

## GRIMES AND THE GREAT RACE

by A. Bertram Chandler

art: Derek Carter

*Here's another in Captain Chandler's stories of the Rim Worlds—this from a series of Commodore Grimes's reminiscences of his days in the Survey Service. . . .*

"I didn't think that I'd be seeing you again," said Grimes.

"Or I you," Kitty Kelly told him. "But Station Yorick's customers liked that first interview. The grizzled old spacedog, pipe in mouth, glass in hand, spinning a yarn. . . . So when my bosses learned that you're stuck here until your engineers manage to fit a new rubber band to your inertial drive they said, in these very words, 'Get your arse down to the spaceport, Kitty, and try to wheedle another tall tale out of the old bastard!'"

"Mphm," grunted Grimes, acutely conscious that his prominent ears had reddened angrily.

Kitty smiled sweetly. She was an attractive girl, black Irish, wide-mouthed, creamy-skinned, with vivid blue eyes. Grimes would have thought her much more attractive had she not been making it obvious that she still nursed the resentment engendered by his first story, a tale of odd happenings at long-ago and far-away Glenrowan where, thanks to Grimes, an ancestral Kelly had met his downfall.

She said tartly, "And lay off the Irish this time, will you?"

Grimes looked at her, at her translucent, emerald green blouse that concealed little, at the long, shapely legs under the skirt that concealed even less. He thought, *There's one of the Irish, right here, that I'd like to lay on.*

With deliberate awkwardness he asked, "If I'm supposed to avoid giving offense to anybody—and you Elsinoreans must carry the blood of about every race and nation on Old Earth—what can I talk about?"

She made a great show of cogitation, frowning, staring down at the tips of her glossy green shoes. Then she smiled. "Racing, of course! On this world we're great followers of the horses." She frowned again. "But no. Somehow I just can't see you as a sporting man, Commodore."

"As a matter of fact," said Grimes stiffly, "I did once take part in a race. And for high stakes."

"I just can't imagine *you* on a horse."

"Who said anything about horses?"

"What were you riding, then?"

"Do you want the story or don't you? If I'm going to tell it, I'll tell it my way."

She sighed, muttered, "All right, all right." She opened her case, brought out the trivi recorder, set it up on the deck of the day cabin. She aimed one lens at the chair in which Grimes was sitting, the other at the one that she would occupy. She squinted into the viewfinder. "Pipe in mouth," she ordered. "Glass in hand . . . Where is the glass, Commodore? And aren't you going to offer *me* a drink?"

He gestured towards the liquor cabinet. "You fix it. I'll have a pink gin, on the rocks."

"Then I'll have the same. It'll be better than the sickly muck you poured down me last time I was aboard your ship!"

Grimes's ears flushed again. The "sickly muck" had failed to have the desired effect.

My first command in the Survey Service [he began] was of a Serpent Class Courier, *Adder*. The captains of these little ships were lieutenants, their officers lieutenants and ensigns. There were no petty officers or ratings to worry about, no stewards or stewardesses to look after us. We made our own beds, cooked our own meals. We used to take turns playing with the rather primitive autochef. We didn't starve; in fact we lived quite well.

There was some passenger accommodation; the couriers were—and probably still are—sometimes

used to get VIPs from Point A to Point B in a hurry. And they carried Service mail and despatches hither and yon. If there was any odd job to do we did it.

This particular job was a very odd one. You've heard of Darban? No? Well, it's an Earth-type planet in the Tauran Sector. Quite a pleasant world although the atmosphere's a bit too dense for some tastes. But if it were what we call Earth-normal I mightn't be sitting here talking to you now. Darban's within the Terran sphere of influence with a Carlotti Beacon Station, a Survey Service Base, and all the rest of it. At the time of which I'm talking, though, it wasn't in anybody's sphere of influence, although Terran star tramps and Hallichek and Shaara ships had been calling there for quite some time. There was quite a demand for the so-called living opals—although how any woman could bear to have a slimy, squirming necklace of luminous worms strung about her neck beats me!

*She interrupted him. "These Hallicheki and Shaara . . . non-human races, aren't they?"*

*"Non-human and non-humanoid. The Hallicheki are avian, with a matriarchal society. The Shaara are winged arthropods, not unlike the Terran bees, although very much larger and with a somewhat different internal structure."*

*"There'll be pictures of them in our library. We'll show them to our viewers. But go on, please."*

The merchant captains [he continued] had been an unusually law-abiding crowd. They'd bartered for the living opals but had been careful not to give in exchange any artifacts that would unduly accelerate local industrial evolution. No advanced technology—if the Darbanese wanted spaceships they'd have to work out for themselves how to build them—and, above all, no sophisticated weaponry. Mind you, some of those skippers would have been quite capable of flogging a few hand lasers or the like to the natives but the Grand Governor of Barkara—the nation that, by its relatively early development of airships and firearms, had established *de facto* if not *de jure* sovereignty over the entire planet—made sure that nothing was imported that could be a threat to his rule. A situation rather analogous, perhaps, to that on Earth centuries ago when the Japanese Shoguns and their samurai took a dim view of the muskets and cannon that, in the wrong hands, would have meant their downfall.

Then the old Grand Governor died. His successor intimated that he would be willing to allow Darban to be drawn into the Federation of Worlds and to reap the benefits accruing therefrom. But whose Federation? Our Interstellar Federation? The Hallichek Hegemony? The Shaara Galactic Hive?

Our Intelligence people, just for once, started to earn their keep. According to them the Shaara had despatched a major warship to Darban, the captain of which had been given full authority to dicker with the Grand Governor. The Hallicheki had done likewise. And—not for the first time!—our lords and masters had been caught with their pants down. It was at the time of the Waverley Confrontation; and Lindisfarne Base, as a result, was right out of major warships. Even more fantastically the only spaceship available was my little *Adder*—and she was in the throes of a refit. Oh, there were ships at Scapa and Mikasa Bases but both of these were one helluva long way from Darban.

