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OUTER SPACE

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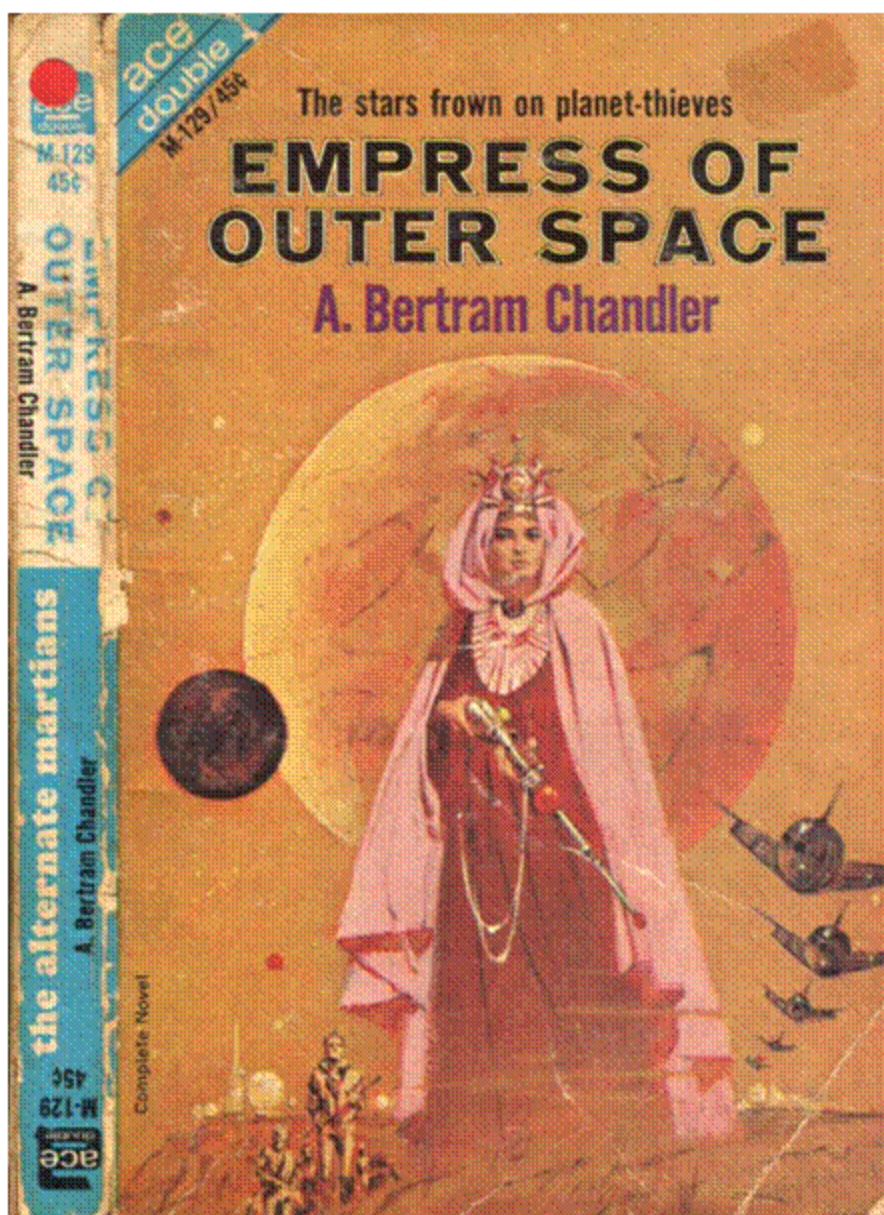
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EMPERESS OF OUTER SPACE

A. Bertram Chandler

Complete Novel





CONSTELLATION OF THE UNKNOWN

The planets of the Empire had decided on the best possible form of government for themselves: a monarchy, for quick decisions; a monarch chosen from the people, for democracy's sake; a female monarch, tall, blonde and beautiful, for dramatic appeal. Her Imperial Highness, the Empress Irene.

So when Captain Mortimer Jones, a little man lusting for power who had set himself up as absolute dictator on an Empire planet, escaped from royal retribution in the Empress's own royal yacht, the Empress decided to follow him across space herself—for the sake of public appeal.

