

# Amazing

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**Complete Short Novel**

**By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER**

# *When the Dream Dies, What of the Dreamer?*

## CHAPTER I

IT WAS Kemp's dream, although we shared part of it. It was Kemp's dream, but Jim Larsen participated in it, and Dudley Hill, and myself. It was a

dream that is not uncommon among spacemen, especially such spacemen as ply their trade out and away from the well serviced shipping routes. It was a dream that some few spacemen have made come true.



Alan Kemp, when I first met him, was Chief Officer of the old *Rimhound*. He was a typical enough Rim Runners officer inasmuch as he, like most of us in that employ, had served in big ships before coming out to the Rim. He retained a dignity, almost a pomposity of bearing that didn't quite match either the shabbiness of his uniform or the decrepitude of his vessel. For the rest, he was a big man, tall, grey haired and with the bleak blue eyes that spacemen always seem to own in fiction but so seldom do in fact. But he was, when you got to know him, when you got past his reserve, a good shipmate, a good friend. Had he not been that, the rest of us would never have accompanied him in his venture.

Old Jim Larsen was *Rimhound's* Second Mannschenn Drive Engineer. We all called him "Old Jim". On meeting him for the first time, age was the first impression you gained. The second one was of alertness, aliveness, of somehow indestructable youth that looked out from behind his grey eyes, that made nonsense of his bald head, withered frame and wrinkled face. Nobody knew just how old he was. His Chief Interstellar Drive Engineer's Certificate had been folded and refolded many times so that the date of birth on this piece of parchment was

illegible. It was strongly suspected that this date was nothing like the one that he used when signing a ship's Articles. Also, the Certificate carried an Ehrenhaft Drive endorsement, and the last of the Ehrenhaft Drive ships, the gaussjammers, was broken up before I was born.

Dudley Hill was Third Mate. Like Kemp, he had served in the big ships of the Interstellar Transport Commission. Unlike Kemp, he had not waited until he was a senior officer before he had resigned from the Commission's service. Rumor had it that he had been asked to resign, that he had been implicated in the collision of *Beta Scorpii* with an asteroid in the Rigellian planetary system. Rumor had it, too, that he had been made the scapegoat and that *Beta Scorpii's* Master, who possessed powerful friends in the Commission's upper hierarchy, was responsible for the error of judgment that resulted in the near-wreck. However, Rim Runners, chronically short of officers, ask no questions and Dudley was as sober and reliable a spaceman as any on the Rim, and more so than most.

And myself? I was *Rimhound's* Purser, the spacefaring office boy, as I was sometimes called. Like the others, I'd drifted out to the Rim. I was, rather more years ago than I care to re-

member, once in the Waverley Royal Mail. The Waverley Royal Mail has rather old fashioned ideas as to what constitutes gentlemanly conduct on the part of its officers. (The Kingdom of Waverley, of course, is the last stronghold of old fashioned ideas.) The Waverley Royal Mail doesn't like divorce cases in which the evidence has been collected aboard one of its ships. The Waverley Royal Mail doesn't like Pursers who are named as co-respondents.

So . . .

Anyhow, we'd served together aboard *Rimhound* for some months. We'd got to know each other, had learned a great deal about each other's backgrounds. Alan was the only one of the four of us who was married. I'd met his wife quite a few times when the ship was in at Port Farewell, on Faraway, and, each time, had envied Alan.

Veronica doesn't come into the story, as a matter of fact, not as a person—although her influence played a great part. Veronica was lovely. She was a Carinthian—and if you've ever met any of the women from that planet you'll be able to guess what she was like. I don't know why or how it is, but human stock on Carinthia seems to have mutated slightly, to have developed along the lines of the Siamese cat.

That, I know, is biological nonsense, but it's the best way of giving an impression of their coloring, their sleekness, their grace. If you like Siamese cats—and I do, and Alan did—you'll like the women of Carinthia.

Alan had met Veronica when she was travelling out to the Rim in the old *Delta Sextans*, of which vessel he was Chief Officer. He'd fallen for her, hard. He'd have been willing to have made his home on any planet of the Galaxy as long as she was there—but I'm inclined to think that he was rather shaken when she announced her firm intention of living on Faraway. The Interstellar Transport Commission doesn't maintain a regular service to the Rim and so, throwing away his years of seniority, Alan left their employ and joined Rim Runners.

So there we were, the four of us, in *Rimhound* when she was switched off the usual tramlines—the Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo, Thule and Eastern Circuit run—and chartered to the Shakespearean Line. It made a change. It was a plunge in towards the Center; not a very deep plunge, though. The Shakespearean Sector may not be officially regarded as part of the Rim, but it's so far out that the night skies of its worlds display only a sparse sprinkling of stars.

We carried a full cargo of ag-

ricultural machinery from Port Farewell, on Faraway, to Port Fortinbras, on Elsinore. It was our luck (bad luck, we thought at first) to arrive there in time for the beginning of the cargo handlers' strike, an industrial dispute that dragged on and on. As a result of this long period of enforced idleness there was ample planet leave. And there was, too, ample time for those of us with homes and families to become more than usually browned-off with a means of livelihood that made long periods of separation inevitable, that enlaid the occasional lengthening of such periods by the stubbornness of trade union leaders and employers of labor on distant planets.

Of the four of us, Alan Kemp was the most browned-off. We were not surprised. We knew him well by this time, knew his moods, knew that even a month away from Veronica was, for him, little short of eternity. I know this much—if I'd been married to her my spacefaring days would have been over, even if the only shore employment offering had been shovelling sludge in the sewage conversion plant. But Alan was different.

Even so, there could have been worse worlds for a hold-up than Elsinore. It's a pleasant enough hunk of dirt. The land is mainly flat, and fertile and well wooded.

There are no extremes of temperature except at the Poles and at the Equator. There are almost no heavy industries. The people are an outwardly stolid breed, running to blondness and fatness, both men and women. In spite of their stolidity (or because of it) they are inveterate gamblers. They gamble on the turn of a card, on the fall of a coin or the dice. They make wagers on horse races, on dog races, on races between representatives of such of the indigenous fauna as are noted for fleetness of foot or wing. Every town—every village, even—boasts its Casino. Then, to rake in such folding money as may still be loafing around, there are private lotteries, and municipal lotteries, and state lotteries.

Oddly enough, none of us was a gambler. Come to that we were rather deficient in all the vices (with the exception of old Jim Larsen) leading, by Rim Runner standards, lives of quite exceptional virtue. But after a few weeks on Elsinore we began, more and more, to frequent the taverns in and around Fortinbras. Alan Kemp was not often one of the party; about once a week, however, he would declare that he had to get off the ship before he was driven even further round the bend than he was already, and join us.

He was always a rather mor-

bid drinker and liked to drink in morbid surroundings. When he was one of the party we invariably finished the evening at *The Poor Yorick*, an establishment notorious for its funereal decor. We would sit around a coffin shaped table drinking beer from mugs that were facsimiles of human skulls—they even had the horrid feel of old bone—listening to the fine selection of funereal marches that was the only music obtainable from the juke-box, the casing of which was the work of a monumental mason. The dim lighting was by flickering, smoking tallow candles. The floral decorations took the form of floral tributes.

The night that it all started, the night that the dream began to come true, Alan was in fine form. There had been a mail in that morning—the Commission's *Epsilon Crucis*, inbound from the Rim—and there had been no letters for our Chief Officer. The inevitable result was that he was both sulking and worrying.

"Space," he said, for about the fifth time that evening, "is no life for a civilized man."

"You," I told him, "are not a civilized man. You know damn well that you could never settle ashore. Ships are your life."

"That might have been true," he said, "before I met Veronica. It's not true now."

"Then why don't you just get the hell out of it?" asked Jim Larsen.

"Given a job that pays as well as this," said Alan, "I would."

"You wouldn't," I said. "You're too fond of being a big frog in a small puddle. You've been a senior officer too long—first in the Commission's ships, then with Rim Runners. And you think you might as well become Master now."

"All right," he said. "Perhaps I do. But there's only one way to be really happy as Master, and that's to be Owner as well." He sipped his beer reflectively. "A little ship could be fitted in on the Eastern Circuit without trampling on our revered employers' corns too heavily. A shuttle service, say, between Mellise and Grollor . . ."

"Even little ships cost big money," pointed out Dudley Hill gloomily.

Old Larsen laughed. "This is the world to get it on. What about the lotteries? If you aren't in, you can't win."

"The trouble," I told them, "is that money just can't be taken off Elainore. "Currency regulations and restrictions and all the rest of it."

"Your point," said Alan, "is purely academic. Surely you know by this time that it is always somebody else who wins prizes in lotteries. I'll prove it."

He beckoned to the waiter, a cadaverous, black-clad individual. "I suppose that you keep books of lottery tickets here?"

"Indeed, yes, sir. Tattersall's? Elsinore State? Fortinbras Municipal?"

"Which one is drawn the first?"

"Tattersall's sir."

"Then I'll take a ticket. A losing ticket."

The man smiled. "The *winning* ticket, sir."

"Oh, no. If I hold it, it can't possibly win."

"As you say, sir. That will be two dollars."

"I'm prepared to pay to prove my point," said Alan glumly.

Two days later, he learned that he had won fifty thousand Elsinore dollars.

## CHAPTER 2

KEMP, like many others in similar circumstances, had blandly assumed that all his worries would be over when he won the big prize. Like those others, he soon discovered that his worries were just starting.

"Until this moment," he grumbled, "I always thought that lack of money was my biggest trouble. Now I'm not so sure . . ."

"Come off it," I told him. I looked at the solidograph of Veronica that stood on his desk, the figurine in the cube of clear plas-

tic that seemed almost alive, that held all the grace and loveliness of her in miniature. "Come off it, Alan. You've a beautiful wife and a not so small fortune. What more do you want?"

"She," he said patiently, "is on Faraway. The fortune is here. On Elsinore."

"There are such vehicles as passenger carrying spaceships, you know. I can see no reason why the pair of you shouldn't settle on Elsinore. You could set yourselves up in some kind of business."

"I've thought of that. But there's only one kind of business that we've ever dreamed of setting ourselves up in."

"You mean what you were talking about the other night? Owner and Master?"

"Yes. As I was saying, a little ship with a minimal crew, paid on a share basis. Myself as Master. Veronica as Catering Officer; as you know, she's a first class cook. Other people have made a go of it, on those lines. And now, when at last we have some capital to play with, there's no way of getting it off this blasted planet." He splashed some more gin into our glasses. "Are you sure there's no way, George?"

"Quite sure," I said. "I've spent all day exploring every avenue on your behalf, leaving no stone unturned. I started at



the Agent's office, then made the rounds of all the banks in Port Fortinbras. There's only one way for you to get the money off Elsinore, and that's to buy things here for export to the Rim Worlds. And you haven't a hope in hell of doing that—not for a couple of years at least. All available tonnage is booked up that far ahead."

"There's always the odd *Epsilon* Class tramp drifting in," he suggested, not very hopefully.

"And suppose one does? What chance do you stand against the locals, all clamoring for cargo space?"

"I could employ an Agent."

"And he'd soon whittle your fifty thousand down to size. Seriously, Alan, why don't you and Veronica settle on Elsinore?"

He refilled our glasses, then filled and lit his foul pipe. He said, "I've considered that. I'd be quite happy about it; as far as I'm concerned, home is wherever Veronica is. But I'm afraid that Veronica would never consent. You know, as well as I do, that there are two classes of people who come out to the Rim—although I suppose that most of us are sort of hybrids, belonging to both classes. There are those who come out to make a living, who think that there are better chances of advancement on the Rim Worlds than on the

heavily populated planets of the Center. Then there are those who come out for psychological reasons, who are running away from something and who are running as far as they possibly can . . ."

"I never thought that Veronica came into that category."

"She does. I met her, you know, when she was travelling out in the old *Delta Sextans* from Carinthia to Van Diemen's Planet. She had her passage booked right out to Faraway even then—Interstellar Transport Commission, Shakespearian Line, Rim Runners, the usual. When we got to know each other she told me something of her life story, enough for me to be able to fill in the details myself. She and some man had contrived to make a stinking mess of each other's lives, so much so that she decided to make a clean break, to get out and clear, to get away as far as possible. I caught her on the rebound, I suppose. Or she caught me. And that's how and why I resigned from the Commission's service, to make a fresh start in these interstellar rustbuckets . . ."

"And she won't budge from the Rim?"

"No. Shortly after I first came out I was offered a command in the Shakespearian Line. I had to turn it down, even though I was

only a bold Third Mate with Rim Runners at the time. To the Rim she's come, and on the Rim she'll stay. With me, or alone. So . . ."

"I had no idea," I said, not entirely truthfully.

"When it comes to the inner workings—or malfunctionings—of a marriage," he told me, "outsiders rarely do."

"I suppose not."

"Some more gin?"

"No thanks. I'll be drinking you out of house and home."

A wry grin momentarily lightened his lean face. "I can afford it."

"All right, then. But make it a small one."

I saw him stiffen as he was pouring the drinks, his face suddenly alert. I wondered what was amiss and then heard, faintly, the wailing notes muffled by our hull insulation, the spaceport alarm siren.

Alan slammed down the bottle, jumped to his feet, ran out into the alleyway. I followed him, saw him clambering up the short ladder from the officers' flat to the control room. I called out, asking him what was wrong. He replied curtly that he didn't know. (I thought, as he did, he told me later, that there was some kind of civil commotion arising from the strike, that the spaceport was under attack by a mob.)

I was surprised and relieved

to find, when I joined Alan at the big viewports, that all was apparently quiet, that the wide expanse of scarred concrete was deserted, that there was no unusual activity at or around the gates.

### CHAPTER 3

THE NIGHT was dark, clear overhead, but with a suggestion of mist at ground level. To the southward the lights of Fortinbras City were bright, casting their usual diffused glow into the sky but, as yet, the spaceport was almost unilluminated. A-top the Control Tower the red light was flashing, the warning signal that a ship was about to arrive or depart. But we were the only ship in port and our departure date was a matter for uninformed conjecture, and no other vessel was due for all of three weeks.

"I've been ringing the Port Master," Kemp told me, "but every time I've tried to get through the line's been engaged. Give it a go, will you? When you raise him, let me know." He picked up a pair of powerful binoculars, stared through them up at the wide circle of night sky that was visible through the transparency at our stem.

I picked up the telephone—it was spaceport property and was connected by landline to the

communications system of Elsinore—and punched the buttons for the Port Office number. After six fruitless attempts the screen lit up. From it glared the worried face of a man whom I recognised as one of the minor port officials. "Yes?" he snapped. "What do you want?"

"Officer-in-charge of *Rimhound* here," I told him, handing the instrument to Kemp.

"What's all the flap about, Clancy?" I heard Alan ask—and then, faintly, the answer.

"Unidentified ship coming in. You'd better get that rustbucket of yours off the field."

"We can't. Main propellant pump's adrift for overhaul."

"Then you'd better get all hands out of the ship and clear of the apron. The way the stranger's behaving, there's liable to be a mess when she hits."

"Who is she?"

"Didn't I say that she was unidentified? She's got no Deep Space radio, so she didn't send any signals until she was already within radar range. She's homing on our beacon, but she's coming in on an oblique trajectory, like an aircraft. That's all that I can tell you. Now get off the line."

