblestones would be injurious to body as well as to pride. He extended an arm until he found handhold, then fumbled with a booted foot for a recessed rung. His other hand went out, and then the other foot. He started to climb. He knew that he must look ludicrous-a naked man going up a ladder with genitalia a-dangle-but he was committed, and the cries of Samz! Samz! seemed to be more expressive of adoration than derision. He scrambled to the upper hull of the pinnacle with an agility evocative of the simian ancestry of his race. He joined Tamara

between the twin laser cannon.

"Samz! Samz!"

He raised his arms in a gesture of benediction.

"Delur! Delur!"

She lifted her flashing sword, making a tired flourish.

She muttered, "Now you can start finding out what it's like . . ." Then, "I wish to all the Odd Gods of the Galaxy that the bastards wouldn't keep stoking up those damned steam engines!"

A cloud of sulphurous smoke suddenly erupted from the tall funnel of the tractor up wind from them, eddied about them. Sparks stung their unprotected skin.

"At least they aren't throwing dead cats at us this time," remarked Grimes philosophically.

The smoke cleared.

Tamara waved her sword again with something less than enthusiasm. Grimes made his bless-you-my-children gesture.

He said, "This is starting to get boring."

She sneered, "You've only just begun. I've been on show for hours."

Less than one hour, thought Grimes, but deemed it politic not to say the words aloud.

Lennay clambered up from the airlock, walked slowly forward to the guns. He looked happy. Grimes and Tamara regarded him sourly.

He said, "I have learned that Hereditary President Callaray and General Porron, together with their high-ranking officers, are aboard Baroom, accompanying the Rogue Queen, advising her, while she wages war against Desaba. That is why the army came over to us after no more than a token show of resistance . . ."

"And they'll change sides again when Baroom comes back," said Tamara.

"If she comes back," Grimes told her.

She said, "I'm only a postmistress, not a naval officer. But even I know that an armed pinnacle is no match for a warship." She contrived to make the waving of her sword in response to the cheers of the crowd a singularly un-warlike gesture. "You've got your ship back, Grimes. I've got the mail-and don't forget that it still has to be delivered. I propose that we get the hell out of here and resume our voyage."

"Lady Delur!" Lennay's voice was shocked. "You cannot mean that!"

"We've done our share, Mr. Lennay. We've given you this city. It's up to you to hold it."

"But the prophecy . . ."

"We've delivered you, haven't we? If you can't stay delivered it's just too bad."

"I agree," said Grimes judiciously, "that it would be unwise to wait here for the Rogue Queen's return . . ."

She said, "I'm glad to hear you say that, Grimes. For a moment I was afraid that you were taking this god and goddess rubbish seriously." She slapped viciously at a spark that had alighted on her right breast. "I've had it in a big way!"

"Lady Delur . . ." implored Lennay.

"We shall not wait here for Baroom's return," stated Grimes.

"Captain . . . you cannot leave us now . . ." It was odd, and rather annoying, thought Grimes how even now Lennay was addressing Tamara as a deity and himself as a mere shipmaster. But it did not matter. He knew, briefly, that something, some entity outside himself, was speaking through him, was implanting in his mind the knowledge of what must be done, what could, quite easily, be done. He himself had little knowledge of what facilities were available in this city, but somehow such information, in great detail, was now available to him. And from his own memory came scraps of Terran naval history, recollections of what he had read of stratagems employed during wars at sea.

He said, "We will not wait for the Rogue Queen-and the President Callaray and General Porron-to come to us. We will go to them."

"You're mad!" exclaimed Tamara.

Mad? he wondered. If she'd said "possessed" he might have agreed with her. But he ignored her and spoke to the native.

"Mr. Lennay, is it essential that your chief clerk be taken to the cave for medical treatment?"

"No, Captain. There is an excellent hospital here."

"Good. And there is an arsenal . . ."

"Yes."

"And part of it is the new yard for building airships. The framework of the Tellaran is almost completely assembled."

"How do you know?" asked Lennay, puzzled.