Only, when her ship ran into a band of hostile space pirates and got blown to the galaxy's rim, a ruined hulk in space, then the publicity stunt had turned into something a little bigger, like the very probable takeover of the Empire by the power crazy Mortimer Jones I

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*EMPRESS OF OUTER
SPACE*

by
A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

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EMPRESS OF OUTER SPACE

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*Cover by Jerome Podwil, interior art by Jack
Gaughan.*

Dedication:

To all those excellent storytellers who, as well as
affording us hours of enjoyment, have provided the
inspiration for the Dream Sequence.

THE ALTERNATE MARTIANS

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I

EVERYTHING WAS OVER BUT THE SHOOTINGS.

Trafford, sitting in his tent and moodily sipping a glass of the local brandy, winced at the crash of each volley. Even through the double walls of tough inflated plastic the noise carried well, too well. War, thought Trafford, was a dirty business—and even dirtier was the tidying up after a war. Not that this had been a *real* war. It had been no more than the suppression of a very minor revolt, or mutiny, on one of the very important planets of the Empire.

Technically, any world upon which a Survey Service ship made a landing—and which did not possess the fire power either to destroy such a vessel or to force her to withdraw— was absorbed into the Imperium. Captain Mortimer Jones had made his landing on a hitherto undiscovered planet

whose humanoid inhabitants had yet to undergo the rigors of an industrial revolution. And there Captain Jones, unwisely assuming that he was beyond the reach of the long arm of the Empress, had attempted to found his own peculiar kingdom. Unluckily for him, a few of his officers had been more loyal to their Service than to their Captain and, escaping in one of the ship's boats, had made it back to Earth, there to tell their story.

The Empress had not been amused. Not only had she despatched a punitive expedition without delay; she, herself, had assumed personal command of it. And now, after one fusion bomb and a certain amount of playing around with laser projectors had clearly established the might of Imperial Earth, Captain Jones' officers and men were being executed, one by one, in the full view of the surviving populace, with all the archaic ritual of the stripping of braid and buttons and decorations, the leveled rifles, the rattling discharges and the smoke and the stink of bumed cordite.

POUT encourager les autres . . . thought Trafford.

But Jones was to stand *his* trial on Earth. Jones was to be made an example to his fellow Terrans. Jones had been too ambitious—and so, instead of being kept up with, he had been caught up with. But Trafford found it hard to feel sorry for Jones. In the past few days he had learned a great

deal about the odd theocracy that the Captain had imposed upon the natives of Shaula VI—or, to give the world the name it was called by its inhabitants, Serengor.

Trafford gulped down the last of the rough brandy and decided to make a start on his report. He was not looking forward to it. He was a spaceman, not a policeman. But, although he held his Commander's rank in the Executive Branch of the Service, he had accompanied the punitive expedition as an Intelligence Officer. It so happened that he had served in Jones' ship, the *Starquest*, just prior to the survey voyage on which the landing had been made on Serengor. He knew Jones at least as well as the average second-in-command ever gets to know his Captain. He knew *Starquest's* officers and petty officers and the more outstanding personalities among her ratings. And so it had not been altogether surprising that some genius in *Personnel, Space-going* had decided that Trafford would be ideally qualified to play his part in the interrogation of *Starquest's* people. Naval Intelligence had not been overly enthusiastic, resenting the admission of an outsider into their esoteric branch of the Service, but Naval Intelligence had been overridden.

And so here was Trafford—a little man with close-cropped sandy hair, with gray eyes that were startlingly pale against the deep space-tan of his seamed, rugged face,

and who, even stripped of his black-and-gold uniform, would have looked like what he was, a spaceman—sitting on a folding stool in an igloo of inflated plastic, glowering at the portable typewriter that sat on the folding table, glowering back at him, demanding his attention.

From outside came the crash of yet another volley. Trafford wondered who it was this time. Crandall, the Navigator? Petersen, the Gunner's Mate? Somebody with whom he had shared bottles and swapped stories, or somebody whom he had disliked intensely?

But brooding about it would do nobody any good. Roughing out the initial report would take his mind off what was happening outside. But writing is done in the mind as a preliminary to the physical work of setting the words down on paper, and before Trafford could set a tentative finger to the keyboard he had to marshal his facts and— after all, that was one of the reasons why he was here—his opinions.