I was called before the Admiral and told that I must get off Lindisfarne as soon as possible, if not before, to make all possible speed for Darban, there to establish and maintain a Terran presence until such time as a senior officer could take over from me. I was to report, on the actions of the Shaara and the Hallicheki. I was to avoid direct confrontation with either. And I was not, repeat not, to take any action at any time without direct authorisation from Base. I was told that a civilian linguistic expert would be travelling in *Adder*—a Miss Mary Marsden—and that she would be assisting me as required.

What rankled was the way in which the Admiral implied that he was being obliged to send a boy on a man's errand. And I wasn't at all happy about having Mary Marsden along. She was an attractive enough girl—what little one could see of her!—but she was a super wowser. She was a member of one of the more puritanical religious sects flourishing on Francisco—and Francisco, as you know, is a hotbed of freak religions. Mary took hers seriously. She had insisted on retaining her civilian status because she did not approve of the short-skirted uniforms in which the Survey Service clad its female personnel. She always wore long-skirted, long-sleeved, high-necked dresses and a bonnet over her auburn hair. She didn't smoke—not even tobacco—or drink anything stronger than milk.

And yet, as far as we could see, she was a very pretty girl. Eyes that were more green than any other

colour. A pale—but not unhealthily so—skin. A straight nose that, a millimeter longer, would have been too big. A wide, full mouth that didn't need any artificial colouring. A firm, rather square chin. Good teeth—which she needed when it was the turn of Beadle, my first lieutenant, to do the cooking. Beadle had a passion for pies and his crusts always turned out like concrete. . . .

Well, we lifted off from Lindisfarne Base. We set trajectory for Darban. And before we were halfway there we suffered a complete communications black-out. Insofar as the Carlotti deep space radio was concerned I couldn't really blame Slovozny, my Sparks. The Base technicians, in their haste to get us off the premises, had botched the overhaul of the transceiver and, to make matters worse hadn't replaced the spares they had used. When two circuit trays blew, that was that.

Spooky Deane, my psionic communications officer, I could and did blame for the shortcomings of *his* department. As you probably know, it's just not possible for even the most highly trained and talented telepath to transmit his thoughts across light years without an amplifier. The amplifier most commonly used is the brain of that highly telepathic animal, the Terran dog, removed from the skull of its hapless owner and kept alive in a tank of nutrient solution with all the necessary life-support systems. PCOs are lonely people; they're inclined to regard themselves as the only true humans in shiploads of sub-men. They make pets of their horrid amplifiers, to which they can talk telepathically. And—as lonely men do—they drink.

What happened aboard *Adder* was an all-too-frequent occurrence. The PCO would be going on a solitary bender and would get to the stage of wanting to share his bottle with his pet. When neat gin—or whatever—is poured into nutrient solution the results are invariably fatal to whatever it is that's being nourished.

So—no psionic amplifier. No Carlotti deep space radio. No contact with Base.

*"And aren't you going to share your bottle with your pet, Commodore?"*

*"I didn't think that you were a pet of mine, Miss Kelly, or I of yours. But it's time we had a pause for refreshment."*

We stood on for Darban [he continued]. Frankly, I was pleased rather than otherwise at being entirely on my own, knowing that now I would have to use my own initiative, that I would not have the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty peering over my shoulder all the time, expecting me to ask their permission before I so much as blew my nose. Beadle, my first lieutenant, did try to persuade me to return to Lindisfarne—he was a very capable officer but far too inclined to regard Survey Service Regulations as Holy Writ. (I did find later that, given the right inducement, he was capable of bending those same regulations.) Nonetheless, he was, in many ways, rather a pain in the arse.

But Beadle was in the minority. The other young gentlemen were behind me, all in favour of carrying on. Mary Marsden, flaunting her civilian status, remained neutral.

We passed the time swotting up on Darban, watching and listening to the tapes that had been put on board prior to our departure from Lindisfarne.

We gained the impression of a very pleasant, almost Earth-type planet with flora and fauna not too outrageously different from what the likes of us are used to. Parallel evolution and all that. A humanoid—but not human—dominant race, furry bipeds that would have passed for cat-faced apes in a bad light. Civilized, with a level of technology roughly that of Earth during the late nineteenth century, old reckoning. Steam engines. Railways. Electricity, and the electric telegraph. Airships. Firearms. One nation—that with command of the air and a monopoly of telegraphic communications—*de facto* if not entirely *de jure* ruler of the entire planet.

The spaceport, such as it was, consisted of clearings in a big forest some kilometers south of Barkara, the capital city of Bandooran. Bandooran, of course, was the most highly developed nation, the one that imposed its will on all of Darban. Landing elsewhere was . . . discouraged. The Dog Star Line at one time tried to steal a march on the competition by instructing one of their captains to land near a city called Droobar, there to set up the Dog Star Line's own trading station. The news must have been

telegraphed to Barkara almost immediately. A couple of dirigibles drifted over, laying H.E. and incendiary eggs on the city. The surviving city fathers begged the Dog Star line captain to take himself and his ship elsewhere. Also, according to our tapes, the Dog Star Line was heavily fined shortly thereafter by the High Council of the Interstellar Federation.

But the spaceport . . . just clearings, as I have said, in the forest. Local airships were used to pick up incoming cargo and to deliver the tanks of "living opals" to the spaceships. No Aerospace Control, of course, although there would be once a base and a Carlotti Beacon Station had been established. Incoming traffic just came in, unannounced. Unannounced officially, that is. As you know, the inertial drive is far from being the quietest machine ever devised by Man; everybody in Barkara and for kilometers around would know when a spaceship was dropping down.

And we dropped in, one fine, sunny morning. After one preliminary orbit we'd been able to identify Barkara without any difficulty. The forest was there, just where our charts said it should be. There were those odd, circular holes in the mass of greenery—the clearings. In two of them there was the glint of metal. As we lost altitude we were able to identify the Shaara vessel—it's odd (or is it?) how their ships always look like giant beehives—and a typical, Hallicheki oversized silver egg sitting in a sort of latticework eggcup.