And how do I know, Grimes asked himself, that Tellaran is the name of a flying reptile?

He said, "We will take your man to the hospital. Then we fly to the arsenal, to the airship yard. You will tell the workers what I want done."

Chapter 28

Little Sister lifted from Plirrit.

Her builders would never have recognized her although, just possibly, they might have realized that she was propelled by an inertial drive unit and that the pusher airscrew mounted at the after end of the long car slung beneath her was for show only. But they would have had to be very close to her to hear the distinctive beat of her real engines; her golden hull had been thickly lagged with mattresses of vegetable fibre which acted as very effective sonic insulation.

Little Sister was now, to all except the most intimate inspection, a Darijjan airship. It had been neither a difficult nor a lengthy task to slide her hull into the cage formed by the already assembled frames and longerons. There was no need to be concerned about the strength of the structure; it was for camouflage only. The real strength, the mailed fist in the velvet glove, was concealed by the panels of fabric that had been stretched and glued and sewn over the ribs, would remain hidden until Grimes got close enough to Baroom to do what he knew must be done, would be done. Until then he would have to limit his speed to one within the capabilities of the almost sophisticated gas turbine that was to have been Tellaran's engine, would have to refrain from maneuvers obviously impossible to a dirigible.

The airship yard technicians had worked with a will, had grasped at once what was required of them. It almost seemed that if Lennay had not been there to interpret the job would have been done just as well and just as speedily.

And speed was essential.

Even though this was a world without the electric telegraph, without radio, news travelled. There was the network of railways. There were steamships. And not everybody in Plirrit was a devotee of the Old Religion; there were those who, already, must be endeavoring to get word of the happenings to their absent President, and, through him, to the Rogue Queen.

So Grimes, as soon as the last stitch had been made in the last seam of the fabric envelope, lifted ship. Tamara was with him, and Lennay. Grimes had not wanted either of them along on what might well be a suicide mission but they had insisted on accompanying him.

Little Sister moved slowly out of the vast hangar, lifted into the evening sky, drab in her disguise, harmless looking. The crowd that had gathered watched in silence. There were no cheers, no singing. Yet Grimes could feel the emotion of those who were, in some odd way, his worshippers. There was the unvoiced prayer that Samz and Delur would overthrow the invaders from outside, the unspoken hope that the Old Religion would once more hold sway on this world, that the joyless faith that had supplanted it would itself be supplanted.

Grimes sat at his controls, Tamara beside him. Lennay stood behind them. The view from the ports was circumscribed; there were only concealed peepholes in the camouflaging envelope. This was of no great importance; radar would suffice for pilotage. Grimes set course, put the ship on to a heading that would bring her to Kahtrahn, the capital city of Desaba. He

had received no intelligence that Baroom was there but he knew that this was where he would find the Rogue Queen. He knew, too, that the outcome of the battle would be determined by his own skills. Samz, for all his power, his omniscience, was only a local deity and, insofar as technology was concerned, knew no more than those whose faith had given him being. Grimes switched over to the auto-pilot. He said that he was going down into the gondola. Tamara said that she would catch the opportunity for some sleep. Lennay accompanied Grimes. A ladder had been rigged from the open airlock door to the control car of the dummy airship. This had not been fitted out; there was neither compass nor altimeter and the wheels that would have been used by the altitude and steering coxswains were still with other equipment back in the hangar. The wide windows were glazed, however, although nobody had thought to clean the tough glass before lift-off. Nonetheless, thought Grimes, he was getting a better view from here than he had been from the pinnacle's control room. He looked out and down to the dark landscape, to the distant clusters of lights that were towns and villages. Ahead the Maruan Range was a darker shadow against the dark sky. Little Sister would find her own way over the mountains without a human hand at her controls; nonetheless Grimes decided that he would prefer to do that piece of pilotage himself. He had time, however, to complete his inspection of the gondola. He made his unimpeded way aft; no partitions had yet been set up at the time of the requisitioning of the airship. Lennay followed him. He looked at the engine and at the motionless airscrew. The motor was completely enclosed in a cylindrical casing from which pipes led to the tanks of pressurized hydrogen. There were dials, meaningless to Grimes, wheel valves and levers. He asked Lennay, "Can you start this thing?"