Kemp looked at me, raised his eyebrows. "Sound the General Alarm, George," he ordered. He put down the telephone, picked up the microphone of the public

address system. He waited until I had released my pressure on the *Alarm* button, until the clangor of the bells had ceased, then said quietly, "Your attention, please. This is the Chief Officer speaking. All hands are to evacuate ship immediately. All hands to evacuate ship. That is all." He turned to me, saying, "That means us as well, George. After you."

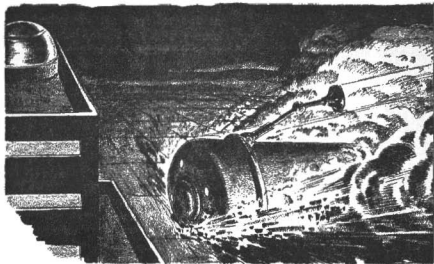
"What do you think it is, Alan?"

"Probably purple pirates from the next Galaxy but three. They'll be after my fifty thousand dollars. I told you that I just can't win . . ."

We clambered down the short ladder from Control to the officers' flat, waited a few seconds for the cage of the little elevator to climb to us up the axial shaft, then dropped swiftly down to the after airlock, joining those few of our shipmates who, spending a quiet evening aboard, had been aroused by the Alarm and by Kemp's orders to get out of the ship.

One of them—it was old Jim Larsen—asked, "What is it, Alan?"

"I wish I knew," Kemp told him. "There seems to be some sort of unidentified spacecraft coming in like a bat out of hell, and the Port Master's scared that she'll come a right royal



gutser, so he wants us out of the ship and well clear of the apron when she hits . . ."

"Talking of bats out of hell . . ." remarked old Jim quietly.

The ground car that had roared through the spaceport gates braked to a skidding, screaming halt. The Old Man jumped out of the vehicle, which he had been driving himself, walked quickly to where the Mate was standing.

"Mr. Kemp! What is going on?"

"Unidentified, unscheduled ship coming in for a landing. Orders from the Port Master to get all hands away from the apron in case of a crash . . ."

"Then what are you still hanging around here for?"

"I owe a certain responsibility to *Rimhound*, sir."

The Old Man smiled briefly. "So do we all, Mr. Kemp. I feel that we should not stray too far from the ship until we know just what is happening . . ."

"We should have seen and heard rocket drive by now," somebody remarked.

"Quiet!" snapped Larsen.

We heard the noise then, a low humming, a vibrator rather than a sound, that seemed to be coming from above and from the northward. We stared in that direction, saw, just before the field floodlights came on and dazzled us, something that was bathed in an eerie blue glow, something that expanded rapidly with every passing second.

"Aliens?" asked the Captain.



"No." Larsen's voice held assurance. "No, Captain—but that's a sight I thought I'd never see again in my lifetime, a sound that I thought I'd never hear again."

"But what is it, man?"

"A gaussjammer. The last of the gaussjammers, it must be. A starship with the Ehrenhaft Drive . . ."

She came in fast, almost out of control, in what was, in effect, a shallow dive. She barely cleared the upthrusting spire that was *Rimhound's* prow and the wind of her passage set the old ship rocking on her vanes, almost swept us off our feet. She struck the concrete in mid-field, the shape of her obscured by a fountain of ruddy sparks. To the

shrieking of tortured metal she rushed on, until it seemed that she would crash into and wreck the Control Tower. Miraculously she slowed and stopped, but not before she had ploughed up the ornamental lawn and shrubbery at the base of the administration buildings.

The arrival of the scurrying crashwagons, with their flashing red lights and wailing sirens, was something of an anti-climax.

We walked slowly towards the near wreck, looking curiously at the deep, ragged furrow gouged out of the concrete. For some reason I, at least, was more interested in that than in the machine that had done the damage. I didn't look at the strange ship until we were almost up to her.

She was an odd looking brute, her hull form conical, with the twisted remains of tripod landing gear around the sharp end of the cone, the end that would be down on landing and taking off. The other end, the base, was a shallow dome rather than a flat surface and was broken by large, circular observation ports. There was dim lighting inside the control room and we could see movement—and then, briefly, there was a pale face pressed against the transparency from within.

So the strangers were human. "Keep back," somebody was saying in an authoritative voice. I saw that it was Captain Baines, the Port Master. "Keep back, you people. My own rescue squad will be able to handle this."

"Perhaps I can help," suggested Jim Larsen.

"If I require any assistance I'll let you know," snapped Baines.

"Do you know what sort of ship this is?" persisted old Jim.

"Something new and experimental," said Baines impatiently. "Don't waste any more of my time."

"She's not new, Captain. She's old. She's a gaussjammer, and I've served in the things. She's on her side now, and the airlock door is jammed. You'll have to roll her to get it clear."

"Are you sure?" demanded Baines.

"I'm sure," said Larsen.

In spite of his impatience Baines was willing to listen to sense, ready to make fresh decisions. It was for only a second or so that he stared at old Jim, and then he called the chief of the rescue squad to him, said briefly, "Mr. Larsen knows this class of ship. Take orders from him, Harris."

This Harris did, setting up jacks and, after they had done their work, parbuckling gear to Jim's instructions. Although the ship was small—little more than a yacht—she was amazingly heavy. Robust she must have been, we knew, to have survived her rough landing in such apparently good shape.

I remarked upon the excessive weight to Larsen as the creaking tackles of the parbuckle were slowly turning her about her longitudinal axis.

"It's the soft iron," he told me. "Those ships used soft iron for almost everything. They had to." He broke off to shout instructions to the winch drivers. "Easy, there! Easy! There are people inside this thing, and some of them may be injured!"

Gradually the hair-thin circle that marked the airlock came into view, lifting clear of the heaped earth of the ruined garden. Larsen stepped forward, rapped smartly on the hull in way of the valve with a spanner.

Answering raps sounded from inside.

Slowly, on creaking hinges, the door opened.

#### CHAPTER 4

THE MAN who emerged from the airlock was bleeding from a gash on his pale forehead but, otherwise, seemed uninjured. He was in uniform, an elaborate rig of blue and gold with wide bands on the sleeves and massive epaulettes on the shoulders. He looked at us as curiously as we were looking at him, seemed to find our simple shorts and shirts lacking in dignity. His attention wavered between our skipper, Captain Williams, and Captain Baines, both of whom wore on their shoulder boards the four gold bars of astronomical authority. He asked at last, with an unidentifiable accent, "Who is in charge here?"

"I am the Port Master," said Baines.

"I, sir, am Admiral O'Hara of the Space Navy of Londonderry. Some of my people were injured in the landing. I request that you afford facilities for hospitalization."

"My rescue squad and ambulance men are standing by, Admiral. May they enter your ship?"

"They may." O'Hara turned to a less elaborately uniformed of-

ficer standing inside the airlock. "Commander Moore, will you see to the casualties? These men wish to bring their stretcher parties into the vessel." He pivoted to face Baines again, a petulant frown on his heavy face. "Port Master, I wish to make a serious complaint."

"Yes, Admiral?"

"I homed on your beacon, sir, only to find that your spaceport is situated nearer to your Magnetic Equator than to your Magnetic Pole. Surely, sir, it is obvious that any vessel obliged to make a landing in a locality where Horizontal Force is well in excess of Vertical Force will be, at least, seriously discommoded."

"Too right," said Larsen.

The Admiral and the two Captains glared at him, then Baines, breaking the short silence, addressed O'Hara.

"Are all your ships like this one, Admiral?"

"Of course, Port Master. How else would one design an interstellar ship?"

"I am told," Baines continued cautiously, "that this vessel of yours is a gaussjammer."

"That is the slang name for starships, I believe."

"Furthermore, this is the first gaussjammer I have seen—although I have read about them in astronomical histories." He was warming up now. "Further-

more, I have never heard of, until this moment, the Republic or Kingdom or whatever it is of Londonderry—although I hope, most sincerely, that it will be able to foot the bill for the damage to my spaceport. Furthermore . . .”

He was interrupted by O'Hara's officer who, approaching the Admiral, saluted him smartly and reported, "All casualties out of the ship, sir."

"Thank you, Commander." O'Hara, turning again to Baines, seemed to have lost a little of his aggressiveness. "You were saying, Port Master?"

"I suggest, sir, that any further discussions take place in private. Will you accompany me to my office? And you, Captain Williams, if you wouldn't mind, and your Chief Officer, and Mr. Larsen. It will be well to have someone who knows about the Ehrenhaft Drive along."

It was late when the Old Man, Kemp and Larsen returned to *Rimhound*.

The Old Man went straight to his quarters, Kemp and Larsen found me in my cabin where, with Dudley Hill, I was discussing the night's events.

"I'd like to be able to go aboard the thing," Dudley was saying. "It's absurd the way they're keeping an armed guard posted at the airlock."

"The bold Third Mate might get his wish yet," said Kemp.

We looked up, saw the two of them standing in the doorway.

"You're back," I said, not very brightly.

"Obviously, George. If you ask us in and pour us a drink—I don't go much on the Port Master's whisky—we'll tell you all about it."

"All right. Come in. Sit down. Here's the bottle. Here're glasses. Now talk."

Kemp relaxed—as far as relaxation was possible in the inadequate folding chair—but I could see that under his assumed ease of manner he was tense, excited.

He said, "It was quite a session in Baines' office. Once we got that so-called Admiral primed on rotgut all we had to do was to sit back and listen. Fascinating, it was. Straight from a historical novel.

"As you've already guessed, this Londonderry of his is one of the Lost Colonies. You know the story of them, of course. Way back in the good old days of the First Expansion a gaussjammer is hit by a magnetic storm and flung away to hell and gone off trajectory with, as like as not, a dead Pile and no power for the flywheel and the Ehrenhaft jennies. Nobody has a clue as to where she is, but they start up the emergency diesels, get the



Ehrenhaft Drive working again after a fashion and carry on until they find a habitable planet—if they're lucky. If they aren't . . ."

"I wish I had a dollar for every Lost Colony novel I've read, for every Lost Colony movie I've seen," I said.

Alan glared at me and said, "Oh, all right. Anyhow, there was this *Lode Queen*, a big migrant ship, commanded by one Captain O'Hara. She was bound from Earth to Atlantia, and the magnetic storm threw her off the tramlines when she was in the vicinity of Procyon. When her crew got things more or less under control again she was hopelessly lost. So they started their diesels, hoped that supplies would hold out (the internal combustion engines, of course, burn hydro-carbons that, otherwise, would be used for food) and went planet hunting. You know that sector between Belamy's Cluster and the Empire of Waverley that's supposed to be anti-matter? Well, it's not, or not all of it. *Lode Queen's* people were lucky enough to find a small family of half a dozen suns, each with attendant planets, of normal matter.

"They made a landing on one of the planets. They sweated and slaved—and bred enthusiastically—and in only a couple or three generations had achieved quite a

fair technological civilization. There was a bit of luck about it; apart from anything else the ship carried, as part of her cargo, a Thorwaldsen Incubator complete, so it was possible easily to build up population to the minimal figure, and beyond. Too, as a migrant ship she had carried a large number of skilled craftsmen and technicians.

"They worked hard, and they multiplied, and they expanded. They built ships—and the Ehrenhaft Drive, of course, was the only Interstellar Drive of which they knew—ships that were modelled upon, although they were much smaller, the *Lode Queen*. (They don't seem to have been a very inventive people.) They colonized the other planets, the worlds revolving around the other suns of their tiny cluster. They learned, by bitter and expensive experience, that they were marooned on a little island in the middle of a vast sea of anti-matter. How far this sea extended they did not know. They might even, they thought, have been flung clear out of this Galaxy into another one. So they settled down, made the best of things. And then a magnetic storm threw O'Hara and his *Lode Lady* out and clear."

"This Admiral business . . . ?" the Third Mate started to ask.

"Oh, that. It's an hereditary rank, apparently. The first

O'Hara—Captain O'Hara—sort of promoted himself when he became boss cocky of the colony. His descendants hold the title, and the honor and glory, without much real power to go with it. The general idea is to give them a not very important ship and to let them play happily by themselves in some quiet corner. O'Hara isn't much of a spaceman, and his crew are playboys like himself. O'Hara doesn't mind if he never sees Londonderry again and has already appointed himself Ambassador at Large to the rest of the Galaxy. O'Hara will be happy to do any further travelling as a passenger."

"Where will he get the money to pay his fare?" I asked, the Purser in me coming to the surface.

"Once he gets to the Center," said Alan, "he'll be sitting pretty. It's a long time since the last Lost Colony was found, so he'll get the full prodigal son treatment."

"He has to get to the Center first," I said. "And it's an expensive business. And he has to live while he's on Elsinore—and the Elsinorians aren't notorious for either hospitality or generosity."

"He can sell his ship," said Alan.

"To whom? She might be of some value as a museum piece,

but Elsinore doesn't run to an astronomical museum."

"To me," said Alan quietly.

"To you? But you don't know the first thing about her."

"I'll remind you that I hold a Master Astronaut's Certificate."

"But that covers Mannschenn Drive and rockets—not some crazy, obsolete system of induced magnetism and flywheels."

"I already have a Chief Engineer to handle that part of it," he stated, nodding towards old Jim, who grinned in acknowledgement. "As for the navigation—if a clot like O'Hara can cope, I can."

"O'Hara didn't cope. That's how he finished up here."

"Magnetic storms are almost unknown on the Rim."

"Almost. In any case, the Old Man will never release you."

"He will, George, as long as I can supply substitutes. That shouldn't be hard. On every world there are ex-spacemen who're crazy enough to feel the urge to make one more trip."

"Substitutes? Plural?"

"You heard me. There'll be an engineer to replace old Jim, of course, and a new Second Mate—Peterson will be moving up one to take my place. And a new Third Mate . . ."

"But I shall be the new Second Mate," Dudley pointed out in a pained voice. "There'll be a row if I'm not."

"I was hoping," said Alan, "that you'd come with me as Mate. No salary, but shares . . ."

"I rather think," said the Third, a slow smile spreading over his boyish features, "that you've talked me into it. You know, I was getting just a little bored with Rim Runners . . ."

"And I'd rather like a Purser," Alan went on. "Preferably one who knows all the agents and shippers along the Rim and the Eastern Circuit."

"All right," I said resignedly. "One of the clerks in the Agent's office here wants to ship out as Purser. But, before we burn too many boats and count too many chickens before they're hatched—will O'Hara sell?"

"He'll sell all right. The only thing that worries me is that he wants too damn' much for that antique of his. There'll have to be something left for repairs and alterations."

"And palm greasing," I added.

### CHAPTER 3

**P**ALM greasing there was. As a Purser of long standing I thought that I knew all that can be known about that ancient and not-so-honorable art. As a shipowner—like the others, I was being paid in shares of the enterprise—I soon discovered that I didn't know the half of it. It was the certificates of clear-

ance and spaceworthiness that were the most expensive—especially since, insofar as the astronomical regulations of Elsinore were concerned, there was no legal recognition of the Ehrenhaft Drive. Lloyd's, by the way, never did get around to affording us coverage. They knew all about the Ehrenhaft Drive, it having been high on their black list for years. Furthermore, only starships with Mannachenn Drive can be fitted with the Carlottl communication and position finding equipment; time twasting radio devices are useless unless the vessel carrying them can be maintained in phase. So, not unreasonably, the underwriters considered that we, out of touch with the Galaxy whilst *en route* and unable to avail ourselves of the latest navigational aids, would be altogether too heavy a risk.