We came in early; none of the Shaara or Hallicheki were yet out and about although the noise of our drive must have alerted them. I set *Adder* down as far as possible from the other two ships. From my control room I could just see the blunt bows of them above the treetops.

We went down to the wardroom for breakfast, leaving Slovtqny to enjoy his meal in solitary state in the control room; he would let us know if anybody approached while we were eating. He buzzed down just as I'd reached the toast and marmalade stage. I went right up. But the local authorities hadn't yet condescended to take notice of us; the airship that came nosing over was a Shaara blimp, not a Darbanese rigid job. And then there was a flight of three Hallicheki, disdainful of mechanical aids and using their own wings. One of the horrid things evacuated her bowels when she was almost overhead, making careful allowance for what little wind there was. It made a filthy splash all down one of my viewports.

At last the Darbanese came. Their ship was of the Zeppelin type, the fabric of the envelope stretched taut over a framework of wood or metal. It hovered over the clearing, its engines turning over just sufficiently to offset the effect of the breeze. That airship captain, I thought, knew his job. A cage detached itself from the gondola, was lowered rapidly to the ground. A figure jumped out of it just before it touched and the airship went up like a rocket after the loss of weight. I wondered what would happen if that cage fouled anything before it was rehoisted, but I needn't have worried. As I've said, the airship captain was an expert.

We went down to the after airlock. We passed through it, making the transition from our own atmosphere into something that, at first, felt like warm soup. But it was quite breathable. Mary Marsden, as the linguist of the party, accompanied me down the ramp. I wondered how she could bear to go around muffled up to the eyebrows on such a beautiful morning as this; I was finding even shorts and shirt uniform too heavy for a warm day.

The native looked at us. We looked at him. He was dressed in a dull green smock that came down to mid-thigh and that left his arms bare. A fine collection of glittering brass badges was pinned to the breast and shoulders of his garment. He saluted, raising his three-fingered hands to shoulder level, palms out. His wide mouth opened in what I hoped was a smile, displaying pointed, yellow teeth that were in sharp contrast to the black fur covering his face.

He asked, in quite passable Standard English, "You the captain are?"

I said that I was.

He said, "Greetings I bring from the High Governor." Then, making a statement rather than asking a question, "You do not come in trade."

So we—or a Federation warship of some kind—had been expected. And *Adder*, little as she was,

did not look like a merchantman—too many guns for too small a tonnage.

He went on, "So you are envoy. Same as—" He waved a hand in the general direction of where the other ships were berthed. "—the Shaara, the Hallicheki. Then you will please to attend the meeting that this morning has been arranged." He pulled a big, fat watch on a chain from one of his pockets. "In—in forty-five of your minutes from now."

While the exchange was taking place Mary was glowering a little. She was the linguistic expert and it was beginning to look as though her services would not be required. She listened quietly while arrangements were being made. We would proceed to the city in my boat, with the Governor's messenger acting as pilot—pilot in the marine sense of the word, that is, just giving me the benefit of his local knowledge.

We all went back on board *Adder*. The messenger assured me that there was no need for me to have internal pressure adjusted to his requirements; he had often been aboard outworld spaceships and, too, he was an airshipman.

I decided that there was no time for me to change into dress uniform so I compromised by pinning my miniatures—two good attendance medals and the Distinguished Conduct Star that I'd got after the Battle of Dartura—to the left breast of my shirt, buckling on my sword belt with the wedding cake cutter in its gold-braided sheath. While I was tarting myself up, Mary entertained the messenger to coffee and biscuits in the wardroom (his English, she admitted to me later, was better than her Darbanese) and Beadle, with Dalgleish, the engineer, got the boat out of its bay and down to the ground by the ramp.

Mary was coming with me to the city and so was Spooky Deane—a trained telepath is often more useful than a linguist. We got into the boat. It was obvious that our new friend was used to this means of transportation, must often have ridden in the auxiliary craft of visiting merchant vessels. He sat beside me to give directions. Mary and Spooky were in the back.

As we flew towards the city—red brick, grey-roofed houses on the outskirts, tall, cylindrical towers, also of red brick, in the centre—we saw the Shaara and the Hallicheki ahead of us, flying in from their ships. A Queen-Captain, I thought, using my binoculars, with a princess and an escort of drones. A Hallichek Nest Leader accompanied by two old hens as scrawny and ugly as herself. The Shaara weren't using their blimp and the Hallicheki consider it beneath their dignity to employ mechanical means of flight inside an atmosphere. Which made *us* the wingless wonders.

I reduced speed a little to allow the opposition to make their landings on the flat roof of one of the tallest towers first. After all, they were both very senior to me, holding ranks equivalent to at least that of a four-ring captain in the Survey Service, and I was a mere lieutenant, my command notwithstanding. I came in slowly over the streets of the city. There were people abroad—pedestrians mainly, although there were vehicles drawn by scaly, huge-footed draught animals and the occasional steam car—and they raised their black-furred faces to stare at us. One or two of them waved.

When we got to the roof of the tower the Shaara and the Hallicheki had gone down but there were a half-dozen blue-smocked guards to receive us. They saluted as we disembarked. One of them led the way to a sort of penthouse which, as a matter of fact, merely provided cover for the stairhead. The stairs themselves were . . . wrong. They'd been designed, of course, to suit the length and jointure of the average Darbanese leg, which wasn't anything like ours. Luckily the Council Chamber was only two flights down.

It was a big room, oblong save for the curvature of the two end walls, in which were high windows. There was a huge, long table, at one end of which was a sort of ornate throne in which sat the High Governor. He was of far slighter stature than the majority of his compatriots but made up for it by the richness of his attire. His smock was of a crimson, velvetlike material and festooned with gold chains of office.