"Yes, Captain. But surely it is not necessary."

"It will be when we meet up with the Shaara. It will look suspicious if we're making way through the air with a motionless prop . . ."

Lennay oscillated his head in the native equivalent to a nod. "Yes. I see." He launched into a spate of explanations. "It is quite simple. You open this valve to admit the gas, then you pull down sharply on this lever to strike a spark, then . . ."

"It would be simpler," Grimes told him, "to use a catalyst, like platinum wire . . ." He could not see the other's expression in the darkness but knew that it was one of pained puzzlement. "But it doesn't matter. As long as this way works, why worry?"

He led the way up the ladder back to Little Sister's airlock, went forward to the control cab. He looked at the radar screen and at the chart. He would, he decided, make a slight deviation so as to negotiate the Daganan Pass rather than fly over the mountains. That would be what a real airship would do so as to avoid jettisoning overmuch ballast. There was little chance that news of his coming would reach the Rogue Queen before his arrival at Kahtrahn but he could not afford to take any chances. The camouflage must be maintained until the end.

Tamara slept all the time that he was steering the ship through the series of narrow ravines. He had thought of awakening her, but there was little to

see. Not only were the viewports almost completely obscured but it was now very dark. Without radar it would have been extremely hazardous pilotage, especially to one with no local knowledge.

At last Little Sister was through the mountains. Ahead of her was the northern coastal plain and beyond that the sea. To the east the sky was pale and a scattering of thin, high clouds already golden. Grimes adjusted course, put the ship back on automatic pilot, yawned widely.

Lennay said sympathetically, "You are tired, Captain."

"You can say that again!" agreed Grimes.

He got up from his seat, went aft. Tamara in her bunk, blanket covered, was snoring softly and almost musically. He spoke to her; she went on snoring. He shook her shoulder. Her eyes opened and she looked up at him coldly.

He said, "You have the watch. I'm turning in."

She said, "Surely you don't expect me to fight your bloody battles for you."

"No. But take over, will you? We're on automatic pilot; all you have to do is watch the instruments, the radar especially. Should you pick up any aerial targets, at any range at all, call me at once. Otherwise let me know when we're one hundred kilometers from the Desaban coastline."

She actually managed a grin. "I'm only a goddess, Grimes, not a navigator. But I think I'll be able to manage . . ."

She threw aside the blanket, stood there naked for a few moments, stretching like some great, lazy cat. Unhurriedly she pulled on her tunic. She asked, "All right if I make some coffee first?"

"Lennay will fix that," said Grimes.

Lennay, not waiting to be told, had already done so. He bowed low before Tamara before handing her the steaming mug. "And for you, Captain?" he asked.

"No thank you," said Grimes regretfully. "It would only keep me awake."

He went forward with Tamara, showed her the pinnacle's position on the chart and the course line that he had penciled in with a small cross marking where he wished to be called, then walked aft to his own bunk. He thought that he would have trouble in getting to sleep but he was out as soon as his body hit the mattress.

Chapter 29

He came awake as soon as Lennay touched him.

The native handed him a mug of coffee which Grimes sipped gratefully.

"We are one hundred kilometers from the coastline," said Lennay. "The Lady Delur asked me to inform you that nothing of interest otherwise had

appeared on the screen of the radar."

"Mphm." Grimes filled and lit his pipe, padded forward. Tamara smiled up at him from her chair. He smiled back, looked first through the forward viewscreen-not that he could see much; it was almost like peeping through a keyhole-and then into the radar screen. Yes, there was the coastline, distant still but closing steadily. That patch of greater brightness inshore a little must be the port city of Denb; he had made a good landfall, he thought. Or Little Sister, left to her own devices, had made a good landfall.