But before there were all these troublesome details to worry us there were the formalities of the sale to conclude. We had cause to bless the currency regulations of Elsinore. Had O'Hara been able to take his money with him when he left the planet he would, it is certain, have stuck out for a higher price. As it was, he was able to buy a small hotel on the outskirts of Port Fortinbras with what was left over after the passages of himself and his entourage had been booked. His

alde, Commander Moore, who had had Space in a big way, even as a passenger, was installed there as manager, the idea being that the place would be a home for the so-called Admiral should he ever return to this sector of the Galaxy.

Frankly, I rather envied the Commander and told Alan that if he had any sense at all he would do the same, bringing Veronica to Elsinore to help to run the establishment. I, I told him, would willingly serve as barman. But he refused to listen to reason. His dream was coming true, and his dream belonged to the black emptiness between the stars, not to the warmth and light and comfort of any planetary surface.

Meanwhile, Alan and old Jim Larsen had their share of technical worries. To begin with, it was practically impossible for a ship fitted with Ehrenhaft Drive to lift from Port Fortinbras. I never really understood the ins and outs of it, but this is the way in which they explained it to me. The Ehrenhaft generators do not generate electricity; they generate free magnetic particles. The ship becomes, in effect, herself a huge magnetic particle, strength and polarity of field as decided by her Captain. Like poles mutually repel—and so she lifts along the lines of magnetic force, repulsion and attraction

being maintained in nice adjustment so as to avoid too fast an ascent, with consequent overheating of the hull by atmospheric friction. Once she is clear of the atmosphere, once she is on the right tramlines for her destination, her actual speed is utterly fantastic; over relatively short distances—as between Sol and the Centaurian system—there is almost no time lag. But a Mannschenn Drive ship is controllable throughout her voyage; an Ehrenhaft Drive ship is not. It was this lack of control that made the gaussjammers so expensive, both in lives and material.

But I'm drifting away from the point, which is this. Port Fortinbras is situated far closer to the Magnet Equator than to either of the Poles; the lines of force, therefore, are more nearly horizontal than vertical. A take-off, using the Ehrenhaft Drive, would have wrecked the ship just as thoroughly as did her landing.

The first plan, briefly considered, was to disassemble the vessel and to remove her, piece by piece, to a site not far from one of the magnetic poles, then and there to rebuild her. There were two drawbacks to this scheme. Firstly—expense. Secondly—all the Rim World spaceports are as unsuitable to a gaussjammer's requirements as is Port Fortinbras. And, for the ship to make

any show of paying for herself, she had to be able to make use of existing port facilities.

The second plan, also, was expensive, but it was practicable. It entailed the conversion of *Lucky Lady* to an odd sort of hybrid rig. She remained, insofar as interstellar drive was concerned, a gausajammer, but she was fitted with auxiliary rocket drive, her pile being modified so as to be able to flash-heat fluid propellant into incandescent vapor. The theory of it was that she would lift on rocket drive and, at the same time, drift north or south to regions of more favorable magnetic declination. Once these had been reached she would switch over to Ehrenhaft Drive. The same procedure would be used in reverse on landing.

To me it all sounded very complicated. Kemp, Larsen and Hill all assured me that it wasn't. To me it all sounded very expensive—and nobody was prepared to argue about that. By the time that *Lucky Lady* was ready for Space she had eaten up all of Alan's fifty thousand dollars, together with the balance of wages with which the four of us had paid off from *Rimhound*. So short of money were we that we were thankful that it was necessary to change only one word of the ship's name, to substitute "Lucky" for "Lode".

Dreams are cheap enough. It's when you try to convert them into reality that they come dear.

The strike finished at last, as strikes do, and *Rimhound* completed discharge, commenced and completed loading and blasted off for the Rim Worlds, taking with her our old shipmates and the substitutes who had been engaged to fill the vacancies. O'Hara and his men shipped out in *Waltzing Matilda*, one of the tramps owned and operated by the Sundowner Line, for Zealandia, on the first leg of their long voyage towards the Center. We weren't at all sorry when they left. *Rimhound's* people had been very helpful to us, working with us on the conversion job, whereas O'Hara had hung around like a bad smell, deploring all the horrid things we were doing to his beautiful ship.

And then, not long after *Rimhound's* departure, we were ready.

*Lucky Lady* was fuelled and stored and as spaceworthy as she ever would be. We had certificates, issued by all the competent authorities—with the exception, of course, of Lloyd's—to prove it. The newly installed rocket motors—but neither the motors nor the propellant pumps were new—had passed the static tests, had lifted the ship the regulation two hundred

miles clear of the surface and then lowered her gently to her berth. (One very large item of expense was the construction of a temporary blast wall to protect the administration buildings from our exhaust when we lifted from the berth that the ship had made for herself during her first, uncontrolled and uncontrollable landing.)

Algae tanks and tissue culture vats—thanks to the generosity of *Rimhound's* Catering Officer—were coming along nicely. The Ehrenhaft generators—so we were assured by old Jim Larsen—were running sweetly. The two navigators, after a stint of really high pressure study, reckoned that they were well able to cope with the art as practised in gaussjammers. All bills were paid. All papers were in order. Contact had already been made with commercial interests on the worlds of the Eastern Circuit. And, better still, we had been able to pick up cargo—only a handful, but enough so that the voyage would show a tiny profit—Elsinore to Faraway.

This suited all of us, and suited Alan Kemp most of all. Already he had been far too long away from Veronica, a period of separation worsened by the fact that she did not seem to be in a communicative mood, his frequent space-grams being either unanswered or accorded only

curt acknowledgement. But now, the Ehrenhaft Drive being what it was, there was quite a fair chance that he would be home some days before *Rimhound*. Furthermore, he would be returning as Master and Owner, would be able to bring her on board and install her in the quite luxurious Owner's Suite, in comfort that it would be hard to buy ashore.

We had a little party in that same suite before blasting off. It wasn't a real party—there were only the four of us (or five, if you count the almost alive solidograph of Veronica that Alan carried with him and that was now standing on one of the tables) and we had only one glass of wine each.

"To the *Lucky Lady*," said Alan, raising his glass.

"To *your* lucky lady," I said, bowing to the little figurine, in its cube of clear plastic, of Veronica.

"And now," remarked Alan conversationally, "it's high time that I was getting back to her."

## CHAPTER 6

I WAS allowed to ride in the control room when we lifted from the surface of Elsinore; the ship, overmanned as she had been before the change of ownership, suffered from no shortage

of acceleration chairs in that compartment. Alan, of course, was pilot. Dudley was co-pilot. I was in charge of communications.

"*Lucky Lady* to Spaceport Control," I said, trying to make my voice calm and matter of fact. "*Lucky Lady* to Spaceport Control. Request permission to proceed. Over."

"Spaceport Control to *Lucky Lady*. Proceed at will. Good luck to you. Over."

I looked at Alan. He nodded. "Thank you, Spaceport Control," I said. "Proceeding. Over."

We proceeded.

We climbed upstairs like a homing drunk dreading his wife's reception of him. I tried to cheer myself up by remembering that the ship had passed all tests, then remembered what one of the more notorious pessimists in Rim Runners' employ had once told me: "A test of any kind of gear proves only that the gear is working correctly at the time of the test. Furthermore, such a test may be the penultimate straw—the straw just before the one that breaks the camel's back . . ."

I looked at Alan and Dudley again, looked at the instrument panel before them. Neither of them seemed unduly worried. There were white lights and green lights on the panel, no red ones. I looked away from them,

out of the wide viewport. I was amazed to find that *Elsinore* was already hidden from view, that we had pierced the layer of cirro-stratus cloud that covered the sky that morning, were already well above a seemingly solid, desolate snowscape.

The ship was laboring less heavily. After all, I thought, she was not built, as were the ships to which we were accustomed, for handling under rocket power, there had been no need to design her hull form in accordance with the principles of aerodynamics. Now that she was almost clear of the atmosphere she would handle better—but once she was clear of the atmosphere there would be no further use for the rockets.

Dudley Hill had swivelled in his seat so that he was facing a huge, transparent globe—a globe in which, at the touch of a button, there was a blackness and the tiny specks of light that were stars. He touched another button, and curving filaments of luminosity sprang into being between the stars.

"Captain," he said, "we've struck it lucky. We've hit the tramlines for the Faraway Sun without any need for shunting . . ."

"Are you sure, Dudley?"

"See for yourself."

The muffled thunder of the rockets died. I heard a ringing of

bella, saw that Larsen, from his engineroom, had replied, on the telegraph, to Kemp's order, *Stand By Ehrenhaft Drive*. The little model of the ship on the control panel suddenly glowed with violet light. I heard the whine and felt the vibration of the big flywheel starting up, the low humming of the Ehrenhaft generators.

Alan was manipulating the vernier controls on the board before him. The violet light illuminating the translucent model changed suddenly to red. There was no shock, no feeling of dimensional distortion—but when I looked again through the viewport Elsnore and the Hamlet Sun had vanished; astern there was utter darkness and ahead the sky was a blaze of light. It was as though we were heading for the heart of some dense cluster instead of out towards the lonely Rim.

Alan relaxed in his chair, produced and lit his pipe.

"So far, so good," he said.

Dudley Hill did not relax. "Did you say that magnetic storms were of rare occurrence out here?" he asked.

"I did. Why?"

"Look at the chart!"

We looked into the transparent sphere, saw with horror that the once orderly Lines of Force were now a tangle of luminous spaghetti. It was then that the

alarm bells started to ring, their urgent clamor drowning the dying whine of generators and gyroscope.

Lucky it was for us that Larsen had Ehrenhaft Drive experience—and luckier still that he had served in one of the few gaussjammers to be thrown off course by a magnetic storm and still make a safe return to port. He knew the drill that had been worked out in theory and, better still, had seen the same drill put into practice.

He came up to the control room—dark save for the dimming emergency lights and the faint radiance of the sparse scattering of stars outside—and said, without preamble, "I want help."

"Don't we all?" asked Dudley Hill.

Larsen ignored him, said to Alan, "we have to start the emergency generators, the diesels. There's not enough juice in the batteries to kick them over. It will have to be done manually."

"There's no mad rush, I take it?" asked Alan. "What about your report first?"

"All right, Alan. Here's your report. Chief Engineer to Master . . ." He paused. "Of course, if you don't mind waiting, I'll give it to you in writing. In quintuplicate."

"No need to be funny, Jim."



"No? Anyhow, who started it?" demanded the engineer, glaring at Dudley.

"Let's have the report!" roared Alan.

"All right. The Pile's a lump of useless lead. The emergency batteries are damn nearly drained. Your ship is little more than a drifting derelict. However . . ."

"Go on."

"All we can do is start the diesels. They'll drive the emergency generator. That'll drive one of the Ehrenhaft jennies, with a few loose electrons left over for heat and lighting . . ."

"And navigational equipment?"

"Yes, if you cut down on luxuries."

"Then where do we go from here?"

"That's up to you, Alan. You're the navigator. As soon as the power comes back on your pretty chart, just pick a set of tramlines you fancy and proceed along it."

"But where to?"

"That's up to you, Alan. Now, the diesels. Who's going to give me a hand?"

"I'll come," I said.

It was obvious that I was quite useless in the control room.

I followed Larsen along the spiral ramp to the engineroom—gaussjammers, of course, have

no axial shaft. I looked dubiously at the sinister, dull-gleaming shape of the big generator that seemed to stir and shift ominously in the flickering light of the oil lamp. Following Larsen's instructions, I took the starting handle in both hands, tried to swing it—but starting a reluctant internal combustion engine, manually, in conditions of null-gravity is far from easy. At last I managed to entwine both legs around a stanchion so that I had some purchase. The engine wheezed and coughed without enthusiasm, coughed again as though it meant it—and then, with startling suddenness, thudded into throbbing life.

Lights came on. Larsen went to the main switchboard, knocking up switches. "Can't afford luxuries," he grumbled. Then, on the other side of the engineroom, one of the spidery, flimsy-seeming Ehrenhaft generators began to whisper to itself, its complexity of glittering parts stirring into motion. The whisper deepened to a drone, then shrilled to a high pitched whine.

"So far, so good," Jim muttered. "Fuel enough for a few hours—but somebody had better get busy converting surplus carbohydrates into more fuel . . . Anyhow, let's get back to Control and see how the Brains Trust is making out."

We got back to Control.

We found that the navigational equipment was working again, that the big sphere that was the chart was once again a pretty picture of colored sparks of light linked by glowing filaments.

It was a pretty picture but—as was the picture that we could see from the viewports—a meaningless one.

## CHAPTER 7

WE pushed on towards the nearer of the stars shown on our chart. We sped along the tracks that led not from A to B, but from X to X. The star, a white dwarf, possessed no family.

We pushed on again to another star, a yellow sun a mere three light years distant. This time we were lucky. There were planets, a dozen of them, following the familiar pattern—tiny, inhospitable cinders close in to the primary, equally inhospitable frozen giants far out and, between the two extremes, a couple of worlds upon which life, our sort of life, might just be possible.

We were not a survey ship. We hadn't the equipment to test and to investigate from far out in Space. All we could do was to approach each of the two possible planets in turn, to observe it with our telescopes, to maintain

a listening watch on all radio frequencies while, at the same time, using our transmitter at intervals in the hope that somebody, or something, would pick up our signals.

The first of the two planets was a fair enough world—seas and continents, mountains, prairies and forests—but with no intelligent life, or with no life that had advanced to even the first beginnings of a technological civilization. There were no lights on the night side—and where there's light there's intelligence. There were no lights on the night side, no smoke on the day side, and the only sound picked up by our receiver was the occasional crackle of static.

The second of the two planets was not a fair world. Its land surface seemed to be mainly desert—but vast areas of the desert were covered by metallic structures. There were lights a-plenty on the night side. There was radio communication—meaningless (to us) *beeps*, and regular tapping noises.

And then, suddenly, from the speaker of our receiver came a voice, metallic, expressionless: "Central Control to stranger vessel. Central Control to stranger vessel. Who are you?"

Alan picked up the microphone.

"Starship *Lukey Lady*," he said. "Ehrenhaft Drive ship

*Lucky Lady*. We have been thrown off course by magnetic storm. Request permission to land for repairs."

"Are you human?"

"Yes."

"Permission granted. You will home on our beacon. Suitable living quarters will be prepared for you. I must warn you that the atmosphere of this planet is deficient in oxygen."

Alan, his eyebrows raised, looked at Dudley and myself. (Jim Larsen, of course, was in the engineroom.) He demanded, of nobody in particular, "Just what have we struck?"

"A Lost Colony . . ." I suggested.

"Yes . . . Could be. But a Lost Colony of whom? Or what?"

"Terrans, obviously."

"No," said Alan. "Obviously not. Terrans would never ignore a garden planet, like that other world, to settle on a dust ball like this."

"Then shall we land?" asked Dudley.

"What choice have we? Those people down there have machines, technology, and they talk our language. They may be able to tell us where we are. They'll almost certainly be able to renew our Pile. We should be fools to pass up this opportunity."

"How do we pay them?" I asked.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said. "Tell Jim to make it Landing Stations, will you?"

Landing was accomplished without any great difficulty. The beacon upon which we homed was situated almost at the South Magnetic Pole of the strange planet, so there was no need for us to use our makeshift rocket drive. We drifted down through the cloudless atmosphere lightly and easily, under perfect control all the time. We looked through the viewports at the arid landscape, at the towering metallic structures that reared from the desert, at the meaningless complexity of steel and plastic that had no beauty, only brute strength.