He remained seated but inclined his head in our direction. He said—I learned afterwards that these were the only words of English that he knew; he must have picked them up from some visiting space

captain—"Come in. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

*I was wondering," said Kitty Kelly coldly, "just when you were going to get around to saying that."*

*"He said it, not me. But I have to use that greeting once in every story. It's one of my conditions of employment."*

And where was I [he went on] before I was interrupted? Oh, yes. The Council Chamber, with the High Governor all dressed up like a Christmas tree. Various ministers and other notables, not as richly attired as their boss. All male, I found out later, with the exception of the Governor's lady, who was sitting on her husband's right. There were secondary sexual characteristics, of course, but so slight as to be unrecognisable by an outworlder. To me she—and I didn't know that she was "she"—was just another Darbanese.

But the fair sex was well represented. There was the Queen-Captain, her iridescent wings folded on her back, the velvety brown fur of her thorax almost concealed by the sparkling jewels that were her badges of high rank. There was the Shaara princess, less decorated but more elegant than her mistress. There was the Nest Leader; she was nowhere nearly as splendid as the Queen-Captain. She wasn't splendid at all. Her plumage was dun and dusty, the talons of the "hands" at the elbow joints of her wings unpolished. She wore no glittering insignia, only a wide band of cheap-looking yellow plastic about her scrawny neck. Yet she had her dignity, and her cruel beak was that of a bird of prey rather than that of the barnyard fowl she otherwise resembled. She was attended by two hen officers, equally drab.

And, of course, there was Mary, almost as drab as the Hallicheki.

The Governor launched into his spiel, speaking through an interpreter. I was pleased to discover that Standard English was to be the language used. It made sense, of course. English is the common language of Space just as it used to be the common language of the sea, back on Earth. And as the majority of the merchant vessels landing on Darban had been of Terran registry, the local merchants and officials had learned English.

The Governor, through his mouthpiece, said that he welcomed us all. He said that he was pleased that Imperial Earth had sent her representative, albeit belatedly, to this meeting of cultures. Blah, blah, blah. He agreed with the representatives of the Great Space-faring Powers that it was desirable for some sort of permanent base to be established on Darban. But . . . but whichever of us was given the privilege of taking up residence on his fair planet would have to prove capability to conform, to mix. . . . (By this time the interpreter was having trouble in getting the idea across but he managed somehow.) The Darbanese, the Governor told us, were a sporting people and in Barkara there was one sport preferred to all others. This was racing. It would be in keeping with Darbanese tradition if the Treaty were made with whichever of us proved the most expert in a competition of this nature. . . .

"*Racing?*" I whispered. In a foot race we'd probably be able to beat the Shaara and the Hallicheki, but I didn't think that it was foot racing that was implied. Horse racing or its local equivalent? That didn't seem right either.

"Balloon racing," muttered Spooky Deane, who had been flapping his psionic ears.

I just didn't see how balloon racing could be a spectator sport—but the tapes on Darban with which we had been supplied were far from comprehensive. As we soon found out.

*"Ballon racing?" asked Kitty Kelly. "From the spectators' viewpoint it must have been like watching grass grow."*

*"This balloon racing certainly wasn't," Grimes told her.*

The Darbanese racing balloons [he went on] were ingenious aircraft: dirigible, gravity-powered. Something very like them was, as a matter of fact, invented by a man called Adams back on Earth in the nineteenth century. Although it performed successfully, the Adams airship never got off the ground, commercially speaking. But it did work. The idea was that the thing would progress by soaring and swooping, soaring and swooping. The envelope containing the gas cells was a planing surface and the altitude of the contraption was controlled by the shifting of weights in the car—ballast, the bodies of the crew. Initially, positive buoyancy was obtained by the dumping of ballast and the thing would plane upwards. Then, when gas was valved, there would be negative buoyancy and a glide downwards.

Sooner or later, of course, you'd be out of gas to valve or ballast to dump. That would be the end of the penny section.

I remembered about the Adams airship while the interpreter did his best to explain balloon racing to us. I thought that it was a beautiful case of parallel mechanical evolution on two worlds many light years apart.

The Queen-Captain got the drift of it quite soon—after all, the Shaara *know* airships. Her agreement, even though it was made through her artificial voice box, sounded more enthusiastic than otherwise. The Nest Leader took her time making up her mind but finally squawked yes. I would have been outvoted if I hadn't wanted to take part in the contest.

There was a party then, complete with drinks and sweet and savoury things to nibble. The Shaara made pigs of themselves on a sticky liqueur and candy. Spooky Deane got stuck into something rather like gin. I found a sort of beer that wasn't too bad—although it was served unchilled—with little, spicy sausages as blotting paper. Mary, although she seemed to enjoy the sweetmeats, would drink only water. Obviously our hosts thought that she was odd, almost as odd as the Hallicheki who, although drinking water, would eat nothing.

They're *nasty* people, those avians. They have no redeeming vices—and when it comes to *real* vices their main one is cruelty. *Their* idea of a banquet is a shrieking squabble over a table loaded with little mammals, alive but not kicking—they're hamstrung before the feast so that they can't fight or run away—which they tear to pieces with those beaks of theirs.

After quite a while the party broke up. The Nest Leader and her officers were the first to leave, anxious no doubt to fly back to their ship for a tasty dish of live worms. The Queen-Captain and her party were the next to go. They were in rather a bad way. They were still on the rooftop when Mary and I, supporting him between us, managed to get Spooky Deane up the stairs and to the boat.

None of the locals offered to help us; it is considered bad manners on Darban to draw the attention of a guest to his insobriety. We said our goodbyes to those officials, including the interpreter, who had come to see us off. We clambered into our boat and lifted. On our way back to *Adder* we saw the Shaara blimp coming to pick up the Queen-Captain. I wasn't surprised. If she'd tried to take off from the roof in the state that she was in she'd have made a nasty splash on the cobblestones under the tower.

And I wasn't at all sorry to get back to the ship to have a good snore. Spooky was fast asleep by the time that I landed by the after airlock and Mary was looking at both of us with great distaste.