To begin with, the story was not an uncommon one—although such cases had been far more common in the days of the First Expansion, before the establishment of powerful, Earth-based naval forces. Jones had come. Jones had seen. And Jones had conquered. Even the comparatively light armament of a Survey Ship had been more than a match for swords and pikes and crossbows.

So far, it was all much of a pattern. Many a semi-piratical tramp master had established a kingdom this way, and now and again (if there had been a supply of human females ready at hand) even a dynasty.

But...

But why, in this day and age, should a high ranking naval officer disregard his oath of allegiance, to say nothing of the tradition of his service?

There were personalities involved. When Trafford had sailed under Jones he had been told nothing by the Captain himself, but there had been the usual fine, flourishing crop of shipboard rumors, some of them obviously based upon fact. It was common knowledge that Jones had been an A.D.C. to the Empress, and in this capacity he had had the run of the Palace. It was rumored that there had been a scandal—very thoroughly hushed up, but a scandal nonetheless. It concerned Jones and the Empress's stand-in, the Lady Eleanor. So Jones had been returned to Deep Space duty, and as Captain of a Survey Ship rather than of a fighting vessel. And Jones, about this time, had turned religious, becoming a member of the Reformed Church of the Atom. Trafford had read some of the pamphlets put out by this organization, and had not been impressed by their attempt to combine over-simplified nuclear physics with Old Testament imagery.

So, in a rough sort of way, it made sense. Sexual frustration, professional failure (the Survey Service appointment was practically a demotion—a spell of duty as A.D.C. was usually the preliminary to promotion to Flag rank), and, as the last unsavory ingredient, a dollop of one of the more hysterical evangelical religions.

That was why Jones, after he had come, seen and conquered, had made his departure from precedent. Explorers in the past had set themselves up as kings, but Captain Jones had become a self-appointed High Priest. Making a great show of the technology at his command he had preached the Gospel, that of Nucleón, the Power God. Nucleón, as prompted by his Chief Minister, hurled lightning bolts around with lethal enthusiasm. The temples of the indigenous gods and goddesses had been destroyed, spectacularly, and their priests and priestesses, together with a large number of still-faithful worshippers, with them.

Even so (Trafford admitted) the short-lived rule of the High Priest Jones had not been all bad. Large scale—and sorely needed—irrigation projects had been initiated, and there had been the beginnings of weather control. Every temple raised to Nucleón was also a power station, so that the god, after due propitiation, had been able to bless his newly conscripted people with light, and heat and—

although this last project had barely gotten under way—rapid and efficient transportation.

But the old adage still held true. All power corrupts—and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Nucleón had soon proven himself to be even more bloodthirsty than his predecessors, and the human sacrifices that he demanded—the incineration of the victims by blinding, crackling electric arcs—had been far more spectacular than the old-fashioned ceremonial garroting of the occasional stubborn heretic.

Then there had been the impressing of the more attractive women—the Serengorese were a handsome people and, in all essential details, human enough—to become handmaidens to the High Priest and the lesser priests. Following upon this had been the wiping out of a few towns and villages, whose men had unwisely and violently objected to the enslavement of their wives and daughters, by the laser projectors of Jones' low-flying *Starquest*.

It could not be denied, thought Trafford, that Jones had been of some service to the world that he had discovered and exploited. But it could not be denied that he had charged heavily, far too heavily, for his services. And now, in a fury of righteous indignation, the Empress was making sure that no other Survey Service officer would feel

tempted to follow the bad example of Captain Mortimer Jones.

There was the crash of another volley, and another.

Trafford tried hard to concentrate on his notes, but found it impossible. Who was it this time? Fordham, the Meteorologist? He had pleaded for Fordham, urged that he be allowed to stay on this planet to continue his work, although stripped of his priestly rank and trappings. But Fordham, he had been told sternly, was a mutineer like all the others. Legally speaking he was, but . . .

Trafford shrugged dejectedly, poured himself another glass of brandy.

Then he set the tumbler down hastily on the folding table. Some of the brown fluid slopped over the rim of the glass, staining the folder in which his notes were clipped. But this was of no importance. What was important was the wailing of sirens and, high and clear over the dismal ululation, the brazen, amplified notes of a bugle call.

Action stations!