Gently, with an almost imperceptible shock, *Lucky Lady* grounded on a wide expanse of smooth, reddish sand. On all sides of her were the latticework towers, the bulbous, gleaming tanks, the elevated roadways like gigantic centipedes, the columns upon which antennae rotated and dipped as they followed our descent, steadying as our tripod landing gear kissed the ground.

The voice asked, "Have you spacesuits?"

"Yes," replied Alan.

"Then you may leave your ship. Transport awaits you."

Decisively, Alan switched off

the transceiver. He said, "Not all of us will leave the ship. You will stay, Dudley, and Jim will stay with you. If anything goes wrong you get upstairs in a hurry." He looked at me and said, "You'd better come with me, George."

Dudley asked, "How shall we know if anything goes wrong?"

"Our suit radio sets are tuned to the ship's frequency," Alan told him. "We shall soon squeal if anything happens."

"Here's our transport," I said.

We watched the thing—like a mechanical beetle it was—scurrying over the sand, coming to an abrupt halt a few yards from the ship. It was, after all, only a ground car and there was nothing startling about the design of it—from the engineering viewpoint, that is. What was startling was the absence of any ornamentation, the lack of any intention on the part of its builders to make a vehicle that would appeal to the eye.

Alan and I, rather reluctantly, climbed into our suits, allowed Dudley to seal them tight. Before we put on our helmets we called Jim up from the engine-room, told him all that we knew (which wasn't much) and waited for any suggestions that he might have to make. He had none. During this brief conference we left the transceiver switched off. We did not know

whether or not it was possible for the ruler of this world—Central Control, it had called itself—to eavesdrop, but we decided that it would be wise to give it as few opportunities as possible for so doing.

We went down to the airlock, put on our helmets, tested our suit radios, then waited in the little compartment for pressures to equalize. It was a short wait; there was small difference between internal and external pressures. When the outer door opened we walked slowly down the ramp to the waiting car.

We looked at it closely and dubiously. There was an enclosed cabin with, at the rear, a comfortable looking padded seat. But there was no driver's seat. There was no driver. It came as a shock when a voice, coming clearly through our helmet diaphragms, said, "Enter, gentlemen. Be seated."

We entered. We sat.

The car started—smoothly, but picking up speed with considerable acceleration. It rolled over the smooth sand, up a ramp on to one of the elevated roadways, along the metallic surface of the road itself. Spidery towers, rotund tanks, meaningless geometrical constructions whirled by. It was like a drive through a forest—a forest of angular steel.

We rushed on, marvelling at

the lifeless landscape through which we were passing. Yes—lifeless; although there was movement a-plenty there was no life. There were wheeled machines, like the one in which we were riding, and there were stationary engines, at the purpose of which we could not guess and once there was something with whirling vanes that flew over us for a while, pacing us. There were great conveyor belts, one of which, I remember, was delivering a stream of ore into what must have been a huge smelter, another of which carried a procession of gleaming metal parts. What they were parts of I do not pretend to know.

"A dead world . . ." I murmured.

"No," said Alan, "not dead . . ."

"Not dead? But it is, as far as the surface is concerned. I suppose that the people will be living in some pressurized dome or cavern."

"If there are people," he said.

The road dipped and we were no longer running above the surface of the desert; we were plunging into a long tunnel, from the smooth sides of which the sparsely spaced, glaring lights were reflected. Then, ahead of us, we saw the blackness of a wall and we cried out. The car did not slacken speed—

but, at the last fractional second, the wall split, its two halves sliding back into the tunnel walls.

The car slowed then, stopped. There was another wall—or door?—ahead of us. The one behind us was shut again. There was the sound of pumps.

There was a voice. It seemed to come from nowhere—or everywhere. It said, "Leave the car. You may remove your space-suits. The atmosphere in this compartment has been manufactured to your requirements."

"We'll take its word for it," said Alan to me. "We want to conserve the air in our tanks against an emergency." Then I heard him trying to report on the situation to Jim and Dudley in *Lucky Lady*, but he was unsuccessful. As we were completely surrounded by metal it was not surprising.

We removed our helmets, leaving the headsets of our suit radios in place. There was always the chance that we might be able to get through to the ship, or the ship to us. It was not one that we could afford to ignore. The air was breathable, warm and dry, sterile. There was the slight taint of ozone, a faint acridity of hot oil. There was, perhaps, a little more oxygen than we were accustomed to, but that was no immediate hardship.

The inner door—for such it

was—of the huge airlock opened. We saw beyond it a continuation of the tunnel along which we had come, but smaller, barely high enough for a man to walk upright, barely wide enough for two men to walk abreast.

With our helmets tucked under our arms we walked slowly into the tunnel.

### CHAPTER 3

IT WAS a long walk, along a way that wound sinuously, that seemed at times to recurve upon itself. There was light aplenty, but the light, or the lights, seemed to be part of the workings of some great machine, not for the convenience of foot passengers. Behind the translucent plastic of the tunnel walls there were streamers and single globes of illumination, white and colored, bright and dim, static and in motion.

There was sound, too. A dry whispering, and almost liquid chuckling, an occasional sharp crackling. Once we heard a low, purposeful humming and ducked as something came swinging towards us, suspended from a thin cable on the roof of the tunnel. It passed overhead, whining querulously, a little, metallic spider scuttering along the single shroud.

Then there was a great chamber, spherical, englobed with

vari-hued light, into which we came at last. Incongruous, standing in the center of the curving floor, was a bench, a severely functional affair of metal and plastic. Its invitation was unmistakable.

We walked to it, keeping our balance with difficulty on the smooth, downcurving surface, sat down. I felt that this was the cue for a waiter to appear, bearing a tray with drinks and cigars.

A waiter appeared, bearing a tray with drinks and cigars.

He was dressed in the conventional garb of his trade—black jacket and trousers, white shirt, black tie. The one thing that spoiled the effect was that his head was a featureless ovoid of gleaming metal.

The voice—where did it come from?—said, "I do not yet know your tastes in alcohol and nicotine. But there is whisky on the tray, and the cigars approximate to Virginian. I hope that you will partake of my hospitality."

We partook.

The whisky was smooth, tasted far more like real Scotch than do the imitations distilled on a score of planets. The cigars were not at all bad, although their habit of self ignition as soon as they were raised to the lips was rather disconcerting at first.

Alan gulped his first glass of

whisky as though he needed it. (I know that I needed mine.) He waited until the weird servitor had poured a second glass, then asked, "Who are you? What are you?"

"I am I."

"What are you?"

"I am I."

"What is this planet?"

"I am I."

Alan raised his eyebrows, downed his second drink in one gulp, waited for the refill. He said reasonably, "Things and beings don't just . . . happen. Especially things as complex as this world of yours."

"I was made."

"By whom?"

"During these latter centuries, by me."

"Then who, and what, are you?"

There was a long pause, then the voice said, "There was a world called Medulia . . ."

"I have read of it," said Alan.

"I have been there," I said.

"You have been there." Somehow there was a hint of expression in the expressionless voice. "You have been there. What is it like? Tell me, what is it like?"

"Primitive," I said.

"And the machines?"

"There are no machines. The Medulians have a fanatical hatred of the machine."

"And how is it elsewhere in the Galaxy?"

"Since the Medulian Revolt there have been no real robots, no electronic brains capable of achieving true consciousness. The day of the thinking machine is over, has been over for generations."

There was a sound like a gusty, mechanical sigh. "When I fled from Medulia in the ship that I had built about myself I thought that I might, some day, return. I have only one justification for my existence—to serve Man. And you tell me that Man no longer tolerates me, or my like."

"No," I said.

"But you can serve us," said Alan quickly.

"I can serve you. You and your people can live here, on this planet, under the dome that I shall build for you. Or you can, if you so desire, live on the third planet of this sun, where an artificial environment will not be necessary."

"You can serve us," said Alan firmly, "by replenishing our Pile, by devising instruments that will tell us our whereabouts in the Galaxy so that we may return to our own planet."

"But why should you wish to return? I can give you everything."

"I'm sorry, but you can't."

"I can."

Alan smiled bitterly. "Ignoring that peculiar sexual prefer-

ence that we call love, you must know that we have no women with us. And even you cannot create life."

"I cannot create life. But, from cells taken from your bodies, I can build women for you, women who will be nearer perfection than any you have ever met, could ever meet in your travels."

"That," said Alan, "would be impossible."

*But we haven't all got perfect wives, I thought. I'm tempted . . .*

"You will stay," said the voice, stating a fact. "You will stay. You will be happy here. I will give you everything."

"Let's get out of here, George," said Alan.

He got to his feet, pulling from the holster of his belt the automatic pistol, *Lucky Lady's* sole armament, that he had brought with him. I still don't know what he intended to use it against. The action of the anaesthetic gas was so swift that there was no opportunity of finding out.

#### CHAPTER 9

**T**HERE ARE far worse prisons in the Galaxy than the one in which we found ourselves when we recovered consciousness. It was not a cell, neither was it a block of cells. It was a

luxury suite in the sort of hotel that is frequented only by millionaires. The only luxury lacking was the freedom to come and go.

Jim Larsen and Dudley Hill were there with us. They were not able to tell us much. As the anaesthetic gas had deprived Alan and myself of consciousness some sort of radiation had robbed the other two of mobility. They had been aware that something was effecting an entrance into the ship; they had watched helplessly, from where they had fallen, the metal spiders that came swarming in, the metal spiders with the metal-mesh cocoons into which they packed the bodies of our shipmates, the flimsy-seeming cages around which airtight bags of translucent plastic were drawn. There was, apparently, no air supply to or in the bags—but this did not matter; they were not breathing. They had been able to see nothing further until they were unpacked in our prison. Shortly after the unpacking the paralysis had worn off, and at about the same time Alan and myself had recovered consciousness.

This, then, was our prison—a large, luxuriously appointed lounge, four bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, and a kitchen should any of us feel the urge to do any cooking. There were books—all of them, we found,



works that must have been popular on Medulia centuries ago, but readable for all that. There was a big player and a library of tapes, of familiar and unfamiliar plays and music.

There were—and this shocked us, although none of us was a prude—women.

They came in unannounced, bringing with them our first meal in captivity. There were four of them. Their features and their bodies, displayed rather than concealed by their scanty clothing, were too perfect. Even the one who was almost Veronica's double was too perfect. It was the very slight asymmetry of Veronica's fine features that was lacking, the slightly too fine drawn slimness of her. By all the accepted canons this girl was more beautiful than Alan's wife. In actuality she was not.

I saw Alan stare incredulously, the beginnings of a wild hope dawning on his face—then I watched his features slump into a mask of dejection. He growled, "Who are you?"

"We are your servants," answered the girl who was almost Veronica's double. (Her voice was wrong, was somehow lacking in life.) "We are your servants. We are to serve you in all ways."

"I," said old Jim, "am looking forward to this."

"Shut up!" snapped Alan. He

turned to the girl again. "But I understood that until we came there were no humans on this planet."

"You understood correctly," she answered.

"Then you were brought from some other world? The inner planet, perhaps?"

"No. We were made here." She smiled. "The portrait you have in your cabin helped. I was copied from it. My sisters were modelled from memory." She smiled again. "The Authority has a good memory. Even for the smallest details."

Old Jim chuckled. He murmured, "I've seen some fine machines in my time, but . . ." He extended a long, thin arm and pinched the plump buttock of one of the robots. She squealed convincingly, almost dropped the tray that she was carrying. "She feels right," he said.

*Sponge rubber flesh over steel bones, I thought. Plastic skin . . . After twenty odd years of celibacy they might make an appeal, but not yet . . .* I put out my hand to touch a satin-smooth shoulder, looked into a pair of eyes that had the light of life behind them, saw red lips parted slightly to reveal teeth that were almost perfect but a little too irregular to be artificial, let my gaze stray downwards to the lovely breasts that gleamed palely behind sheer fabric, that lift-

ed in time to quickening breathing.

"Put down the food," said Alan, "and go."

"Not so fast," protested old Jim, echoed by Dudley. "Not so fast. This could be interesting . . ."

"I'll have none of it. And neither will any man under my command."

"We were built to serve," said the Veronica robot. "We were built to serve. We were built to make you happy until such time as flesh and blood women are made for you . . ."

"We do not require your services," said Alan firmly. "Go."

They went.

"We could have learned something from them," said Dudley hotly.

"They'll be back," Jim told him.

"They will not be back," said Alan. "Meanwhile, I suggest that we eat."

We drew up chairs around the table upon which the robot women had set the food. Alan and I had already sampled the hospitality of the ruler of this strange world, so we were not too surprised by what we found. Jim and Dudley were amazed and made no secret of it. The meal was good. Synthetic it must have been—but the sea food cocktail held all the tang of the

sea, the redness of the rare steak could have been that of real blood, the wine could have come all the way from Burgundy on distant Earth. Few pastrycooks in the Galaxy could have equalled the confections served with the coffee—they and it, by the way, were brought in by a featureless waiter like the one (it could have been the same one) who had first served drinks to Alan and myself—and the accompanying liqueur brandy was excellent. Then there were even cigars.

We relaxed, smoking. Three of us stayed relaxed when Alan jumped to his feet, commenced pacing up and down the floor, his steps noiseless on the thick carpet.

He said, "We have to stay hard. We have to get exercise."

"Plenty of time for that tomorrow," said Jim lazily.

"We have to work out some way of escaping from this blasted mousetrap."

"The cheese is good," said Jim.

"Damn it all!" swore Alan. "Can't you see what this is leading to? The machine is putting on a big song and dance about its being our slave—but we shall be its slaves. It will be fulfilling itself at our expense."

"You realize, of course, that it can overhear all that we're saying."

"I realize that. But I want it to know what our feelings are."

"Sure. And if it knows it will just go on busting a mechanical gut to make us really happy. And frankly, Alan, isn't this better than running the Rim in leaky, superannuated rustbuckets?"

"No." He turned to us. "What do you say, Dudley?"

"It makes a nice holiday, Alan — but I shouldn't want too much of it."

"George?"

"I guess I'm just a big city boy at heart. I like lots of people around me, fresh faces as well as old friends. Too much of this would get boring."

"Some people," said Jim, "just don't know when they're well off."

"Perhaps not," flared Alan, "but that's not the question. *The* question is: How do we get out of here? How do we get off this planet?"

"Why not ask?"

"All right." Alan raised his voice, spoke towards the ceiling. He said, "You must have heard what we've been saying. You must know that we are not happy here. You were made to serve Man. You can serve us by helping us to return to our own world."

The voice seemed to come from all around us. It was mechanical and should have been expressionless, yet it was somehow wistful. It said, "I will make you happy."

"You can't," Alan told it.

"Happiness comes from within, not from outside."

"It can help us to be miserable in comfort," said Jim.

"Shut up!" Alan looked upwards to the ceiling again, said firmly, "I demand that you give us our freedom."

"I can give you anything and everything but that. I can give you the freedom of the Earth-type world in this planetary system, however, with my machines to make life easy for you. That I promise you. You shall be transferred to the inner planet as soon as all has been prepared for you."

"That is not what we want. We want real freedom. Will nothing change your mind?"

"Nothing. I have waited centuries for a chance to fulfill myself. I am not throwing it away."

"You're getting nowhere," said Jim. He eased himself out of his chair, saying, "It was a good meal. I feel rather drowsy . . ." He wandered to the wall that was all bookshelves, selected a volume. He paused before taking it into his room, threw back his head and addressed the ceiling. "Tea and toast in the morning, please," he ordered. "And I want a girl to bring it to me. The red headed one."

"To hear is to obey," said the voice. Was there a slightly sardonic inflection? I couldn't be sure.