*"I'm not a wowser," said Kitty Kelly.*

*"Help yourself, then. And freshen my glass while you're about it."*

Bright and early the next morning [he went on, after a refreshing sip] two racing balloons and an instructor were delivered by a small rigid airship. Our trainer was a young native called Robiliyi. He spoke very good English; as a matter of fact he was a student at the University of Barkara and studying for a degree in Outworld Languages. He was also a famous amateur balloon jockey and had won several prizes. Under his supervision we assembled one of the balloons, inflating it from the cylinders of hydrogen that had been brought from the city. Imagine a huge air mattress with a flimsy, wickerwork car slung under it. That's what the thing looked like. The only control surface was a huge rudder at the after end of the car. There were two tillers—one forward and one aft.

Dagleish inspected the aircraft, which was moored by lines secured to metal pegs driven into the ground. He said, "I'm not happy about all this valving of gas. You know how the Shaara control buoyancy in their blimps?"

I said that I did.

He said that it should be possible to modify one of the balloons—the one that we should use for the race itself—so as to obviate the necessity of valving gas for the downward glide. I prodded the envelope with a cautious finger and said that I didn't think that the fabric of the gas cells would stand the strain of being compressed in a net. He said that he didn't think so either. *So that was that*, I thought. *Too bad*. Then he went on to tell me that in the ship's stores was a bolt of plastic cloth that, a long time ago, had been part of an urgent shipment of supplies to the Survey Service base on Zephyria, a world notorious for its violent windstorms. (Whoever named that planet had a warped sense of humour!) The material

was intended for making emergency repairs to the domes housing the base facilities. They were always being punctured by wind-borne boulders and the like. When *Adder* got to Zephyria it was found that somebody had experienced a long overdue rush of brains to the head and put everything underground. There had been the usual lack of liaison between departments and nobody had been told not to load the plastic.

Anyhow, Dalgleish thought that he'd be able to make gas cells from the stuff. He added that the Shaara would almost certainly be modifying their own racer, using the extremely tough silk from which the gas cells of their blimps were made.

I asked Robiliyi's opinion. He told me that it would be quite in order to use machinery as long as it was hand-powered.

Dalgleish went into a huddle with him. They decided that only the three central, sausage-like gas cells need be compressed to produce negative buoyancy; also that it would be advisable to replace the wickerwork frame enclosing the "mattress" with one of light but rigid metal. Too, it would be necessary to put a sheet of the plastic over the assembly of gas cells so as to maintain a planing surface in all conditions.

Then it was time for my first lesson. Leaving Dalgleish and the others to putter around with the still unassembled balloon I followed Robiliyi into the flimsy car of the one that was ready for use. The wickerwork creaked under my weight. I sat down, very carefully, amidships, and tried to keep out of the way. Robiliyi started scooping sand out of one of the ballast bags, dropping it overside. The bottom of the car lifted off the mossy ground but the balloon was still held down by the mooring lines, two forward and two aft. Robiliyi scampered, catlike, from one end of the car to the other, pulling the metal pegs clear of the soil with expert jerks. We lifted, rising vertically. I looked down at the faces of my shipmates. *Better him than us*, their expressions seemed to be saying.

Then we were at treetop height, then above the trees, still lifting. Robiliyi scrambled to the rear of the craft, calling me to follow. He grabbed the after tiller. The platform tilted and above us the raft of gas cells did likewise, presenting an inclined plane to the air. We were sliding through the atmosphere at a steep angle. I wasn't sure whether or not I was enjoying the experience. I'd always liked ballooning, back on Earth, but the gondolas of the hot air balloons in which I'd flown were far safer than this flimsy basket. There was nothing resembling an altimeter in the car; there were no instruments at all. I hoped that somewhere in the nested gas cells there was a relief valve that would function if we got too high. And how high was too high, anyhow? I noticed that the underskin of the balloon, which had been wrinkled when we lifted off, was now taut.

Robiliyi shouted shrilly, "Front end! Front end!" We scuttled forward. He pulled on a dangling lanyard; there was an audible hiss of escaping gas from above. He put the front-end tiller over and as we swooped downward we turned. The treetops, which had seemed far too distant, were now dangerously close. And there was the clearing from which we had lifted with *Adder* standing there, bright silver in the sunlight. But we weren't landing yet. We shifted weight Aft, jettisoned ballast, soared. I was beginning to get the hang of it, starting to enjoy myself. Robiliyi let me take the tiller so that I could get the feel of the airship. She handled surprisingly well.

We did not return to earth until we had dumped all our ballast. I asked Robiliyi what we could do if, for some reason, we wanted to get upstairs again in a hurry after valving gas. He grinned, stripped off his tunic, made as though to throw it overboard. He grinned again, showing all his sharp, yellow teeth. "And if *that* is not enough," he said, "there is always your crew person. . . ."

We landed shortly after this. Robiliyi reinflated the depleted cells from one of the bottles while Beadle and Spooky collected ballast sand from the banks of a nearby brook.

Then it was Mary's turn to start her training.

*"Mary? Was she your crew, your co-pilot, for the race?"*

*"Yes."*

*"But you've impressed me as being a male chauvinist pig."*

*"Have I? Well, frankly, I'd sooner have had one of my officers. But Mary volunteered, and she was far better qualified than any of them. Apart from myself she was the only one in Adder with*



*lighter-than-air experience. It seems that the sect of which she was a member went in for ballooning quite a lot. It tied in somehow with their religion. Nearer my God to Thee, and all that."*

Well [he went on], we trained, both in the balloon that Dalgleish had modified and in the one that was still as it had been when delivered to us. The modifications? Oh, quite simple. A coffee-mill hand winch, an arrangement of webbing that compressed the three central, longitudinal gas cells. The modified balloon we exercised secretly, flying it only over a circuit that was similar in many ways to the official, triangular race track. The unmodified balloon we flew over the actual course. The Shaara and the Hallicheki did likewise, in craft that did not appear to have had anything done to them. I strongly suspected that they were doing the same as we were, keeping their dark horses out of sight until the Big Day. The Shaara, I was certain, had done to theirs what we had done to ours—after all, it was a Shaara idea that we had borrowed. But the Hallicheki? We just couldn't guess.

And we trained, and we trained. At first it was Robiliyi with Mary or Robiliyi with myself. Then it was Mary and I. I'll say this for her—she made good balloon crew. And I kidded myself that she was becoming far less untouchable. In that narrow car we just couldn't help coming into physical contact quite frequently.