What was important was the screaming thunder of a salvo of ground-to-air missiles, answered by screaming thunder that beat down from the heavens, by heavy explosions somewhere not far distant, the blasts of which flattened Traf-ford's tent, knocking him to the ground

among the tangled wreckage of chair and bed and table and typewriter.

He got to his feet somehow, clawing his way up through the shredded plastic. He was dimly conscious that his face and the front of his uniform were wet, thought that he must have been injured, perhaps badly, by one of the flying shards of metal that had demolished the camp. But the moisture seeping through his lips was brandy, not blood.

The bugle was still calling.

Action stations! Action stations!

But I have no action station, Trafford told himself sourly. *Fve no ship. I'm no more than a temporary, acting policeman—and this is far too big a job for an honest cop.* He looked up at the dark sky, then hastily shut his eyes against the glare of the mutual destruction of missile and anti-missile.

He opened his eyes again to see who it was who was talking to him. It was Penfold, one of the correspondents attached to the expedition. "Have you heard, Trafford?" the pressman was demanding excitedly. "Have you heard?"

"Have I heard what?"

"The biggest news since the outbreak of the Seven Days War. Mortimer Jones and the Lady Eleanor have flown

the coop in the Empress's own yacht! Her Imperial Highness is not, if I may coin a phrase, amused."

"She'll get over it," said Trafford—but he spoke too soon.

n

"I ASSURE YOU, Admiral," said the Empress coldly, "that I shall not get over this in a hurry."

Admiral Buring was a brave man. The blaze of rainbow color on the left breast of his uniform was made by the ribbons of real decorations, not mere "good attendance medals." Time and time again he had faced the guns of superior enemy fleets without flinching—but now he flinched before the contemptuous glare of the Empress's eyes. Even so, he fought back.

"I would remind Your Imperial Highness," he murmured, "that I and my own people were not alone to blame. It would seem that a member of the Court is implicated. . . ."

"We have no proof that she is, Admiral. The Lady Eleanor may have been abducted by the man Jones."

"She may have been, Your Imperial Highness. She *may* have been. But the fact remains that a woman, answering to your description, accompanied by five men heavily

muffled in boat cloaks, boarded the yacht. And we all know what happened shortly thereafter."

"Yes, Admiral. We do. Your entire squadron put out of action by the fire from a lightly armed pleasure craft—evidence of a state of unpreparedness that would not be tolerated aboard a third-rate star tramp under the Rim Runners' flag . . ."

Buring flushed angrily. He went on, still in the quiet voice that his officers feared, "We are at peace, Your Imperial Highness. The nearest possibly hostile fleet, that of the Te-rengi—and our truce with them has not been broken—is all of forty light years distant. Had this been an attack from Space by any normal enemy we should have been warned in ample time. Nobody could have foreseen that the guns of Your Imperial Highness's own yacht would be turned against us. Furthermore . . ." His voice rose slightly. "Furthermore, *Wanderer* is not, as you put it, a lightly armed pleasure craft. She is a converted light cruiser, with a few extras added . . ."

"The fact remains," said the Empress, "that your squadron is immobilized. I suppose that by this time your Carlotti technicians have succeeded in raising Earth, but it will be at least a week before any unit of the Grand Fleet is space-borne. I want a ship. Here. And *now*."

An elderly Captain, the purple velvet of the Engineering Branch showing under the gold rank stripes on his epaulets, approached Buring deferentially, whispered something. The Admiral nodded, then turned again to the Empress. There was the hint of an expression of relief on his dark, craggy face. "Your Imperial Highness, the light cruiser *Vindictive* sustained only minor damage. Captain McHenry assures me that she will be spaceworthy within twenty-four hours."

"Good. I am pleased to note, Admiral, that some members of your staff are capable of carrying out their duty. See that *Vindictive* is stored for a voyage of indefinite duration. See that she is fully automated, as I have no intention in putting out in a ship cluttered up with hordes of useless junior officers and ratings."

"But, Your Imperial Highness, I assumed that I should be . . ."

"Then assume again, Admiral. It was *my* yacht that was stolen, thanks to your laxity. So I intend to recover her from the thief."

Buring stiffened. "Your Imperial Highness, I would respectfully point out that *Vindictive* is a unit of the Imperial Navy, and that your own regulations regarding her manning must be observed."