He grunted again, went aft to the little toilet. When he was finished he put on his familiar shirt and shorts uniform; he felt far happier in this rig than he had felt either in the ceremonial sarong or the slightly less hampering tunic. He was pleased that the Shaara had left most of his clothing aboard the pinnace, although, attracted by the plenitude of gold braid and buttons, they had stolen the finery that he had been obliged to wear when employed by the Baroness.

He relieved Tamara at the controls. She went aft to tidy up, saying that with things liable to start happening at any moment she might as well look her best. She returned with a tray of food, having persuaded the auto-chef to produce hot rolls with butter, a quite savory pat, and a jug of chilled orange juice. Lennay, sharing the simple but satisfying meal, expressed gratification and amazement but when told that what he was eating was probably processed Shaara excrement abruptly stopped eating. He suggested that it was time that he started the gas turbine and went out through the airlock and down to the car. Grimes could imagine him throwing open a window and vomiting. With typical spaceman's heartlessness, remembering how he, as a green cadet, had been nauseated when learning of the origin of a meal that he had just enjoyed, he was amused rather than otherwise.

Lennay came back after a long interval, reporting that the airship's engine was in operation and the airscrew spinning. Grimes thanked him, then closed the airlock doors. From now on the ship was in fighting trim, invulnerable to almost anything save a direct hit by a missile with a nuclear warhead. Yes, thought Grimes, she was invulnerable but an explosion in her near vicinity could and would shake her like a terrier shaking a rat, and could her frail human crew survive such treatment? Possibly, as long as he and Tamara were tightly strapped into their chairs, as long as Lennay was well secured in one of the bunks . . .

He gave the necessary orders, set the example.

They were over Denb now. On their present course they would pass ten kilometers to the west of Kahtrahn. Grimes made an adjustment of course to starboard.

"Target," reported Tamara. "Bearing green oh-one-oh. Range thirty-five. Closing."

Grimes looked into the screen. Yes, there was the blip. It could not be Baroom; she would have been picked up at far greater range. There was very little metal, apart from the engine, in the Shaara blimps however. This

could be a blimp, or a native airship.

Yes, the range was still closing and the bearing was unchanged. It, whatever it was, was on an interception course. Grimes brought Little Sister round ten degrees to starboard. Through the peephole in the camouflaging fabric he could see something silvery against the blue sky. He picked up the binoculars from their box, stared ahead through the powerful glasses. Yes, it was a blimp all right. It was too fat for one of the native dirigibles. Tiny motes danced around it-the drones swarming out of the car of their aerial transport.

Tamara said, "They'll get a nasty surprise when you open up with the laser cannon."

Grimes told her, "They won't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I open up now I'll give the game away and the Rogue Queen will be able to pick us off at long range. No, I'll just keep on going through whatever those bastards sling at us and hope that there's enough smoke to cover the rents in the camouflage. With any luck at all they'll assume that we're the local version of a kamikaze, but one too ill-armed and flimsy to take seriously . . ." He laughed. "That's one thing about the Shaara. They're never ones to use a power hammer to crack a walnut. They'll use on us only the weaponry that past experience on this world has taught them is ample to swat a gasbag out of the sky. By the time they realize what we really are it will be too late for them to deliver a nuclear punch without doing for themselves as well as us . . ."

"Which they might do," she said.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said.

"It will be fitting," called Lennay from his bunk, "if the gods, the prophecy fulfilled, ascend to heaven on a pillar of the fire that has destroyed their enemies . . ."

Grimes sighed. It was all too possible, but, as far as he was concerned, he wanted the gods to ascend to heaven in a golden chariot, Little Sister.

The blimp was closing rapidly, directly ahead. There was a flickering of pale flame at the forward end of the thing's gondola, a stream of sparks bright even in the bright sunlight. Tracer. Whoever was in command of the Shaara airship wanted to bring the intruder down herself instead of leaving the task to the drones. Faintly the noise of the bullets striking the outer skin of the pinnace rang through the cabin.