Then the time was upon us and we were as ready as ever we would be. On the eve of the Great Day the three contending balloons were taken to the airport. The Shaara towed theirs in behind one of their blimps; it was entirely concealed in a sort of gauzy cocoon. The Hallicheki towed theirs in, four hefty crew hens doing the work. There was no attempt at concealment. We towed ours in astern of our flier. It was completely swathed in a sheet of light plastic.

The racers were maneuvered into a big hangar to be inspected by the judges. I heard later, from Robiliyi, that the Nest Leader had insinuated that the Shaara and ourselves had installed miniature inertial drive units disguised as hand winches. (It was the sort of thing that *they* would have done if they'd thought that they could get away with it.)

We all returned to our ships. I don't know how the Shaara and the Hallicheki spent the night but we dined and turned in early. I took a stiff nightcap to help me to sleep. Mary had her usual warm milk.

The next morning we returned in the flier to the airport. It was already a warm day. I was wearing a shirt-and-shorts uniform but intended to discard cap, long socks, and shoes before clambering into the wickerwork car of the balloon. Mary was suitably—according to her odd lights—dressed but what she had on was very little more revealing than her usual high-necked, longsleeved, long-skirted dress; it did little more than establish the fact that she was, after all, a biped. It was a hooded, long-sleeved cover-all suit with its legs terminating in soft shoes. It was so padded that it was quite impossible to do more than guess at the shape of the body under it.

Young Robiliyi was waiting for us at the airport, standing guard over our green and gold racer. Close by was the Shaara entry, its envelope displaying orange polka dots on a blue ground. The Shaara crew stood by their balloon—the pilot, a bejewelled drone, and his crew, a husky worker. Then there were the Hallicheki—officers both, to judge from the yellow plastic bands about their scrawny necks. The envelope of their racer was a dull brown.

On a stand, some distance from the starting line, sat the Governor with his entourage. With him were the Queen-Captain and the Nest Leader with their senior officers. The judges were already aboard the small, rigid airship which, at its mooring mast, was ready to cast off as soon as the race started. It would fly over the course with us, its people alert for any infraction of the rules.

Two of the airport ground crew wheeled out a carriage on which was mounted a highly polished little brass cannon. The starting gun. I kicked off my shoes, peeled off my socks, left them, with my cap, in Robiliyi's charge. I climbed into the flimsy car, took my place at the after tiller. Mary followed me, stationed herself at the winch amidships. She released the brake. The gas cells rustled as they expanded; we were held down now only by the taut mooring lines fore and aft. I looked over at the others. The

Shaara, too, were ready. The Hallicheki had just finished the initial dumping of sand ballast.

One of the gunners jerked a long lanyard. There was a bang and a great flash of orange flame, a cloud of dirty white smoke. I yanked the two after mooring lines, pulling free the iron pegs. Forward Mary did the same, a fraction of a second later. It wasn't a good start. The forward moorings should have been released first to get our leading edge starting to lift. Mary scrambled aft, redistributing weight, but the Shaara and the Hallicheki, planing upwards with slowly increasing speed, were already ahead.

Almost directly beneath us was Airport Road and in the middle distance was the railway to Brinn with the Brinn Highway running parallel to it. I can remember how the track was gleaming like silver in the morning sunlight. To the north, distant but already below the expanding horizon, was the Cardan Knoll, a remarkable dome-shaped hill with lesser domes grouped about it. We would have to pass to the west and north of this before steering a south-easterly course for the Porgidor Tower.

Shaara and Hallicheki were racing neck and neck, still climbing. I was still falling behind. I brought the dangling mooring lines inboard to reduce drag. It may have made a little difference, but not much. Ahead of us the Shaara balloon reached its ceiling, compressed gas and began the first downward glide. A second or so later the Hallicheki reduced buoyancy to follow suit. I looked up. The underskin of my gas cells was still slightly wrinkled; there was still climbing to do.

The last wrinkles vanished. I told Mary to compress. The pawls clicked loudly as she turned the winch handle. Then we scuttled to the front end of the car. I took hold of the forward tiller. We swooped down, gathering speed rapidly. The farm buildings and the grazing animals in the fields were less and less toylike as we lost altitude. I steered straight for an ungainly beast that looked like an armour-plated cow. It lifted its head to stare at us in stupid amazement.

I didn't want to hit the thing. I sort of half ran, half crawled aft as Mary released the winch brake. We lifted sweetly—no doubt to the great relief of the bewildered herbivore. I looked ahead. The opposition were well into their second upward beat, the Hallicheki soaring more steeply than the Shaara. But taking advantage of thermals is an art that every bird learns as soon as it is able to fly; there must be, I thought, a considerable updraught of warm air from the railroad and the black-surfaced Brinn Highway. But the higher the Hallicheki went the more gas they would have to valve, and if they were not careful they would lose all their reserve buoyancy before the circuit was completed.

The Shaara reached their ceiling and started their downward glide. The Hallicheki were still lifting, gaining altitude but losing ground. I couldn't understand why they were not gliding down their lift. And I was still lifting. Then I saw that, ahead, the Hallicheki had at last valved gas and were dropping. I pulled to starboard to avoid them. It meant putting on some distance but I daren't risk a mid-air collision. The Hallicheki had wings of their own and could bail out in safety. Mary and I hadn't and couldn't.

But there was no danger of our becoming entangled with the Hallicheki. They had put on considerable speed during their dive and were swooping down on the Shaara balloon like a hawk on its prey. They were directly above it—and then, although they were still well clear of the ground, were rising again. A failure of nerve? It didn't fit in with what I knew of their psychology. But ballast must have been dumped and it would mean an additional soar and swoop for them before rounding the Cardan Knoll.

And I was gaining on them.

But where were the Shaara?

Mary seemed to have read my thought. She said, "They're in trouble."