"Admiral Buring, I will remind you that I hold the rank of High Admiral in this same Imperial Navy. And if you dare to tell me that it is only an honorary rank, I will tell you that I, during my period of training for my real rank as Empress, spent several years in Deep Space and hold a perfectly valid Master Astronaut's Certificate."

"Even so," insisted Buring stubbornly, "there should be a serving naval officer in at least titular command."

"Should there be? All right, I'll let you have your way in this small thing." Her cold, blue eyes swept the Headquarters' Tent, came to rest upon the little group of Intelligence

Officers among whom stood Trafford. "That man there. The ginger-headed one . . ."

"Commander Trafford, Your Imperial Highness."

"Yes, Trafford. He's the one who's supposed to have been a boozing pal of Captain Mortimer Jones, isn't he? So he may be of some help in running this same Mortimer Jones down. He'll do."

And Trafford, looking at the tall, imperious figure clad in form-fitting black leather, thought, "No, not me. Please, not me . . ."

Wardroom gossip had taught him all that he ever wished to know about the Empress. He had no desire for a closer acquaintance.

"Commander Trafford!" snapped Buring.

"Sir!" replied the Commander, and, his heels clicking smartly on the polished wooden floor of the tent, advanced to be presented to his Sovereign.

HI

DOWN THE DARK infinities fell the cruiser *Vindictive*, her interstellar drive unit pushed to its safety limits, and beyond. Down the dark dimensions she fell, and the Universe outside her viewports was a nightmare of warped space and eldritch colors, of stars that were spirals of pulsing light, of the gulfs between the stars that were absolute blackness made alive and tangible.

The *Vindictive* was fully automated, and so the seven people who were all the personnel that she was carrying were able to gather together in the control room. Trafford was uneasy. He was too old-fashioned a spaceman ever to place his full trust in automation—but, although he was in titular command, his three rings weighed little in the balance against the Imperial Crown.

Not that the Empress was wearing her crown. She was clad in her favorite form-fitting black, wearing no insignia of rank. But she did not, admitted Trafford, need the tawdry trappings of brass and braid. She was tall, and her

gleaming golden hair fell to her shoulders, lustrous against the smooth, darkly tanned skin of her face and neck. Trafford was still more than a little uneasy in her presence, was still over-awed by her high-powered personality. But he sensed that there was some chink in her armor, some all-to-human frailty. Not that it mattered, or ever would matter. She was the Empress—he was only a humble commander.

By her side sat the Lady Susanna, her Lady-in-Waiting. She was human enough, and made no secret of it. She was dark—although her hair held coppery glints—in contrast to the striking bloneness of her mistress. She was slight—although that, thought Trafford, eyeing her speculatively, could be deceptive—and her face was thin and intelligent, betraying a sense of humor that was lacking in the make-up of the Empress Irene. She would, thought Trafford, be nice to know.

Then there was Dr. Pettigrew, the Empress's personal physician. He was an old man, who carried his years lightly, only his scanty silvery hair betraying his age, and he held something of a privileged position. He could speak to the Empress in a fatherly manner. Trafford decided that his friendship would be worth cultivating.

The others—who, like himself, were in uniform—he already knew.

There was Metzenth, one of the few remaining telepaths in the Imperial Navy. The Carlotti Beacons, which had made electronic radio communication possible over interstellar distances with no time lag, had superseded the psionic radio officers. But the Carlotti Beacons had one grave limitation— they could not read the minds of any aliens encountered by Man during his expansion among the stars. So men like Metzenth were still recruited, still trained, although they were now borne on the strength only of survey ships and of vessels, such as *Vindictive*, whose voyages might carry them to regions beyond the ever expanding human frontier. Metzenth—he was often called the Commissioned Crystal Gazer—looked as though he would be far more at ease in a turban and robes covered with cabalistic symbols than in the neat black and gold of naval uniform. But Trafford, although he didn't especially like the man, respected him. Insofar as his job was concerned, his reputation was an excellent one.

There was Bronheim, Engineer Commander. He, like Trafford, did not trust automation and sat in his chair uneasily, obviously listening intently to the thin, high whine of the Mannschenn Drive, alert for any subtle variation in its almost supersonic song, and, at the same time, keeping an ear cocked to the muted hissings and chucklings of other shipboard machinery. He caught Trafford's eye and

raised a thick, black eyebrow, made a faint gesture of resignation with his broad, hairy hands. A brief, worried smile flickered across his heavy features. Trafford replied with a smile that he hoped was reassuring.