I should have thought of having a few gasbags of hydrogen packed in, thought Grimes. Our friends will be wondering when the fireworks display is going to start . . . But I suppose that there must be helium on this world and the inference will be that we've sacrificed lift for safety . . .

Grimes stood on.

The blimp stood on.

Stubborn bitch . . . thought Grimes of the Shaara airship's captain. But she, princess or high-ranking worker, would be expecting the other aircraft to burst into flames at any second and, secure in the knowledge of the non-flammability of her own vessel, would be prepared to skirt closely or even to fly through the flaming wreckage. She was due for a big surprise.

She stood on, her automatic guns still hammering away. Hot metal flattened on the transparency of the pinnacle's forward viewport, fell away. Then her nerve failed. When there was nothing at all visible from Little Sister's control cab but the huge, clumsy, grey bulk of her she pulled sharply to starboard. Grimes held his course, striking her a glancing blow. The blimp rebounded from the contact like a violently struck beach ball. The pinnacle, with her far greater mass, stood on stolidly. Grimes hoped that the camouflage had not been torn from the pinnacle's port side exposing her true nature. He brought her round slowly, careful to maintain the impression that she was only a slow and clumsy airship, adjusted trim so that he had the Shaara blimp in sight. She swam into his limited field of vision. Her envelope was crumpled and she was settling slowly but as far as Grimes could see there were no fragments from his disguise adhering to the wreckage. He turned away from the disabled ship and from the squad of drones flying fast towards him, laser pistols drawn and ready. Probably they would succeed in setting fire to the sonic insulation with which Little Sister was covered; as long as the bright golden plating was not revealed thereby the resulting smoke and flame would be more to his advantage than otherwise.

He returned his attention to the radar screen.

Something big was ahead, was rising rapidly. It could only be Baroom. It could only be the Rogue Queen determined to make an example of the native dirigible that had dared to ram one of her airships.

And what weaponry would she be using?

Laser, probably, thought Grimes-but he was not surprised when he felt the muffled shock of close explosions and heard the faint clangs of shrapnel that had penetrated the disguising envelope and the vegetable fibre lagging. And these must be well ablaze by now although the smoke and flame, blowing astern, were not visible from the control cab. Nonetheless the temperature gauges showed that the outer skin was heating rapidly although the interior of the pinnacle was still cool.

The Rogue Queen still had time to launch a nuclear missile, but time was running out for her. If she delayed firing such a weapon much longer she could not use it for fear of destroying her own ship. But, thought Grimes, she might take that risk. So he increased speed, hoping to be able to carry out his intentions before the last of the blazing camouflage was stripped away.

Baroom was in sight visually now. Grimes stared at her through the ragged, widening rent in the tattered fabric of the envelope. He saw the continuous flashes from her turret guns, the scintillating streams of tracer shells. The Shaara gunnery was not at all brilliant; whoever was in fire control was still assuming that the moving target was making only the normal speed of an

airship. The Shaara, he remembered, did not use computers to any great extent; an organization of intelligent, social insects is, to a certain degree, an organic computer itself with built-in limitations, including a refusal to admit data known to be impossible, and until Little Sister was stripped of the last of her disguise her speed would fall into that category.

Baroom was close now. Grimes could see the people in the transparent dome of her control room-Shaara and a scattering of humanoids. He aimed for the rounded apex of the huge, conical spaceship and pressed the firing switches of the twin lasers. Reflected light almost blinded him, but it must have been worse, much worse, for the Rogue Queen, her officers and her allies before the automatic screening was actuated. In that instant they would have realized who their enemy was, but now it was too late for them to do anything about it.

Little Sister bored in viciously-but in almost the last instant before impact Grimes applied full stern power. Tough though his ship was he did not wish to subject her to the strain of a collision and, even if she survived the shock relatively unscathed, it was unlikely that her crew would do so.

But she struck, hard enough for her prow to make a deep dent in the shell of the Shaara control room. She struck, and as she did so Grimes cut the reverse thrust and came ahead again on his inertial drive, gently at first and then building up to the full capacity of his engines.