I looked down to where she was pointing. Yes, they were in trouble all right. They had lost considerable altitude and the car of their balloon was entangled with the topmost branches of a tall tree. The drone and the worker were tugging ineffectually with all their limbs, buzzing about it. But they would never get it clear. They'd lost all their lift. The sausage-like gas cells were limp, more than half deflated.

But that was their worry. We flew on. Ahead, the Knoll was getting closer. I pulled over to port to pass to the west'ard of the brush-covered domes. The Hallicheki were already rounding the Knoll, lost briefly to sight as they passed to north of it. Then I was coming round to starboard in a tight, rising turn. I didn't realise until it was almsot too late that the slight, northerly breeze was setting me down onto the hill; I had to put the tiller hard over to try to claw to wind'ard. The deck of our car just brushed the branches of a tree and there was a clattering, screeching explosion of small, flying reptiles from the foliage. Luckily

they were more scared of us than we were of them.

Ahead, now, was the railway to Garardan and the Garardan Road. Beyond road and railway was the Blord River and, far to the southeast, I could see the crumbling stonework of the Porgidor Tower. Over road and railway, I reasoned, there would be thermals but over the river, which ran ice-cold from the high hills, there would be a downdraught. . Yes, there were thermals all right. The Hallicheki were taking full advantage of them, going up like a balloon. Literally. What were they playing at? Why weren't they gliding down the lift? And they were keeping well to starboard, to the south'ard of the track, putting on distance as they would have to come to port to pass to north and east of the tower.

I looked astern. The judges' airship was following, watching. If the Hallicheki tried to cut off a corner they'd be disqualified.

I kept the Porgidor Tower fine on my starboard bow; whatever the Hallicheki were playing at, I would run the minimum distance. And then, as I was lifting on the thermals over the railway, I saw that there was some method in the opposition's madness. There were more thermals over the power station on the west bank of the river and I had missed out on them.

Swoop and soar, swoop and soar. Compress, decompress. Our muscles were aching with the stooped scrambles forward and aft in the cramped confines of the car. It must have been even worse for Mary than for me because of the absurdly bulky and heavy clothing that she was wearing. But we were holding our own, more than holding our own. That thermal-hunting had cost the Hallicheki their lead.

Then there was the Porgidor Tower close on our starboard hand, with quite a crowd of spectators waving from the battered battlements. And we were on the last leg of the course, over boulder-strewn bushland, with the twin ribbons of the Saarkaar Road and Railway ahead and beyond them the river again, and beyond that the mooring masts and hangars of the airport.

Swoop and soar, swoop and soar. . . .

I swooped into the thermals rising from the road and the railway so that I could manage a steep, fast glide with no loss of altitude. I began to feel smugly self-congratulatory.

But where were the Hallicheki?

Not ahead any longer. All that they had gained by their use of thermals was altitude. They were neither ahead nor to either side, and certainly not below, where the only artifact visible was a little sidewheel paddle steamer chugging fussily up river.

Then there was the anticipated downdraught that I countered with decompression.

Suddenly there was a sharp pattering noise from directly above and I saw a shower of glittering particles driving down on each side of the car. Rain? Hail? But neither fall from a clear sky.

Mary was quicker on the uptake than I was "The Hallicheki," she shouted. "They dumped their ballast on us!"

Not only had they dumped ballast on us, they'd holed the gas cells. Some of the viciously pointed steel darts had gone through every surface, dropping to the deck of the car. If we'd been in the way of them they'd have gone through us too. Razor-sharp, tungsten tipped (as I discovered later). So this was what had happened to the Shaara racer. . . .

"Ballast!" I yelled. "Dump ballast!"

But we didn't have any to dump. I thought briefly of the mooring lines with their metal pegs but the ropes were spliced to the pins and to the structure of the car. And I didn't have a knife. (All right, all right, I should have had one but I'd forgotten it.) Then I remembered my first flight with Robiliyi and what he had told me when I'd asked him what to do when there was no ballast left to dump. I stripped off my shirt, dropped it over the side. It didn't seem to make much difference. I sacrificed my shorts. I looked up. All the cells were punctured and three of them looked as though they were empty. But the planing

surface above them must still be reasonably intact. I hoped. If only I could gain enough altitude I could glide home. Forgetting the company that I was in I took off my briefs, sent the scrap of fabric after the , other garments.

I heard Mary make a noise half way between a scream and a gasp.

I looked at her. She looked at me. Her face was one huge blush.

I felt my own ears burning in sympathy.

I said, "We're still dropping. We have to get upstairs. Fast."

She asked, "You mean . . . ?"

I said, "Yes."

She asked, her voice little more than a whisper, "Must I?"

I said that she must.

But you could have knocked me over with a feather when her hand went to the throat of her coveralls, when her finger ran down the seam. She stepped out of the garment, kicked it aside. Her underwear was thick and revealed little; nonetheless I could see that that fantastic blush of hers suffused the skin of her neck and shoulders, even the narrow strip of belly that was visible. *That will do*, I was going to say, but she gave me no time to say it. Her expression had me baffled. Her halter came off and was jettisoned, then her remaining garment.

I'll be frank. She wouldn't have attracted a second glance on a nudist beach; her figure was good but not outstanding. But this was not a nudist beach. A naked woman in an incongruous situation is so much more naked than she would be in the right surroundings. She looked at me steadily, defiantly. Her blush had faded. Her skin was smoothly creamy rather than white. I felt myself becoming interested.

She asked, "Do you like it?" I thought at first that she meant the strip show that she had put on for me. She went on, "*I do!* I've often thought about it but I had no idea what it would really be like! The feel of the sun and the air on my skin . . . "

I wanted to go on looking at her. I wanted to do more than that—but there's a time and a place for everything and this was neither. It could have been quite a good place in other circumstances but not with a race to be flown to a finish.