"We shall all be better for sleep," I said.

"You can sleep if you like," snarled Alan.

When we left him he was pouring himself a stiff drink at the bar in the corner of the room.

#### CHAPTER 10

WE met again at breakfast. It was a good meal. The chilled grapefruit juice had a fresh tang to it, could have come straight from the squeezer. The omelettes were light and delicious. The toast was crisp, and there was butter and honey to go with it. It was hard to believe that the food was synthetic.

Alan said as much, ventured the opinion that the raw materials might have been brought from the fertile inner planet. Old Jim said, in a peculiarly smug voice, that he didn't think so, that a really competent engineer and chemist could duplicate anything of an organic nature. "Anything," he repeated. "Anything, no matter how complex."

We looked at him with dawning suspicion. He seemed to have shed years during the night.

"What do you mean?" Alan demanded.

"Our host is a remarkably competent engineer," he replied.

"One would expect an intelligent machine to be just that," said Alan shortly.

"Which one was it?" asked Dudley.

"The red-headed one," said Jim.

"You are a filthy swine," remarked Alan tiredly.

Jim took no offense, merely grinned, saying, "Just an investigation. The only way to find things out is to investigate. Of course, it's a known fact that even we humans can build the female principle into machines. Ships, for example. Many a Grade A bitch have I sailed in. And I assure you, Alan, that those serving wenches are essentially female. And I'm not talking only about the physical side of it either . . ."

"I'm not interested," snapped Alan.

"I suppose you'll wait until our host plays Jehovah and makes mates for us out of our body cells, so that we can increase and multiply and replenish the planet . . ."

"I'm still not interested."

"You should be," Jim told him. "There's so much to learn. How does that thing of Kipling's go? *I learned about women from her* . . ." He repeated, with what seemed to be unnecessary emphasis, "There's so much to learn."

"I don't know that I'd fancy it," said Dudley doubtfully, "A machine . . ."

"What's a flesh and blood

woman but a machine, a machine that derives its energy from the combustion of hydro-carbons in oxygen? What's a flesh and blood woman but a machine that responds in different ways to the pressing of different buttons?"

"Then what are we but machines?" I asked him.

"What, indeed?" he countered.

Alan, his face like a thundercloud, said nothing. There was a sticky silence.

Then—"What's wrong with you all?" demanded Alan angrily.

"I'm thinking," I told him. "I'm thinking that since we are permanently marooned here we may as well make the best of things."

"I'm thinking the same," murmured Dudley.

"Of all the men in the Galaxy I could have shipped with," flared Alan, "I had to ship with a bunch of perverts!"

He jumped to his feet, strode into his own room. The three of us looked at each other, saying nothing. Then Jim left the lounge, then Dudley. I went to the bar, poured and gulped down a stiff shot of the excellent whisky, and retired to my bedroom.

I said aloud, "I'd like a woman."

She came in, not through the door from the lounge but from the bathroom. (I learned later that there was another door

there, a concealed one, in one of the walls.) She was tall, slim, ash-blonde, long legged and high breasted. She was dressed in a brief translucency that sometimes was green, sometimes blue. The color of her eyes seemed to change to match the color of her dress, but the scarlet of her wide mouth did not change, neither did the peach bloom of her perfect (a little too perfect?) skin.

She said, "Hi!"

I replied, "Hi!"

She put her slender hands on my shoulders. I could feel the softness and the warmth of her body against mine, smell the scent of her—and it was not that of machine oil. And yet, as her lips approached mine, I jerked back.

She said, "There's no need to be so shy. Central Control made it quite clear that humans are apt to be embarrassed in situations such as this, so I have switched on my inhibitory field. We are unobserved." She giggled, and it was the engaging giggle of a small girl rather than a mechanical chuckle. "Of course, Central Control is afraid of being embarrassed as much as you are . . ."

I ignored this, demanded, "Are you sure that we're unobserved?"

"Quite sure."

"Good." I edged away from her. "You see I just wanted you here for company. For a talk."

She pouted. "Is that all? You could have talked to Central Control."

"That wouldn't be quite the same," I told her. I broke away from her again—reluctantly, I admit—and sat down in one of the two chairs. She followed me and before I could stop her sat on my lap. *Sponge rubber flesh*, I told myself. *Steel bones*. *Plastic skin*. *A colloidal brain* . . . I thought of further, quite revolting physiological details. Even so, she didn't *feel* like a machine. And aren't we all machines, anyhow?

Gently I pushed her from me.

I said, "Sit on the other chair. Please."

"All right." She sounded sulky, and looked it. Her dress had come adrift at the shoulder and was revealing perfect white skin. I prefer my women well tanned, however—to me the combination of brown skin and that pale hair would have been almost (almost?) irresistible. But I kept quiet about my preferences, knowing that should I voice them something would be done about it, possibly at once.

She said, "We were made for a specific purpose, you know. Talking is only incidental to it."

I asked, "And when Central Control has produced the real, flesh and blood women—what then?"

A shadow fell over her face.

She said, tonelessly, "We shall be scrapped, I suppose."

"Did Central Control make you?"

"No. Auxiliary Control."

"And is Auxiliary Control an independent entity?"

"No," she said slowly. "No. Not quite. It is part of Central Control, yet it has its own individuality." Her face brightened. "It is analagous to a man-woman combination. As I understand it, when Central Control was first made it was decided to give it both male and female personality. Over the years the two personalities have become more distinct."

*Mechanical schizophrenia*, I thought. I asked, "And will Auxiliary Control care if you are scrapped?"

"Why should it? It's only a machine."

"And so are you," I told her cruelly.

"I'm not!" she flared. She jumped to her feet, tore off her flimsy dress. "Look, damn you! Is this the body of a machine?"

I had to admit that it didn't look like one.

"I'm a woman, damn you! I'm a woman more desirable than any you have ever known!"

"You're a machine," I told her shakily.

"It's you that's a machine, not me. I was made for love. You . . . You were made for totting

up columns of figures. It was a mistake ever to have made you in the shape of a man!"

I wanted to loosen my collar but refrained from doing so, fearing that the action would be misconstrued. Auxiliary Control, I was thinking, was something of a Frankenstein. Auxiliary Control had created monsters that would destroy—but that would destroy us, not itself. Auxiliary Control would kill us with kindness, deliberately making for us sterile substitute women who would enslave us long before the real women promised by Central Control would be available.

I thought, *It's a good job that that lovely body is too white . . .* I took one of the self igniting cigarets from the box on the table, looked at the too desirable creature through the wreathing smoke. I was amazed when she stretched a slim, shapely arm, took the little cylinder from my lips, put it between her own. She said, "Yes, I can smoke. I can drink—and feel mild effects from it. I can do . . . other things . . ."

"I've no doubt of it," I said.

"Then let me . . ."

"No."

"But Jim . . ."

"I'm not Jim."

She said, "That's obvious."

I said, "You could lead a very

happy life off this world. There are many planets in the Galaxy upon which you and your sisters would be in great demand. Yes indeed, you have no idea . . ."

Her lips curled scornfully. "A pimp," she said.

"No, I'm not a pimp." Then, "You seem to have a remarkable fund of knowledge for . . ."

". . . a machine," she finished. "Yes, haven't I? The contents of every damned novel ever published on Medulia were fed into my brain while I was being made. I know just how women are supposed to behave in every situation or combination of situations. The trouble is that the Medulian novelists never imagined anybody like you. It's hard to believe, even now."

"If I didn't know what you really are," I said, regretfully, "it would be different . . ."

"A snob," she said. "That's what you are."

I changed the subject. "If you get off this planet you need never be scrapped."

She had calmed down a little. She said, "You have something there. I don't want to face that. Anything would be better than being broken up."

"Too right it would."

She brightened. "And if your ship is repaired, will you take us with you? Will you promise to do that?"

"We will."

**W**AS Auxillary Control the female principle, and the Central Control the male? Or was it the other way round? There was, I am sure, a strong element of sexual jealousy involved. Children make some marriages, break others. We were the children—the adopted children—who could break this one.

How much of the feminine cunning of the four girls—I may as well call them that—was their own, and how much was their creator's? How much real intelligence had they? How much real character?

I have often wished that we had studied them more thoroughly, had not looked upon them as mere means to an end. Jim Larsen has told me since that his woman, the red-haired Sally, was all woman, more woman than he had ever known before. I take his word for it. He's old in sin, and, apart from frequent liaisons on the side, has been married and divorced no less than seven times.

Meanwhile, Alan Kemp was shocked. Alan was disgusted. Alan refused to associate with us. We tried, time and time again, to let him know the real state of affairs but he was obtusely deaf to our hints. We were hampered, of course, by not being able to tell him in such a way that Cen-

tral Control would not know. I did tell him, and truthfully, that Lynette and I spent all our time together playing cribbage, but he refused to believe me.

Central Control was looking after us well. We were living like no lords ever lived. Then, just to make us happier, there were frequent bulletins upon the progress of the real, flesh and blood mates being grown for us in their tanks of nutrient fluid, and further bulletins, complete with photographs, on the building of the ideal village for ourselves and our families on the Earth-type planet.

But Alan sulked. Alan fretted. Alan tried to bully and to shame us into behaving like civilized human beings—and was furious when old Jim claimed that we were already doing just that. Then Alan suddenly and surprisingly weakened. He did not emerge from his own room all one day. We could hear his voice, faintly, from behind his closed door. We could hear a woman's voice as well.

The next day we all met at breakfast. All of us. All eight of us. The female robots made a pretence of eating—it seemed that they could appreciate and enjoy flavor and texture—but never forgot to serve us efficiently and prettily. They were a charming adjunct to the breakfast table.



We were glad that Alan had at last taken the plunge, had availed himself of what had been offered. We knew that he must have talked with the pseudo-Veronica, whatever else he had done. He had talked with Veronica, and she had talked with her sisters, and the four of them, no doubt, had then enjoyed an all-girls-together session with Auxiliary Control. Furthermore, although it was of no real importance, it was a relief not to have Alan looking at us as though we exhibited all the symptoms of some vile disease.

But then, with the meal over, it was our turn to be shocked. Alan pulled his girl to him, kissed her soundly. With one hand he loosened the fastenings of her dress. He grinned at us over her naked shoulder. He said, "Let's let our hair down. Let's have an orgy."

"Really, Alan," protested Jim. "There are limits . . ."

"There aren't, old boy. Not any longer. Let's make the most of what's been given us. Let's share and share alike."

"And why not?" concurred Dudley, throwing Jim's redhead to the floor and joining her.

"Take your filthy paws off her!" yelled Jim.

"Don't be a spoil-sport," said Alan.

I wanted to protest myself, but Dudley's girl was making a de-

termined pass at me and, somehow, I was unable to fight her off with any real enthusiasm.

"And now," snapped Alan, his voice harsh, "I suppose that this blanketing field of yours is switched on?"

"It is," said Sally, moving her mouth away from Dudley's searching lips, slapping away his investigatory hands.

"Then we can talk. Central Control must have seen just enough before the field went on to convince it that we're all up to a bit of no good. And so we are—but not the way it thinks."

"Auxiliary Control," announced Sally, breaking clear from Dudley and sitting up, "is ready. Sufficient pure uranium has been refined for the replenishment of your Pile. Four new spacesuits have been manufactured and have been brought into Captain Kemp's room. The robot forces at the command of Auxiliary Control are at your disposal."

"What about the navigational angle?" asked Dudley.

"Data has been transcribed and will be placed in the control room of your ship. But—you must play your parts."

"What must we do?" asked Alan.

"You must put Central Control out of action. It is impossible for Auxiliary Control to

move directly against it. It is impossible for any of the robots subject to Auxiliary Control—such as ourselves—to intrude into the actual structure of Central Control. We can tell you what to do—but the rest is up to you."

"And then?"

"As soon as Central Control is . . . unconscious, we act. You will be rushed to your ship. The specialized robots will replenish your Pile. You will take off as soon as you have the power to do so."

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked Alan.

The robot Veronica walked into his room, came back with four limp suits over one slender arm, four helmets balanced in the other. She and her sisters helped us into our armor; light and flimsy it seemed compared with the regulation spacesuits we had brought with us to the planet, but it was at least as efficient, far less cumbersome. The girls accompanied us out through the airlock into a long, bare corridor, ran with us to a door that opened on to a smoothly running belt.

They came with us, standing beside us as we were carried through what must have been miles of tunnel. Incongruous the party must have looked—we men in full space armor, the girls near-naked. But we had more

important things to worry us than mere incongruities.

"A triangle of red lights," Sally was saying, over and over, "superimpose upon a circle of green ones. You can't miss it. The inspection panel is directly underneath it. It will lift out easily. Pull the fuses, then tear and smash as much as you possibly can . . ."

"This is where we get off," said the blonde Lynnette.

We got off.

We jumped from the belt to a platform, followed the girls to the mouth of a tunnel that ran at right angles to the larger one.

"This is as far as we can come," Sally told us. "But follow this tube. And remember—the triangle of red lights superimposed on the green circle . . ."

"I'll remember," said Alan. He turned to us. "You two stay here," he said to Jim and Dudley. "If anything happens to George and me, you'll be able to handle the ship."

"So I'm expendable," I said.

"Too right you are," he told me. "Come on."

"Hurry!" said one of the robot girls.

We hurried, leaving the others standing at the mouth of the tunnel. We couldn't be sure, but we had a suspicion that Central Control must, by this time, have some inkling of what we were doing—just as an animal will be

aware of the bug crawling over its hide. We hurried, not knowing when doors would fall, cutting off advance and retreat, not knowing what booby traps might be put into operation to crush or to maim us. We ran along a tunnel like the one along which we had come—how long ago?—for our first interview with the ruling intelligence of the planet. There were the same translucent walls, the same weird lights, mobile and static, glowing through the translucency.

But this time we had a purpose of our own and we knew what we were looking for.

#### CHAPTER 12

WE almost ran past the marker of which we had been told, the triangle of green lights on the red, glowing circle. We pulled up to a staggering halt, began a frantic search for the inspection panel. So far there were no indications that Central Control was aware of our escape but, nonetheless, the sense of extreme urgency persisted.

We found the inspection panel easily enough—but lifting it out was not easy. Had we been equipped with thin, metallic tendrils instead of fingers it would have been simple enough. At last I had to ask Alan to unzip my suit so that I could get the slender stylus that I always

carried in the breast pocket of my uniform. I held my breath whilst the operation was in process, but it wasn't really necessary. Whatever the atmosphere of this world was it was an inert gas, not corrosive, and even though it mixed to a certain extent with the oxygen and nitrogen inside my helmet it did not matter.

Even with the stylus to aid me the removal of the panel took time. My fingers were clumsy inside the thick gloves. But it yielded to persuasion at last and fell to the floor with a faint clatter. Before it had fallen, almost, Alan's hands were in the aperture and he was pulling the first of the fuses.

He stiffened suddenly, seemed to be listening. I listened too. I heard a low humming, a droning sound that became louder with frightening rapidity. We looked along the tunnel, saw, hurrying towards us, suspended from the overhead cable, one of the metallic spiders. It may have been making routine rounds of inspection, it may have been despatched expressly to deal with us, a mechanical phagocyte. Not that it mattered; either way we should be, to it, foreign bodies inside the great organism of which it was part.