Something gave, but it was not the fantastically strong structure of the pinnacle. Grimes fired his lasers through the widening crack in the Shaara warship's stem. Only those directly in the line of fire would be killed but the others would be panicking-he hoped-and instruments and controls would be destroyed. He . . . pushed.

Baroom fell away from the vertical, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

Suddenly she toppled and had Grimes not applied full stern power Little Sister would have been dragged down with her. She plunged to the ground, driven to destruction by her own mighty engines rather than dragged by the force of gravity.

She struck, and it was only then that Grimes realized that the battle had taken place over the city of Kahtrahn. He watched in horror as tall buildings crumpled under the impact, as other buildings were rocked by the explosion of Baroom's ammunition, as fires broke out among the ruins.

He turned to the others, said in a shaky voice, "We must go down. We must help . . ."

Lennay said, "What can we do, Captain? We have done enough . . ."

"You can say that again," Grimes told him. "But we must render assistance."

"Those people," said Tamara, "must be hating all aliens, including us, by now. It's time that we were getting out of here."

Reluctantly Grimes conceded that she was right.

CHAPTER 30

The prophecy fulfilled the demons from Outer Space destroyed, Delur and Samz ascended to Heaven. They left, as saviours so often do, quite a mess behind them. The Desabans were not as grateful as they might have been and were inclined to harp upon the fact that their capital city had been devastated and to cast doubts upon the divinity of Grimes and Tamara. And in Taraplan, now that there was no longer any danger of Shaara domination, only a handful of fanatics preached the Old Religion. The trouble was that the Darijjans had become accustomed, over the years, to visits from outside and knew that they themselves could build spaceships once they got around to it. Meanwhile there was a period of anarchy until a successor to the late President Callaray could be found. There was a paying off of old scores. There were rioting and arson.

Grimes—who had always evinced a weakness for taking sides—would have liked to stay to help Lennay and his adherents. Tamara, however, insisted that the voyage be resumed at once, that the precious consignment of parcel mail be carried to its recipient without further delay. She talked menacingly about the penalties for breach of contract. Grimes could not but listen to her. He insisted, however, that he perform one last service for his devotees—the rounding up of the Shaara survivors. These, not having been aboard Baroom at the time of her destruction, had fled to an island off the south coast of Desaba where they had killed or enslaved the native inhabitants. They had three blimps, automatic projectile weapons and lasers. The ammunition for their machine guns was limited but, as each of the airships possessed its own generator, the power cells of the laser pistols could be recharged as required for a long time to come.

There were princesses, drones and workers—females, males and neuters. Possibly breeding had commenced already.

The raid on the island was a short and bloody business. Little Sister, no longer in disguise, pounced at first light. Somehow the Shaara were expecting her. The blimps were already airborne and around each of them was a squadron of drones. They made no attempt to flee but attacked at once. A pinnacle built of normal materials would have been overwhelmed by the ferocity of the assault. Looking back on it all Grimes was inclined to think that it was deliberately suicidal. The blimps bored in, their machine cannon flaming. The streams of tracers converged on the pinnacle and the bursting shells blotted out all vision from the forward viewport. The drones were above Little Sister, around her, below her. Skin temperature gauges went mad.

Grimes fired the twin lasers and, at the same time, swung the ship's head to port, then to starboard, slashing with the double beam. The cannonade abruptly ceased and he could see ahead again, watched all three blimps fluttering groundward, their descent barely slowed by the charred rags that had been their envelopes. The crews—those who were still living—flew out from the cars to join the battling drones. Grimes slashed again and bee bodies burst smokily.

But the drones surrounding Little Sister were keeping well out of the field of fire of her lasers. Even if they could not hurt her—although they were

searching frantically for a weak spot-they could not be hurt themselves. But they were singleminded, concentrating their fury on the obvious enemy. Perhaps they did see the native dirigible that came drifting above the battle; if they did, they ignored her. She could be dealt with at leisure. They were not expecting the invisible vapor that was discharged from her gondola, that fell slowly, that blinded and poisoned.