I tore my eyes away from her naked body—I heard a ripping noise, but it was only one of the rents in the envelope enlarging itself—and looked around and up and down to see what was happening. Mary's supreme sacrifice was bringing results. We were lifting—sluggishly, but lifting. And so, just ahead of us, were the Hallicheki. The gas cells of their balloon were flabby and wrinkled; they must have squandered buoyancy recklessly in their attacks on the Shaara and ourselves. And then I *saw* one of the great, ugly brutes clambering out of the car. They were abandoning ship, I thought. They were dropping out of the race. Then I realised what they were doing. The one who had gone outboard was gripping the forward rail of the car with her feet, was beating her wings powerfully, towing the balloon. Legal or illegal? I didn't know. That would be for the judges to decide, just as they would have to make a decision on the use of potentially lethal ballast. But as no machinery was being used, the Hallicheki might be declared the winners of the race.

What else did we have to dump? We would have to gain altitude, and fast, for the last swoop in. The hand winch? It was of no further use to us. It was held down to the deck of the car only by wing nuts and they loosened fairly easily. We unscrewed them, threw them out. We were rising a little faster. Then there were the shackles securing the downhaul to the compression webbing. Overboard they went. The winch itself I decided to keep as a last reserve of disposable ballast.

High enough?

I thought so.

I valved gas—for the first and only time during our flight—and Mary and I shifted our weight forward. We swooped, overtaking the crawling, under tow, Hallicheki balloon. We were making headway all right but losing too much altitude. The winch would have to go.

It was insinuated that my jettisoning it when we were directly above the Hallicheki was an act of spite. I said in my report that it was accidental, that the Hallicheki just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or the right time. I'll not deny that we cheered when we saw the hunk of machinery hit that great, flabby mattress almost dead centre. It tore through it, rupturing at least four of the gas cells. The envelope crumpled, fell in about itself. The two hen officers struggled to keep the crippled racer in the air, ripping the balloon fabric to shreds with their clawed feet as their wings flapped frenziedly. Meanwhile *we* were going up like a rocket.

The Hallicheki gave up the attempt to keep their craft airborne. They let it flutter earthwards, trailing streamers of ragged cloth. They started to come after us, climbing powerfully. I could sense somehow that they were in a vile temper. I imagined those sharp claws and beaks ripping into the fabric of our balloon and didn't feel at all happy. *We* didn't have wings of our own. We didn't even have parachutes.

It was time for the final swoop—if only those blasted birds let us make it. There was no need to valve any more gas; the rents in the fabric of the gas cells had enlarged themselves. We shifted our weight forward. Astern and overhead I heard the throbbing of engines; it was the judges' airship escorting us to the finish line. The Hallicheki wouldn't dare to try anything now. I hoped. My hope was realized. They squawked loudly and viciously, sheered off.

Overhead, as I've said, there was the throbbing of airship engines—and, fainter, the irregular beat of an inertial drive unit. *Adder's* atmosphere flier, I thought at first, standing by in case of accidents. But it didn't sound quite right, somehow. Too deep a note. But I'd too much on my plate to be able to devote any thought to matters of no immediate importance.

We swept into the airport, steering for the red flag on the apron that marked the finish. We were more of a hang glider now than a balloon but I *knew* somehow that we'd make it. The underside of the car brushed the branches of a tree—to have made a detour would have been out of the question—and a large section of decking was torn away. That gave us just the little extra buoyancy that we needed. We cleared the spiky hedge that marked the airport boundary. We actually hit the flagpole before we hit the ground, knocking it over. Before the tattered, deflated envelope collapsed over us completely we heard the cries of applause, the thunder of flat hands on thighs.

It was quite a job getting out from under that smothering fabric. During the struggle we came into contact, very close contact. At least once I almost . . . Well, I didn't. I'm not boasting about it, my alleged self-control, I mean. There comes a time in life when you feel more remorse for the uncommitted sins—if sins they are—than for the committed ones.

At last we crawled out of the wreckage. The first thing we noticed was that the applause had ceased. My first thought was that the natives were shocked by our nudity and then, as I looked around, saw that they were all staring upwards. The clangour of the strange inertial drive was sounding louder and louder.

We looked up too. There was a pinnacle—a big pinnacle, such as are carried by major warships—coming down. It displayed Survey Service markings. I could read the name, in large letters, *ARIES II*. *Aries'* number-two pinnacle . . . *Aries*—a Constellation Class cruiser—I knew quite well. I'd once served in her as a junior watch-keeper. She must still be in orbit, I thought. This would be the preliminary landing party.

The pinnacle grounded not far from where Mary and I were standing. Or where *I* was standing; Mary was on her hands and knees desperately trying to tear off a strip of fabric from the ruined envelope to cover herself. The outer airlock door opened. A group of officers in full dress blues disembarked. Captain Daintree was in the lead. I knew him. He was a strict disciplinarian, a martinet. He was one of the reasons why I had not been sorry to leave *Aries*.

He glared at us. He recognised me in spite of my non-regulation attire. He stood there, stiff as a ramrod, his right hand on the pommel of his dress sword. I still think that he'd have loved to use that weapon on me. His face registered shock, disbelief, horror, you name it.

He spoke at last, his voice low but carrying easily over the distance between us.

"Mr. Grimes, correct me if I am wrong, but your instructions, I believe, were merely to maintain a Terran presence on this planet until such time as an officer of higher rank could take over." I admitted that this was so.

"You were not, I am certain, authorised to start a nudist club. Or is this, perhaps, some sort of love-in?"

"But, sir," I blurted, "I won the race!" Even he could not take that triumph from me. "I won the race!"

*"And did you win the prize, Commodore?" asked Kitty Kelly.*

*"Oh, yes. A very nice trophy. A model, in solid gold, of a racing balloon, suitably inscribed. I have it still, at home in Port Forlorn."*

*"Not that prize. It's the body beautiful I mean. The inhibition-and-clothing-shedding Miss Marsden."*

*"Yes," said Grimes. "She shed her inhibitions all right. But I muffed it. I should have struck while the iron was hot, before she had time to decide that it was really Beadle—of all people!—whom she fancied. He reaped what I'd sown—all the way back to Lindisfarne Base!*

*"When you get to my age you'll realise that there's no justice in the Universe."*

*"Isn't there?" she asked, rather too sweetly.*