Finally, there was Lieutenant Commander Tallentire, the Gunnery Officer, a slim, supercilious young man who had made it plain, in more than one vessel, that he considered a ship to be only a platform upon which to mount his weapons. This had not endeared him to the Captains under whom he had served—but one and all had been obliged to report on his gunnery in glowing terms. Before his transfer to *Vindictive* he had been Gunnery Officer of *Implacable*, the Admiral's flagship. If there was to be any shooting, thought

Trafford, it would be nice to have Tallentire to do it. And at least, in this wagon, there would be Her Imperial Highness to smack him down to size.

"Gentlemen," said the Empress, breaking the silence, "you may smoke. And, Lady Susanna, if that automatic dispenser is working you may draw each of us a cup of coffee."

"It *is* working, Your Imperial Highness," said Bronheim in a hurt voice.

"Is it, Commander? I gained the impression, on Serengor, that many things in this navy were not in working

order when required. However . . ."

Moving gracefully, the Lady Susanna handed around the containers, serving the Empress first, with a slight curtsy. Then, nursing her own cup in her slender hand, she resumed her seat. The Empress sipped her coffee, put the cup into the recess in the arm rest of her chair, took a long, slender cigarette from the case preferred by Dr. Pettigrew. Seen through the veil of smoke her features looked softer—but it was only an illusory softening. She grinned fleetingly—but it was a hard grin. She said, "So we're on the Up and Out. At last. Commander Trafford, you're supposed to be an Intelligence Officer. What do we do now?"

"Not a *real* Intelligence Officer, Your Imperial Highness."

"After what happened on Serengor, that I can well believe."

Trafford blushed darkly. He said, "Actually, Your Imperial Highness . . ."

"Now we're in Space you can call me ma'am."

"Actually, ma'am, I was only on loan to the Intelligence Branch. I'd served on *Starquest* as second in command, and knew Captain Jones and most of his officers quite well. So it was thought that I'd be well qualified to handle some of the interrogations."

"That's your story, Commander, and you stick to it. All right. You know Jones. If you were Jones, what would you be doing now?"

"A return to Earth," said Trafford slowly, "is out of the question. So is a landing on any planet of the Empire . .

"Go on, Commander. You dazzle me."

"Excuse me, ma'am," mumbled Trafford. "I was thinking out loud."

"So you can think. I was under the impression that that was one of lost arts insofar as my Navy is concerned."

"Irene!" Pettigrew's voice was sharp with reproof.

"I am tried, my good Doctor. I am sorely tried." Even so, when she resumed her questioning of Trafford her voice had almost imperceptibly softened. "Carry on, Commander."

"He's had the taste of power. And—let's face it—he has more fighting power under his feet in your yacht than he had in his own *Starquest*. So, having made his escape, he'll try to find another world upon which he can set himself up as an absolute dictator. For quite a while, perhaps, he will be, as it were, just shopping around . . ."

"And just how," asked the Empress, "does one shop around in Deep Space?"

"There's one way. It's not a very nice way—but the things that he did on Serengor weren't very nice. Piracy is

a means whereby an unscrupulous and ruthless man may, in a relatively short time, gain detailed knowledge of distant worlds without the necessity for exploration. A ship fired upon and seized, her papers gone through with a fine tooth comb . . . I assume that your yacht was fitted with an I.B.M. translator?"

"Of course. Go on."

"Her papers gone through with a fine tooth comb—log books, articles, cargo manifests and the like. Her crew and passengers interrogated, if possible—and don't forget that Mortimer Jones had set up a particularly unpleasant version of the Inquisition on Serengor. And then . . . Your Imperial Highness, you've been a spacewoman. What is the modem version of walking the plank?"

"Being pushed out of the airlock without a spacesuit," she told him quietly.