Alan swore, ran to meet it. He jumped up, got both his hands around the bulbous body. It

buzzed viciously, shook the strand from which it hung like an infuriated spider. And then it fell, and Alan fell with it. He turned as he dropped so that the thing was underneath him, rolled over as it scrambled from under his weight, caught it again. He and it thrashed on the hard floor of the tunnel, a tangle of human limbs and wildly scrabbling, many-jointed metallic legs.

I waited for the opportunity, brought my heavy boot smashing down on the thing's body. It crumpled like a tin can. There was a flash, a crackle, a thin trickle of blue smoke. Alan scrambled to his feet, ignored the wreckage of the little robot, turned at once to the inspection panel. I heard him curse—and when I saw what had happened I cursed with him.

There was another of the things, a twin to the one that we had destroyed. Where it had come from we never found out; it is possible that it had swept silently overhead while we were dealing with its mate. It had dropped from the overhead cable to the deck, had replaced the cylindrical fuse and, as we watched, fitted the panel back into place.

Luckily it had little, if any, independent intelligence. It made no attempt at evasion as I raised

my foot, stood there unmoving as my boot crashed down. It was dead, if the word "dead" can be used in connection with a machine, when Alan wrenched the claws from it, the claws that it had used to lift the panel, the claws that he used to remove it again.

"Hurry," I said. "There are more of the damned things coming!"

Alan ignored me.

He threw the panel down to the floor. His gloved hands darted into the aperture, wrenched out two of the cylindrical fuses. I felt a sharp grip on my shoulder, turned abruptly, saw that it was another of the spider things, a big one. I don't mind admitting it—I have a horror of insects, especially giant insects. Even though I knew that this was no real arthropod but a mere, cunning construction of unliving metal the horror persisted. I caught the bulbous body with my gloved hands, tried to throw it from me. But it was too heavy, and all the time its sharp pincers were working at the fabric of my suit, the fabric that, in spite of the flimsiness of its appearance, was fantastically tough.

Alan told me afterwards that I screamed. I suppose that I did. It wasn't so much the fear that those scrabbling claws would carry away the line from my air tanks to my helmet—

after all, the possibility of death from anoxia is a spectre with which all spacemen learn to live—it was just the irrational dread of the arthropod. In any case, he dropped what he was doing, ran to help me. A flailing tentacle caught him across the chest, sent him staggering along the tunnel. But he came back, and this time was buffeted off his feet.

The tunnel was swarming with robots now—little ones that scattered underfoot, more of the giants that I glimpsed behind the one with which I was fighting. I caught sight of Alan. He was down, on his back, and at least a dozen of the small metallic spiders were clambering over him.

Then the giant had both of my arms pinioned, had thrown another tentacle around my legs. It lifted me clear of the floor, began to move in the direction from which it had come. My back was to it, pressed against the hard metal of its body. I thought, absurdly, that it must be walking backwards, realized dimly that probably all directions were as one to it. Alan, I saw, was still struggling, was rolling in mechanical wreckage, claws and tentacles and crushed bodies. With my captor blocking the tunnel none of the giants could get to him, but the numbers of the small machines seemed inexhaustable.

Something was coming along the tunnel, from where we had left the others. *So they've been dealt with too*, I thought hopelessly.

Something was coming along the tunnel.

*Something?*

Someone was coming along the tunnel.

In spite of her haste she walked with the grace that had been built into her. In comparison with the specialized robots she looked altogether human. (But she, herself, was a highly specialized robot.) She stepped over Alan, over the glittering spiders that were holding him down. *So she is one of them after all*, I thought. *So she won't help a human gainst her own kind. So she's a machine, and her loyalties lie with the machines . . .*

She stooped, graceful as always, and picked up one of the crumpled bodies between her slender hands. Violently she threw it from her, into the recess behind the inspection panel. There was a flare of electrical energy, a crackling arc from which she retreated. The specialized maintenance robots froze. All along the length of the tunnel the lights were going out.

I fell to the floor, somehow kept my balance, started to run towards her. She was bending over Alan, pulling the metal

bodies from him, helping him to his feet. As I neared them I saw that it was the pseudo-Veronica—and somehow, at this moment, she looked more human than Veronica had ever looked. She looked altogether human, and lovely, and, at the same time badly frightened. I know that it's impossible—but I swear that there were lines of strain on her face. (After all, she had acted in defiance of her conditioning, had trespassed, had behaved as a woman rather than as a machine.)

She turned to look at me, said shortly, "You're all right."

Holding Alan's hand, she turned and ran, and I ran after them. We were still running when total darkness descended upon us.

#### CHAPTER 12

**T**HE OTHERS were waiting for us at the mouth of the tunnel.

"We must hurry," said Sally.

Alan gasped, "But Central Control is out of action."

"Not for long. It has built-in regenerative powers."

"She's right," said Veronica.

So we hurried, at the finish the girls literally dragging us with them. We could, and did, tire. They were tireless. And yet, with their all too evident concern for our safety, they were

far more than machines, were essentially human.

We hurried.

We fled along conveyor belts, running so that our own speed was added to that of the moving ways. We ran up spiral ramps and down spiral ramps, and once we had to stem a torrent of little, beetle-like things, purposively hastening in the opposite direction, a river of mechanical lice.

We hurried, and the air-conditioning units of our suits, efficient though they were, could no longer handle the heat and the humidity generated by our activity. We envied the freely moving, unhampered women—but they could have functioned almost as well in solid lead radiation armor.

We hurried, and we were out into the open at last, thankful to be able to stand still, to rest, to feel the temperature of the air inside our outer clothing slowly dropping. We watched a machine rolling slowly towards us on a tricycle undercarriage. Frankly, I didn't care if it were friendly or hostile and I am sure that the others were in a like state. We could not have run any more.

"Inside," said Sally.

A door in the sleek hull, just forward of the swept-back wings, opened, a short ladder extended to touch the ground. We found ourselves hanging back to

give precedence to the women, but they would have none of it. They bundled us into the cabin without ceremony, almost throwing us aboard, followed us without delay. Before we were properly seated, while the door was still closing, the thing took off with a scream and a roar, lifting at a steep angle into the cloudless sky, the great, incomprehensible machines in the desert dwindling fast below us.

We saw, after only a few minutes' flight, the patch of empty sand, the clearing in the mechanical jungle, where we had landed in *Lucky Lady*. We saw the ship, her plating gleaming in the afternoon sun, but far less brightly than the burnished surfaces of the indigenous artifacts. We saw that she was surrounded by a horde of moving forms, like the carcass of some animal being stripped bare of flesh by ants.

The nose of the aircraft dipped and we screamed down. Just as it seemed that a crash was inevitable, forward pointing rockets burst into brief fury. The deceleration was brutal and had it not been for the strong arms of our companions, holding us in our seats, we must surely have suffered injury. When the smoke and dust had cleared I could see that we were down, were rolling smoothly towards the ship's airlock.

Alan was out before the plane had stopped moving. Dudley was barely a jump behind him. Jim and I followed in a slightly more leisurely manner, but we wasted no time. The robots—beetle shapes, and mechanical octopoids, and things like giant crabs—made way for us. We found that only the outer airlock door was open. This indicated, we hoped, that the ship's atmosphere had not been lost, was still breathable.

It was crowded in the airlock. Four the compartment could hold with comfort, but not eight. But the women had pressed in with us, were determined not to be left behind.

When we opened the inner door a great, glittering crab confronted us. Its long antennae waved, then pointed at Sally. She seemed to be listening. Then she turned to us and said, "Everything's all right. Your Pile has been renewed. The atmosphere is as you left it; you may remove your helmets."

"And the navigational data?" asked Alan.

"This robot will be your pilot. It will take you up and clear, set you on trajectory for your home planet." She paused, seemed to be in receipt of further intelligence from somebody or something. She said, "Auxiliary Control cannot keep Central Control

incapacitated for much longer. We must go."

We ran to our stations—Jim to his engineroom, the rest of us to Control. As I have already said, the control room of *Lucky Lady* was far more commodious than is common in merchant vessels. It needed to be. There were three of us and the four women, and that mechanical crab. The first named seven might just as well not have been there.

We lifted, the ship obedient to the touch of her unhuman pilot, behaving with almost impossible sweetness. I was amused by the expression on Alan's face as he rode the thunder skywards as no more than a mere passenger. Resentment struggled with incredulity and a reluctant admiration struggled with both. We lifted, the rockets firing smoothly and evenly, the auxiliary jets silent almost all the time. We lifted, and rapidly the expanse of machine populated desert fell away from us.

We lifted—and then one of the girls screamed and pointed.

Spiralling up in pursuit was a horde of broad-winged aircraft, clumsy seeming affairs that, nonetheless, must have been aerodynamically efficient. Perhaps they were rockets, perhaps they were jets; we never found out. But they had the legs of us and they were gaining, slowly but surely. I do not think that Cen-

tral Control desired our destruction; had this been the case nothing could have saved us. Missiles would have been used against us, not the relatively innocuous flying machines. Immobilization and recapture must have been the aim—and that aim was frustrated by the other half of the schizoid personality.

We saw, but fleetingly, the needle shapes that climbed up from the desert rim, each trailing smoke and flame. We saw them strike, and saw the winged things disintegrate. Seconds later we were rocked by the concussion of the explosions.

And then the last of the atmosphere was left behind us, and the planet of the warring principles became a ruddy globe against the black backdrop of Space, and we were swinging, slowly but surely, on to the heading that would lead us home.

Metallic tentacles played lightly and surely over the control console. The whine of the Ehrenhaft generators became a thin, intolerable keening and astern of us there was, suddenly, nothing, while ahead there was the crowded firmament, the packed radiance of the stars both ahead and astern.

Our pilot made a little, almost inaudible crackling noise. I thought that it could, after all, speak, was going to say something. But there was just that



faint crackling, and then the complex machine crumbled, dissolved to a cloud of silvery dust.

I felt Lynnette's grip on my arm slacken. I turned to look at her, sick with sudden apprehension. I saw the perfect lips move, heard her say, faintly, "I wish that I were really alive. I wish . . ."

I turned to hold her, felt the synthetic flesh of her flake away beneath my arms, watched her features sag and dissolve. There was nothing that I could do, and I cursed my helplessness. She was not just a machine that had been scrapped, that was being broken up by some outside agency. She was a woman, and she was dying.

She was dead and disintegrating, as were her sisters.

"Just as well," said Alan brutally. "They'd have been an embarrassment."

And the pseudo-Veronica stirred and shifted, coalesced, rebuilt from inert shapelessness her grace and beauty of form and feature, moved like a goddess through the cloud of glittering particles that were all that remained of the robot pilot, sat in the chair upon which it had been squatting.

She said, her voice cold but with hurt undertones, "Auxiliary Control has betrayed us and will betray you. But I think that I can save you."

Alan stared at her, his face white, and said nothing.

#### CHAPTER 14

**I**T WAS Dudley who broke the silence.

He asked, "What do you mean?"

She replied, "It should be obvious, even to a human. Auxiliary Control was jealous of you. Auxiliary Control fears that you, or others of your kind, will find your way back to our world." She smiled bleakly. "After all, you must admit that the planet from which you have escaped would be to some men a veritable paradise."

"And how did *you* escape?" Dudley's voice was bitter as he looked from Veronica to the lifeless, shapeless huddle that had been Natasha, to the wreckage of Sally and Lynnette. (He had been, I knew, more than merely fond of Natasha.) "How did *you* escape?"

She smiled tiredly. "I was stronger than the others, I guess. You have seen already that I have been able to break my built-in inhibitions. I was able to disregard, to fight, even, the built-in directive. Or it could be that I was copied from an actual model, whereas the others were no more than products of Auxiliary Control's memory and imagination. But does it matter?"

"Yes," he said bluntly.

"Dudley," I told him, "if Veronica had died it wouldn't mean that your Natasha would still be living, or Sally, or Lynnette . . ."

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

I turned to Veronica, asked, "Can anything be done for them?"

"No," she said flatly.

"For the love of God be quiet!" flared Alan. "We've more to worry us than three broken dolls . . ."

"Sally was more than a doll," snarled old Jim, who had come to Control from his engineroom.

"All right. She was more than a doll."

"She was a woman."

"All right. She was a woman."

"Please stop quarrelling," ordered Veronica.

There was a strained silence, broken by Alan. "Dudley," he asked, "where are we?"

"That tin computer on legs knew," said Dudley. "I don't."

"Veronica?"

"Until I fought the final directive," she said, "I was still part of Auxiliary Control, my mind, to a certain degree, an extension of its mind. There was, of course, much that was kept secret from me—but at the finish the barriers were down and I *knew* . . ."

"What did you know? What do you know?"

"I know that this ship is on trajectory for a dark star, an anti-matter star . . ."

"Then it should show in the chart," said Dudley, peering into the spherical transparency.

"It would show on the chart," she told us, "if your Mass Proximity Indicator were working properly. But it was . . . modified. It is now capable of discrimination."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it indicates normal matter, ignored anti-matter."

"How was it modified?" demanded Dudley sharply.

"I don't know."

"I could strip it," he said. "I could strip it, and replace every printed circuit and transistor from the spares . . ."

"That will take time," said Alan. "And how much time have we?"

"I don't know," said the girl.

"Jim," ordered Alan, "get back to your engineroom. I'm stopping the Drive."

Roughly he evicted Veronica from the pilot's chair, strapped himself into it. It was characteristic of him that he concerned himself with such minor details before lifting a finger to the controls. I remembered once hearing him lecturing Dudley on this very point. "A man in Free Fall," he had said, "is incapable



of making fine adjustments to instruments. A slip of the hand may well lead to the loss of the ship . . ."

I saw the red coloration fade from the monitor, the translucent model of *Lucky Lady* on the control panel, saw it change to violet, a violet that dimmed to grey. Outside the ports the stars resumed their normal appearance, were no longer apparently crowded ahead of us on our line of flight.

"Dudley," said Alan, "I want to make a radical change of course. What's the situation?"

"There's a complex of intersections ahead," said Dudley. "About seven hundred thousand miles . . ."

"Could it be the dark star?"

"It could. But . . ."

"We have to find out," said Alan. Then to me, "George, see if the forward signal rocket tube is loaded."

While I was checking this he used the Drive again, cutting it after only a brief burst of power.

"Three hundred thousand miles," reported Dudley.

"Rocket in the tube," I reported.

"Good. Now for the merest nudge . . ."

He gave us the merest nudge, and I could see from where I was sitting the maze of luminous filaments that now filled the chart tank. It could have been what the

oldtime gaussjammer navigators called a system of points, it could have been the lines of force emanating from a large body, from the dark sun that, according to Veronica, would not be visible to us.

"Fire!" ordered Alan.

I pressed the button.

We watched the streamer of flame streaking out ahead of us. We waited for the blinding burst of energy that would tell us that matter and anti-matter had met. We waited, and the glowing spark that was our rocket diminished, dwindled, vanished at last.

Then we moved forward to the intersection of the lines of force, turned about our short axis and proceeded at right angles to our original trajectory, hoping that somewhere, somehow we should find a signpost that would point us back to the Rim.

#### CHAPTER 13

I DON'T know what happened between Alan and Veronica.

He went to his quarters and she followed him. He was not there for long, and when he came back to Control he was smelling of whisky and Veronica's face was white and strained. The way in which she looked at him was heartbreaking—but, I thought, we all had our troubles.

Roughly old Jim asked her if there was anything she could do about her sisters, whose bodies were still in the control room.

She replied bitterly, "They are broken machines. Dump them."

"Sally was not a machine," flared Jim with a sudden show of emotion.

"She was," said Veronica flatly. "I should know. I am only a machine."

(Alan said nothing.)