Sickened, Grimes watched the last of them, with wings twitching feebly and ineffectually, plunge to join their dead companions on the rocky ground.

CHAPTER 31

John Grimes and Tamara Haverstock came to Boggarty. They were not received on that world as deities. At first they were treated with considerable coldness. The Tiralbin Post Office had contracted to deliver an important consignment of parcel mail by a certain date. The subcontractor had entered into a similar agreement. Neither had met the terms of the contract.

The Planetary High Commissioner was a reasonable man, however. He listened patiently to Grimes' slightly edited story. He agreed that Grimes was entitled to plead Restraint of Princes and that neither Boggarty nor Tiralbin could successfully sue him for Breach of Contract. He maintained though, to Tamara's great disgust, that the penalty clauses regarding late delivery applied insofar as she was concerned.

She said to Grimes when they were alone together, "You look after yourself, don't you?"

"Somebody has to," he told her smugly.

She said, "The way things are I may as well get my full money's worth out of your precious contract. I can demand that you provide me with an escort until the mail is delivered."

"All right," he said.

The High Commissioner had provided them with a ground car and a driver, a stolid colonist who sat dourly in his seat and made no move to assist with the offloading from Little Sister. The sack of parcels was both heavy and awkward but Grimes dragged it out of the locker, to the airlock, and then struggled to lift it into the rear of the vehicle while Tamara muttered, "Careful, Grimes, careful . . . If anything is damaged you will be held responsible."

They drove from the spaceport to the city, were taken to the lofty cylindrical tower that was the seat of planetary government. Again Grimes was obliged to go into his portage act, carrying the sack from the car to the elevator, from the elevator to the High Commissioner's office.

"Sir," said Tamara to the portly men sitting behind the huge, gleaming desk, "please accept delivery of the mail. I have to report that the bag was tampered with by the Shaara and that one carton was opened and one can taken."

"Captain Grimes has already informed me, Miss Haver-stock," said the Commissioner. "He mentioned that, among other things, during our telephone conversation."

"Sign here, please," said Tamara, producing a pad of receipt forms. "I have already made the necessary endorsement"

"I am not the actual consignee, Madam. But Grigadil will make his mark. He should be here at any moment."

"Grigadil?" asked Grimes curiously.

"Yes, Captain. The King Boggart. He instructed his people not to make any more wire sculptures for export until I did something to help him with his peculiarly personal problem. Ah, here he is now . . ."

A boggart shambled into the office.

The films that Grimes had viewed concerning Boggarty had not prepared him for the full repulsiveness of the indigenes. In addition to their horrendous appearance they-or, at least, this one did-stank, a rank, animal effluvium.

The being extended a clawed hand, pointed to the mail sack.

"Mine?"

"Yes, Grigadil," said the High Commissioner. "And now if you will sign the lady's paper . . ."

"No sign till know if work. All wives give me no peace for too long. Me afraid they find younger husband-but me not old . . ."

You look, thought Grimes, like some prehuman from the dawn of time who's been aging steadily ever since . . .

Grigadil tore open the sack, pulled out a wrapped carton. His claws made short work of the outer coverings. He extracted a can. Grimes could read the gaudy label: VENUS STRAWBERRIES. Grigadil pulled the tab, lifted the now topless container to his wide, tusked mouth, swallowed noisily.

Tamara was looking down with an expression of horrified fascination on her face. Grimes wondered what was causing this and then he saw. The boggart was wearing only a filthy rag as a kilt and it was now no longer adequate to hide what was under it.

"Good," grunted Grigadil. "Good. Me sign. Me go back to cave and show wives who boss."

Wordlessly Tamara handed the creature the pad and the stylus, keeping as much distance as possible between him and herself. She glared at Grimes when he said cheerfully, "As we've already found out, it's love that makes the world go round!"

She was not amused.

And this, Grimes realized without overmuch regret, was the ending of a beautiful friendship.