All seven of them turned to look out through the huge viewports—and Trafford, at least, was acutely conscious that there was only a thin shell of metal and plastic between him and a painful and disfiguring death.

rv

DOWN THE dark dimensions fell the ship, from the sparsely populated spiral arm of the Galaxy in which the Solar System is situated, down to the very heart of the

Milky Way, where the flaring suns are thickly clustered, to regions in which interstellar travel, even before the invention and development of space-time warping devices, had been practicable almost coincidentally with the blasting off of the first clumsy orbital rockets from their home worlds. Down she fell, and down, and the thin, high keening of the Manns-chenn Drive reached an intolerable level, and the taint of overheated metal, of frying lubrication, pervaded all the spaces of the vessel.

Down she fell, and her powerful receivers dragged in the faint whisperings of distress calls, some in languages known to the Empress and her crew, some that had to be processed by the clucking I.B.M. translator before perusal. There was no doubt that Mortimer Jones, as Trafford had suggested, had embarked upon a career of piracy. *Strange ship, opening fire . . . Terran light cruiser, opening fire . . .* And there was one signal, faint and garbled, from a lifeboat transmitter, that told of a big, blonde woman prominent among the attackers. So, thought Trafford, the Lady Eleanor had not only accompanied Mortimer Jones willingly, but was his willing accomplice in his career of crime.

But the distances were too vast, the overhauling too prolonged for the chase to hold, as yet, any elements of excitement. Life aboard the *Vindictive* settled down to an

almost normal routine. Almost normal. Trafford, appointed to the command of a light cruiser—a post almost invariably held by Junior Captains—should have been happy. But he was not. There was a fly—a big, beautiful, yellow-haired fly—in his ointment. Legally speaking, the Commander was in full charge of the ship. In practice he was not. The situation was analogous to that prevailing aboard the flagship of a fleet or squadron. Legally speaking, the Admiral is no more than a passenger aboard the Headquarters vessel, and has no say in her running or handling—but it would be a very bold or very foolish captain or watch officer who told him so. And an Empress piles on more G's than a mere Admiral, especially an Empress who is a fully qualified Master Astronaut. She knew too much, and she made no secret of the fact.

One evening, an hour or so before dinner, Trafford was sitting alone in the wardroom, hoping for company, nursing the small, weak gin that was all that he allowed himself in these circumstances. He was hoping that somebody would come in to keep him company—but these days all of his shipmates seemed to be revolving around the Empress like humble satellites about some resplendent primary.

And then, just as Trafford had resigned himself to his loneliness, Dr. Pettigrew came in. The old physician sank into one of the huge armchairs, allowed Trafford to dial him

a Scotch on the rocks. He accepted the condensation-misted glass gratefully when Trafford brought it to him from the auto-bar, sipped it appreciatively. And then he regarded the Commander keenly over the rim of the tumbler.

He asked, "And are you happy in the Service, Commander?"

Trafford knew that he could talk to this man without the risk of tales being carried back to the Empress Irene. "No," he replied bluntly.

Pettigrew chuckled. "Just the answer that I expected. But you have to make allowances, you know."

"Even though I'm liable to be hanged, drawn and quartered for saying so, I feel that I'm not the only one who should be making allowances. *Noblesse oblige*, and all that."

The doctor said thoughtfully, "Part of the trouble is that very few people—and you're not one of them—have a real appreciation of what being the Empress entails. Look at it this way—we have created a superwoman. In some ways she's more than human. In other ways, however, she's all too human. Tell me, Trafford, just what do you know of the modern machinery of government?"

The Commander took a thoughtful sip from his glass. "Frankly," he admitted, "very little. There's an Empress, to

whom we serving officers swear an oath of allegiance, and this Empress is an absolute monarch. But the monarchy is not, as the monarchies of the past were, hereditary. In theory, at least, any girl child belonging to any family in the Im-perium stands a chance of becoming the next Empress."

"In theory, Trafford. *And* in practice. I've been a member of the Court for many years now. I served the Empress Helga, and after her the Empress Natalie. I hold a permanent seat on the Selection Committee . . ."

"The Talent Scouts," said Trafford.

"Yes. We have been called that. But the real Talent Scouts are the enormous computers into which is fed the mass of data from all the schools, and from every organization having to do with the care and welfare of the young, throughout the Empire. It's a fantastically complex machine that we have set up—but, within its limitations, it works well."

"I suppose that it ensures the continuity of a system of government that is capable of making the quick decisions possible only in what is, to all intents and purposes, a dictatorship. And what happens, may I ask, when the dictator is off on a wild goose chase among the stars, like an overgrown child playing at Space Patrol and Pirates?"