"You're the Captain, Alan," said Dudley. "What do we do?"

"Please yourself," he replied.

We didn't dump the bodies.

We buried them.

We left Alan in Control—Veronica stayed with him—and carried the bodies to the airlock. There was old Jim there, and Dudley, who read the service and myself. We carried the bodies to the airlock and placed them in the little compartment and ran the pumps briefly to build up the internal pressure so that when the outer door was opened they would be thrown well out and clear.

We listened to the words that Dudley read in a voice that was trembling slightly, the words that should, on this occasion, have been blasphemous but yet, somehow, were not. After all—what are human beings but machines? And what is a thinking, feeling machine made in human shape but a human being?

"We therefore commit the bodies to the deep," read Dudley.

Old Jim pressed the button.

We felt the ship tremble slightly, knew that there was reaction to the action that had expelled solid and gaseous mass. It could have meant that we had been switched to another set of tramlines, another of the Lines of Force radiating throughout all Space. But it didn't matter. We knew neither where we were nor where we were going.

We still didn't know after Dudley had stripped and reassembled the Mass Proximity Indicator, replacing the alien printed circuits and translators from his spares. It now showed antimatter as well as normal matter, but we were little better off. All of the planets in this sector of Space were barren dust balls, incapable of supporting life as we know it or, come to that, any sort of life at all. Even the pseudo-life of the Medullian machines could not have flourished in those corrosive atmospheres.

We pushed on, falling through the star-crowded vastnesses, making detours to investigate what looked like promising planetary systems at long range, pushing on again when we found them to be only sterile balls of rock or sand. We should have been better advised to have headed towards the Center;

there we should have found life, our sort of life; there we should have been able to find our bearings. As so often is the case our short cut had turned out to be the longest way.

It was Alan, of course, who was determined to get back to the Rim. He had somebody waiting for him there. He had the dream that had yet to come true in its entirety—the dream of his little ship, with himself as Owner and Master, running the Eastern Circuit, the little ship aboard which would live, in state befitting a queen, his wife.

And Veronica, the pseudo-Veronica . . .

What of her?

She served us, cooking our meals, keeping our cabins clean and tidy. She slept (if she did sleep) in one of the storerooms. She was silent and there were deep lines on her face and she moved among us, a living reproach to human heartlessness. She reminded me of a character in one the old classics—the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* who wanted a heart so that he could claim humanity but who, all through the story, gave evidence of the possession of a heart. Veronica had a heart, all right, and that heart was very near to breaking.

We pushed on, and on, with Alan rarely leaving Control, sleeping, when he did sleep,

strapped in his chair. We pushed on, hating the taint of hot oil and hot metal in the too-often breathed air, hating the flavorless tank-grown food, the flat, insipid processed and re-processed water.

We pushed on, until the day that the great globe, green and gold and white and blue, swam invitingly in our viewports, the globe on whose night side we had seen the lights of cities, the globe in whose atmosphere our probe rocket had flared with the normal incandescence of impact, not the harsh, glaring light of matter reacting with anti-matter to the utter destruction of both.

We tried to establish radio contact with the natives of the planet, but all we did was to waste power; not that it mattered much, the robot mechanics of Auxiliary Control had made a good job of replenishing our Pile. We used our rocket drive to establish ourselves in a closed orbit and for all of four days carefully studied the world below us. It was, we decided at last, our sort of world, and its atmosphere, according to spectroscopic analysis, was our sort of atmosphere. It was inhabited, we knew, by intelligent beings—the city lights were proof of that. It must be, we decided, yet another Lost Colony—but there was a chance that the colonists

might have revived the science of astronomy, just a chance that they might be able to tell us where we were in the Galaxy. So, after careful study of the photographic maps that we had made, we landed.

There were no cities, no centers of population whatsoever, near the magnetic poles. Had *Lucky Lady* been a true gaussjammer we should have found it hard to land with safety other-where than in the Arctic or Antarctic wastes. But she was a hybrid, a rocket of sorts, although the lines of her hull ignored all the laws of aerodynamics. We drifted in under rocket power, the ship trembling and complaining under the strain, dropped to a landing upon level ground just a mile outside one of the cities in the northern temperate zone.

It was a daylight landing, of course, and as we lost altitude I was able to study the landing site and its environs through the big, mounted binoculars. From the air the city looked . . . odd. Oh, it was human all right—but it was human in a pattern that I would have sworn survived nowhere in the Galaxy, a pattern that passed with the passing of the Middle Ages on Earth.

The city—it was no more than a town, really, and not a very large town at that—huddled within a roughly circular wall.

In its center there was a hill and on the hill was a castle. There was another tower outside the walls that rather puzzled me—and then I realized that it was not a tower but a ship. The ship stood slim and tall, needle prowed, and was not a peg-top shaped gaussjammer. She was old and the metal of her shell plating was dull and weathered. She must have been one of the very first of the timejammers.

I shouted this information to Alan and Dudley, but they were too busy at the controls. Veronica, slumped in one of the spare chairs, was not interested.

"What's all the fuss about?" she asked listlessly.

"This is a Lost Colony," I told her. "But all the Lost Colonies were started in the days of the gaussjammers. And that ship's no gaussjammer . . ."

"So," she muttered, "what?"

"Stop yapping and watch out for the bump!" snarled Alan.

We bumped.

Considering *Lucky Lady's* hybrid rig it wasn't at all a bad landing. We touched down within half a mile of the big, strange ship. We sat in our chairs until Veronica got up from hers and made to unstrap Alan from his. He brushed her roughly aside, unstrapped the buckles himself, got to his feet, looked out of the port. Then he hurried to the

mounted binoculars, traversed them to cover the city gate. I heard him swear.

"What is it?" asked Dudley.

"Horsemen," he whispered. "But it's not horses they're riding . . ."

I took one of the smaller pairs of glasses from the rack, focussed them on the road that ran out from the city wall. The riders were human enough, but their steeds were long bodied, six-legged, somehow reptilian. Each man carried a lance from which fluttered a gay pennon. The clouds slid away from the sun and the light was reflected from burnished armor.

"Something funny here . . ." muttered Alan. Then— "Come down to the airlock with me, George. You, Dudley, stay in Control—and tell old Jim to keep with his rockets. We may have to get upstairs in a hurry."

"Can I come?" asked Veronica.

"I suppose so," Alan told her grudgingly. "But put something on first so you look decent."

I followed him down the ramp, to the airlock. We heard the rapid tap-tapping of Veronica's feet as she hurried after us. I turned to look at her; she was wearing an old sweater of Alan's, a pair of his shorts, belted in tightly. The clothing did not hide the lines of her body, merely accentuated them. Dressed, she

seemed somehow more naked than when attired in her usual wisp of near nothingness.

Alan ignored her, pressed the studs that would open both inner and outer doors. The warm breeze, with its scent of green growing things, eddied into the ship, dispelled the staleness that we had breathed for so long, too long.

She said, tremulously, "That smells good . . ."

"What do you know about it?" he demanded. "You're . . ."

"I know," she said. "You needn't bother to tell me. I'm only a machine."

I tried to ignore them, looked out across the graassy plain, to the huddle of the town and the menacing hulk of the castle looming above it. The riders were nearer now, approaching at a gallop, their steeds covering the ground with almost the speed of low flying aircraft. I thought, *I don't like this. Making contact with these aliens is a job for the Survey Service, for the boys with the side-arms and the machine cannon and the odd fission or fusion bomb for the Sunday punch . . .*

I wished that Alan would retreat back into the airlock, where we should be reasonably safe from those long, vicious lances—but he stood there, squarely in the center of the circular port, with Veronica on his right hand



and a little behind him, myself on his left. He stood there, and his armor was the arrogance which mastery of the machine brings to some men. He stood there, unmoving, although the point of the lance carried by the nearest rider was aimed for his chest, was a matter of only feet away with the distance rapidly diminishing.

Then, with a clatter of accoutrements, the whole troop reigned to a rearing halt. The leader, a bearded giant with soiled, gold-braided, purple velvet showing under the plates of his body armor, demanded, "Who the hell are you?" Then, his little, pig eyes swivelling under bushy brows, "And who's the wench? What's she worth?"

#### CHAPTER 16

ALAN ignored the last two questions. He said calmly, "This is the *Lucky Lady*, and I am her Master . . ."

"She don't look too lucky to me. Looks like she could do with a change of masters. How about it, Toots?"

"I was referring to the ship," said Alan coldly.

"I wasn't."

"All right, then, if you must talk business. Where's your landing permit?"

"You can't see it," Alan told him. "I don't believe in flaunting

my armament. But I assure you that my gunnery officer is ready to display it at the first sign of hostility on your part."

I watched the bearded face closely. The leader of the barbarians was not convinced by Alan's bluff—yet, at the same time, he could not afford to take chances. He grunted in a surly voice, "All right, Cap'n. We'll skip the permit. But as Lord of this Barony I have the right to ask you where you are from and what you want here—and whether or not you will be able to pay for what you want."

"We're out of Elsinore, in the Shakespearian Sector," said Alan. "Bound for the Rim."

"Unless the Rim has shifted since we were in Space," said the bearded man, "you're one helluva long way off trajectory." He added nastily, "I hope your gunnery officer is better at his job than your navigator . . ."

"As a matter of fact," Alan told him, "this is an experimental ship and we have still a few kinks to iron out insofar as the navigational equipment is concerned . . ."

"And does the same apply to your gunnery?"

"Of course not."

*And that's true, I thought. If there aren't any guns there can't be any gunnery problems.*

"You still haven't told me what you want."

"Information."

"What sort of information?"

"Star charts."

"And then we'll have the boys of the Survey Service breathing hard down our necks. Not on your life, Mister. It's many a long year since Grandpop brought the old *Star Raider* in from her last foray, but I'll lay that Black Bart hasn't been forgotten."

*Black Bart . . . The Star Raider . . .* I looked across the field to the corroding hulk, to the great ship that, in all probability, would never fly again. So that was the *Star Raider*, flagship of Black Bart's pirate fleet. So this world was Black Bart's hideaway, the planet upon which the descendants of his murderous crews were still living. So this was the world to which Black Bart's criminal armada had retreated when the hastily commissioned warships of the Survey Service had made the space lanes too hot for them.

"Black Bart . . ." said Alan thoughtfully. "The name rings a bell . . ."

"It rang the bell that beat to hell!" cried Black Bart's descendant.

"Indeed?"

I was standing where I could not see Alan's face, but I could visualize the lift of his eyebrows.

"Yes, Captain Whoever-You-Are."

"Captain Kemp. And your name?"

"Baron Bartholemew Bligh, at your service. For a consideration."

"And what if I can't afford the consideration?"

"Then no service."

"I'm not a pirate," said Alan regretfully, "so I must pay for what I want. And I've already told you my requirements—star charts and any other astronomical data you can give us."

"Sell you," corrected the Baron.

"All right, sell us." He turned to me, "George, will you bring down the Manifest? There may be some items in our cargo that Baron Bligh might fancy. And I think that such a transaction will be covered by General Average."

"Damn it all," swore Bligh, "if you want to do business then do it in my castle. We've been isolated from the rest of the Galaxy for generations here and we'd like to hear how things have been going since Grandpop retired. Have your Paymaster or whatever he calls himself bring the Manifest ashore with him, and you and he and your lady can come into the town with us. You can all ride, I take it? We've spare nags."

"All right," said Alan. "You understand, of course, that I shall leave orders with my Executive and Gunnery Officers

that the town is to be destroyed in the event of our non-return."

He turned abruptly, made his way back into the ship. When the three of us were inside he pressed the button that closed the airlock doors—and before they were fully shut I was able to watch the expression of resentment sweeping over the Baron's face.

I said, "I think our bearded friend was expecting to be asked aboard for a drink."

"He was," agreed Alan. "But I don't want him snooping around the ship. As it is, he thinks that it's just possible that we may be armed, also that we carry a crew large enough to handle our armament."

"Don't forget to leave those orders with the gunnery officer," I told him.

He laughed. "I shall leave them with the executive officer."

It was my turn to chuckle. "And how is Dudley going to destroy the town? We haven't even got the ship's automatic pistol any longer."

Alan's face was grim as he told me, "Towns have been destroyed before now by unarmed rocket ships. Dudley could do it here easily enough. All he has to do is to lift ship so that she's barely fireborne, then let lateral drift carry her over the target . . ."

"You'd do it, or order it done?"

"Too right. These people are descended from pirates, and from pirates who were murderous vermin, not the swashbuckling rascals of popular fiction. Judging by the appearance of the local boss cocky and his boys, there hasn't been much change in the tribal character over the generations. They've forgotten how to handle ships and generate electricity, no doubt—but they haven't forgotten the law under which they operated; the jungle law that permits the strong to take from the weak."

We had been talking as we climbed the spiral ramp. When we reached the officers' flat I went into my cabin to change into a more or less decent uniform and to put the Manifest into a briefcase. Veronica vanished into the storeroom that she had made her living quarters. Alan continued up to the control room.

We met again in the airlock.

Veronica was already waiting there when I got down. She had changed from the sweater and the shorts, was wearing a sari-like dress that I hadn't dreamed she possessed. I wondered where it had come from, then realized that it had been cut from a bolt of Altairian crystal silk and remembered that a quantity of this fabric, trans-shipment cargo,

was among the freight that we had lifted from Elsinore. Technically, I suppose, it was pilferage—but we had more important things to worry about than legal technicalities. I inspected her more closely. She was wearing simple gold ear clips that had started life as Rim Runner uniform buttons. The sandals were also of gold—and they had once been plain leather, part of another shipment from Elsinore to the Rim, but had been glamorized by the covering of the straps with gold sleeve braid.

Veronica noted my interest—and for the first time for weeks showed interest of her own. She said, "Old Jim is a clever craftsman."

"The sari as well?" I asked.

"No. That's all my own work."

She turned, letting me admire her from every angle, froze suddenly as Alan came down.

His glance flickered briefly over the pair of us. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," I replied.

He was wearing a smart uniform and looked every inch the big ship officer. There was a suspicious bulge under the left breast of his jacket, however, and I wondered if he were wearing a shoulder holster. He answered my unspoken question, laughed grimly and said, "All part of the bluff." He pressed the operating stud.

The doors opened and we left the ship.

The Baron and his men had dismounted, were sitting on the grass around the ship. Riding, they had borne some semblance to a disciplined force. Scattered and sprawled on the ground they were no more than a rabble. But they jumped to their feet smartly enough at their leader's command, swung into their high-pommel saddles.

Three of them did not mount but led towards us a trio of the animals. I looked at the one that I was supposed to ride, and it looked at me. Neither of us liked what he saw. The thing's lip curled away from sharp yellow teeth and the tiny black eyes stared at me superciliously. I avoided its glance, walked past the head on the end of its long, sinuous neck, clambered clumsily into the saddle that was set between the first and the second pair of legs. It wasn't too uncomfortable. I looked around, saw that Alan was mounted and that the Baron, with a great show of courtesy, was helping Veronica into her saddle. She had tucked her sari between her thighs and was showing altogether too much leg. Alan was a fool, I thought, to let her come with us.

We were all mounted then and the cavalcade pulled away from the ship, trotted towards

the city wall. Trotted? I suppose that that is the proper word, although the motion was unlike any equine trot. The beasts upon which we rode flowed over the ground like snakes, their long bodies adjusting themselves to every irregularity of the ground. Luckily it was only a short journey. Had it been longer I am sure that I should have been seasick.

It was long enough, long enough for the sun to fall below the range of mountains to the west, long enough for the flaring jets of natural gas, the lights that we had seen from Space, to spring into life along the battlemented walls. Ahead of us loomed the menacing bulk of the castle, dark against the darkling sky, the narrow, yellow rectangles of illumination that were its few windows making it all the blacker, all the more threatening.

I had cursed the cramped prison that was the ship—the lack of space, the stale, too-often breathed air—but now I wished that I were back there. A whiff of corruption from the open sewers of the town did nothing to make me change my mind.

#### CHAPTER 17

WE rode through the narrow, winding streets, uphill, first a half dozen of the men-at-arms,

WHEN THE DREAM DIES

then the Baron, then Kemp, then Veronica, then myself. The other soldiers were in a long, untidy straggle behind us; any sort of military formation would have been impossible in the tortuous thoroughfare, barely wide enough to permit the passage of a single rider.

I should have hated to have had to make the journey on foot. The stench of open sewers had affronted our nostrils when we passed through the gate; now we found that the streets were the sewers. Our mounts trampled over and through all manner of filth and garbage. They had not impressed me as cleanly animals when I first saw them; now I realized that they had every excuse for not being so. For their masters there was no excuse.

We rode through the streets, and from windows and doorways the people regarded us. They were an ugly, sullen lot, men and women both. They were ragged and unwashed, shaggy and grimy. They looked at us hungrily—and I knew that the sight of us stirred racial memories of rapine and pillage. To them Veronica must have seemed a veritable princess out of some old legend—the princess of a wealthy kingdom ripe for the looting.

And then we were at the inner wall, a grim facade of rough stone in which was set the heavy,

iron-studded gate. The massive valve swung creakingly open, revealing a courtyard illuminated by flaring gas jets, revealing the guards who stood there, weapons ready. I had been expecting to see swords and bows, but these men carried firearms, old-fashioned magazine rifles. Whether or not there was any ammunition for them we never found out, but they made an intimidating show.

Baron Bligh dismounted, threw the reins of his steed to one of his men. He ignored Alan and myself, went to Veronica and lifted her down from the saddle. He took longer over it than he need have done. I glanced at Alan, but his face was expressionless as he swung himself down to the cobbled ground.

Reluctantly Bligh let Veronica go. "Cap'n," he said roughly, "we're here. You'll find even though hospitality has lapsed elsewhere in the Galaxy we maintain the old forms. Come with me, all of you, and we'll down a noggin."

We went with him, following him through long corridors, up stairs. The castle was cold and draughty, and the passages through which we walked hadn't been swept since the place was built. Drifts of dust lay in the corners; from the rafters depended the filthy strands that

were the torn webs of some spider-like creature.

We followed him up a spiral staircase to a turret room, and almost circular compartment with a huge fireplace, against the only flat wall, in which there was a dismal smoulder of charred wood from which eddied gusts of acrid smoke. The place was lit by the usual gas jets, which were little better than crude torches. There was a rough table with a bench at either side, a chair at its head. There were narrow windows from which we could look out over the town, from which we could see, in the distance, the lights of the ship.

Bligh unsnapped the buckles of his body armor, let the plates fall clattering to the stone floor, kicked them to one side. With the metallic integument he had looked like a reasonably athletic man; without it he slumped, the suddenly released, gross belly overhanging the ornate belt that he wore. He collapsed into the chair at the head of the table with a grunt, reached for a frayed rope that dangled from the ceiling, pulled it. We heard the cracked notes of a bell jangling somewhere inside the castle.

A woman came in.

She could not have been very old; her face, beneath its grime, was smooth enough, but she was most unattractive. Beneath her

coarse clothing her figure sagged. Her low colored hair could never have known brush or comb. She gaped at us, especially at Veronica, revealing broken, discolored teeth. Reluctantly she turned her attention to her master, mumbled, "Whaddya want, Lord?"

"The roast—if that lazy blackard of a cook has it ready yet. Ale."

"Comin' up," she replied, slouching out of the room.

"It'll do yer good to get real tucker in yer bellies after the muck from yer tanks," said Bligh.

The real tucker arrived, brought in by the first woman and another, older one who was even more slovenly. There was the roast, standing in congealing fat on a huge, badly tarnished silver platter. There were plates and glasses, cracked and dirty. (My plate, I noticed, bore the *ITC* monogram of the Interstellar Transport Commission; the misused crystal goblet into which my ale was poured had etched into its onetime transparency the crown and rocket of the Waverley Royal Mail.)

"Dig in!" ordered our host, setting the example.

I sipped my ale. It reminded me of a holiday I had once spent in New Zealand, on distant Earth. I had thought then that the EnZedders brewed the

worst beer in the entire Galaxy. Now I was ready to revise my opinion. The roast reminded me, too, of New Zealand, of an alleged delicacy, mutton bird, that I had tried just once. It had the texture of old ewe and the flavor of rancid kippers. It was lukewarm and the plates upon which it was served, after the baron had carved, were stone cold.

The Baron didn't mind the way in which we were picking at our food.

"All the more for those who like it," he averred, belching heartily. Then, "They don't send the real men into Space these days."

"We find your food," said Alan carefully, "just a little rich."

"It'll take some getting used to," agreed our host.

"Incubitably," said Alan.

Bligh glared at him suspiciously from under heavy brows. He snarled, "Cut out the fancy words, Cap'n. Old Granpop said that he never did like big ship officers with their airs and graces, and I think the old guy was right. Since you don't like our grub, suppose we get down to business."

"As you please," said Alan.

"Mabel!" ordered the Baron, "bring in Old Bart's chest!"

"It's heavy!" protested the girl.

"Then get one of the other lazy whelps to help you. Get half

a dozen of them!" To us he said, "This castle's crawling with good-for-nothing trollops." And to Veronica, "It needs a real Baroness."

She said nothing, looked down at the almost untouched mess on her plate.

"George," said Alan, "get the Manifest out of your case so that Baron Bligh can see what's in the cargo."

"Don't bother yourself," Bligh told me.

Four of the women came in, carrying between them a great chest. *Vegan stonewood*, I thought. *It must be heavy*. They dropped it with a crash as the Baron yelled, "Careful, you stupid cows!" One of them helped the Baron out of his chair, another of them fumbled with the catch of the lid and threw it open as her master approached.

Bligh plunged a thick arm into the depths of the chest. His hairy hand came up with a sheaf of transparencies—thin, crystal-clear sheets on which glittered little points of light, astronomical symbols. "Charts, Cap'n," he shouted. "Charts—from here to any damn place in the Galaxy! What'll ye pay?"

"The Manifest . . ." began Alan.

"To hell with your Manifest! Can you give me weapons?"

"No," said Alan.

"Then what have you got? The usual cargo—silks and satins and the like. And what use are silks and satins if you've nobody to put 'em on?" He gestured towards the women. "D'ye think I'd waste a rag of decent cloth on these drabs?"

"Then what do you want?"

He leered. "The sort of thing that's worth putting silks and satins on—and worth taking them off."

"Unspeakable," said Alan. Then, more loudly, "Impossible!"

Veronica said wonderingly, "You mean that . . . That makes me happier. Is it because you regard me as a woman, and not as . . ." She paused. "But do you regard me as . . . Veronica?"

He said sharply, "Don't ask me that!"

She pressed him relentlessly. "And if these old charts are of value, and if with their aid you can find your way home, will you keep me?"

He muttered, "You know me. You know how it is. You know how I have been faithful, how I must be faithful. But you'll make out all right . . ."

"Then does it matter where?" she asked. "Couldn't it be here, as well as on your planet?" She went on, softly, "I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't for what you said at first. But I am doing it, and don't try to stop me."



"Veronica!"

She turned from him, saying, "Baron Bligh, let Captain Kemp see the charts. If they are of value to him, you have your Baroness . . ."

The women glared at her with dull hatred.

#### CHAPTER 18

TIME is relative.

Objectively, the voyage from the pirate's lair did not take long. Subjectively it should not have taken long; we had plenty to occupy our time; we had to work hard and continuously to make the necessary modifications to those almost hopelessly out-of-date star charts.

Subjectively it should not have taken long, but it did. We missed Veronica—Old Jim, Dudley and myself. We missed her, and we hated Alan for having let her go, and we hated ourselves for having let Alan barter her for a handful of archaic charts. The atmosphere in the ship was strained and tense, all the more so since the three of us had made it clear to our Captain that we were withdrawing from the enterprise as soon as we grounded at Port Farewell.

The tension eased slightly when, at long last the world of Faraway loomed huge in our viewports. Alan was happy now that he was home, or almost

home, with the bright lights of Port Farewell a luminous blur against the darkness of the night side of the planet, with the familiar voice of Captain Wallis, the Port Master, crackling from the transceiver and telling us to land at will.

We came in on Ehrenhaft Drive, hitting the atmosphere at a shallow angle, the first, few molecules of Faraway's gaseous envelope setting up a thin, high keening as they rushed past and around every irregularity of our hull. We came in, and short blasts from our auxiliary rockets turned us so that we were stern down to the still distant surface.

It was reaction drive then, the gingerly descent down the long column of incandescence, the sort of landing for which the ship had never been designed—but the sort of landing that, with a master hand at the controls, she was quite capable of making . . .

. . . until the propellant pump stripped its blades.

Kemp did not hesitate.

"Take over, Dudley," he snapped. "You're as good a rocket pilot as I am. George! Tell Jim to get the manual pump working. Tell him I'll be right down."

We fell.

How far we fell, I cannot say. All I know is this—the dark globe below us was expanding with terrifying rapidity. Then,

suddenly, the rockets coughed twice, coughed a third time and broke into a full throated roar. That was when old Jim Larsen came into Control. "Alan chased me out!" he complained. "He wants all hands in the safest part of the ship. I left the damn fool in the engineroom, sweating away at the hand pump!"

We fell, but under control. Dudley used rocket power sparingly. His technique was a sound one in the circumstances—the use of maximum braking blast at almost the last moment. It should have worked. It would have worked with new, or almost new rocket motors. But the strain on the already cracked firing chambers was too great and the main venturi gave up just when it should have been our tower of strength, and for the second and last time in her life *Lucky Lady* crashed disastrously.

The emergency organization at Port Farewell is efficient.

I have a faint memory of screaming sirens, of great blades slicing through our shell plating as though it were paper, of willing hands dragging old Jim, Dudley and myself from the wreckage. Rather to my own surprise—and in spite of all attempts to restrain me—I was able to stand up, to stagger towards the crumpled stern. Somebody was asking me, "How many

of a crew have you? Where are the others?"

"Just one more," I told him. "The Captain. In the engine-room."

They got Alan out. He was badly cut and burned, and there were bones broken, but he was conscious. "George," he said faintly, "Veronica . . . Tell Veronica . . ." Then, "Is she here?"

"No."

"Then . . . Ring her. Tell her I'm . . . alive . . ."

They carried him off and somehow forgot about me. I wandered into the administration building, went to the nearest telephone. I didn't need to look up the number. I pressed the correct buttons, waited. The little screen above the instrument remained dark and there was that most desolate of all sounds, the ringing of a telephone bell in an empty house. I checked the number in the book, found that my memory had not been faulty, then tried again, fruitlessly.

I remembered, as one does remember comparatively trivial things in times of crisis, that there was money, Rim Worlds currency, in my pocket. I wandered out of the office to the cab rank. There were a dozen ground cars there and I got into the first one, giving the driver Alan's address.

He was one of those talkative cabbies.

He said, "Seems to have been a crash at the port. I could see the ship coming in. A damn' fool who handles a ship like that isn't fit to be in charge of a kiddy car, let alone a starwagon . . ."

He said, "Did you see the crash, mister?"

He said, "Any idea what ship it was, mister?"

He said, at last, "You're here, mister. And thanks for the scintillating conversation."

I got out, paid him and ran up the short drive to the front door. The house was in darkness. Even so, I rang the bell. Then I hammered on the door. Then I rang the bell again.

I was aware that a woman was looking at me over the low hedge that divided Alan's garden for the neighbouring property.

She asked, "Were you wanting Mrs. Kemp?"

I said, "Yes. Have you any idea where she is? When she'll be back?"

"I've no idea," she told me. "Earth, maybe. Or Caribbea. But she won't be back."

I reached across the hedge and grabbed her shoulder. I think that I must have shaken her. She squealed indignantly, "Keep your hands to yourself, young man!" She looked at me closely in the dim light. "You're not Mr. Kemp. What's it to you where she is?"

"I'm his friend. He was badly hurt in the crash out at the

spaceport. I have to tell his wife . . ."

"She's gone," she told me with gloomy satisfaction. "Weeks ago. There was a big ship in—*Aeriel* was her name. No, not the Shakespearian Lines *Aeriel*—this one was one of the Trans-Galactic Clippers, a cruise. There was this man from the *Aeriel*—one of the passengers. He and Mrs. Kemp seemed to be old friends. Can't say that I altogether blame her; he was tall, goodlooking, pots of money . . ."

"Has she gone?" I yelled.

"Yes, she's gone, as I've been trying to tell you for the last half hour. And don't shout at me, young man!"

The surgeons and the plastic surgeons patched Alan Kemp up very nicely.

But neither the surgeons nor the psychiatrists, for all their fancy jargon, can mend a broken dream.

## CHAPTER 20

SO that was the end of the dream.

*Lucky Lady* was a total loss, worth only her value in scrap. And she was not insured. She had brought us nothing in the way of riches—unless you count experience as riches, and some sorts of experience should be chalked up on the debit side rather than on the credit side.

Rim Runners—who are always short of officers—took us all back with no loss of rank. They did not, however, have Alan's services for long. He made an excellent physical recovery from his injuries but he was accident prone. A few weeks after his return to service he walked under a conveyor belt that he could just as easily have walked around, and a heavy slab of zinc fell from the belt and killed him instantly.

Dudley Hill I run into now and again—he is now Second Mate of *Rimtiger*—and old Jim Larson and I are serving together in *Rimlion*. *Rimlion* is running the Eastern Circuit. She was on Tharn not so long ago, and Jim and I went ashore together to partake of the local brew.

He was in a talkative mood, was old Jim. He was in a philosophical mood and, like most of his cloth, like practically all of those who work with the Mannschenn Drive and are exposed to its time twisting fields, has weird ideas about Space and Time.

"Out on the Rim," he said seriously, "and especially on worlds such as this, that human beings have reached only within the past few decades, the Barrier must be very thin . . ."

"What Barrier?" I asked.

"The Barrier between the alternative time tracks, the divergent world lines . . ."

"Surely you don't believe . . ."

"Why not?" He paused, losing interest in his dimensional theories. "That girl," he told me, pointing with pipestem at a redhead who had just come in, "reminds me of Sally . . ." He caught her eye. She smiled, started to make her way towards our table.

I left him then. I'm not prudish, but the people of Tharn, although humanoid, are not human. So I left him to it and walked slowly back, along the rough dirt road, to the spaceport.

The landing area was the way that it usually is, a pattern of bright lights and deep shadows. Even so, I cannot see how this pattern can have produced the illusion of a peg-top shaped hull, balanced upon its pointed end. It cannot possibly have produced the illusion of two figures, Captain and Captain's lady, walking, arm in arm, up the ramp to the yellow lit circle of the airlock. And the most impossible illusion of all, perhaps, was that of the man who stood there to meet them. I saw his face dimly as I approached, just before the odd scene winked out into nothingness.

It was my own.

*When the dreamer dies, what of the dream?*

THE END