Pettigrew laughed. "In Irene's absence, the Crown Princess Iranda is in charge. But I can see that you haven't

the full picture, Trafford." He paused, took a sip from his drink. "As you know, the human race has experimented with many and various forms of government during its comparatively brief life span in the Universe. And throughout history there have always been two main opposing viewpoints, each with its sincere and convincing propagandists.

On the one hand there is the hankering after democracy, the feeling that each and every citizen should have his way in the governing of the society in which he lives. On the other hand there is the recognition of the fact that only an absolute monarch can make quick, firm decisions—and that is more than ever essential in this day and age of faster-than-light communications.

"Then there is a third point of view—and in its own way it is just as important as the other two. It is that democratic government is so sadly lacking in glamor. In the so-called good old days very few Presidents or Premiers, even of great powers, were able to put on such a good show as the King or Queen of even a small kingdom." He smiled a little smugly. "We, I think, have gotten over that hurdle."

"I think I see what you mean," admitted Trafford.

"Yes. You're probably beginning to get the first glimmerings of it. It boils down to this, my dear Commander. First, the people want democracy, although

they know that it's not very efficient. So we tell them, and truthfully, that any girl child from any family in the Empire may be selected for the finest job in the Universe. And there are consolation prizes, too. There are the doubles who become the Empress's stand-ins, such as the Lady Eleanor.

"Second, the people want an absolute monarchy, which presents at least the illusion of stability. So we give them an absolute monarchy—and a monarch who has been thoroughly trained and who is, both physically and mentally, as near as possible a superwoman.

"Thirdly, the people want glamor. So we give them glamor—a court with all its archaic trappings, and titles, and gorgeous uniforms and all the rest of it. Moreover, we have contrived a regression to the days when the Monarch was the real leader of the people, taking the field in person in time of war. Our present expedition can hardly be classed as warfare—but you can just imagine how everybody on the Home Worlds is waiting for news of the beautiful Empress and of the success of her pursuit of the villainous mutineer and pirate, Captain Jones."

Trafford laughed without much humor. "If anybody is all that interested, Doctor, he can have my job."

The physician got up and went to the auto-bar to obtain another drink. He stood there by the functional metal

cabinet, glass in hand, grinning down at the Commander. "Yes, Trafford. I see your point. But you must make allowances. Even so, it's a sticky situation. Perhaps I should apologize to you. After all, it was I who persuaded the other members of the Selection Committee that the ruler of an Interstellar Empire should have a Deep Space background. As you know, there's still a strong prejudice against female executive officers in the Imperial Navy, and this prejudice extends, too, to the Interstellar Transport Commission. But some of the tramp concerns operating out of the colonial worlds aren't so fussy. Irene served her time in the Dog Star Line out of Procyon VI. She holds a Master's certificate, as you know. And, unluckily for you, she holds the opinion that all naval officers are gilded popinjays—an unfortunate and unforeseeable result of her Merchant Service training."

"Unfortunate—but it shouldn't have been unforeseeable. And her practically taking over the navigation isn't so bad—after all, she *is* a Master Astronaut—but when it comes to assuming full control of the gunnery . . ."

Pettigrew chuckled. "Really, Trafford, it's high time that you got rid of a few of your own prejudices. You know as well as I do that after some rather bad outbreaks of piracy in the Procyon sector the Dog Star ships took to packing

quite a hefty armament. As Irene put it to me, 'Those useless bastards in the Imperial Navy couldn't look after us, so we had to look after ourselves.' "

"At the time," said Trafford stiffly, "we had our hands full with the Sandruk Uprising."

The old doctor resumed his seat. When he looked across at the Commander there was no trace of a smile on his face. He said, "I've been telling you all this for your own good, young man. I know that you, as captain of this ship, are having a rather hard time of it. But Irene is the Empress— and I am a loyal servant of the Empress." He allowed himself to grin briefly. "Being an Empress isn't an easy job, either. But it has compensations. One of them— shared by space captains when there's no superior authority on board—is the right to be unreasonable."

"I suppose you're right," admitted Trafford glumly.

V

THE *Vindictive* followed a scent that grew stronger daily, her trajectory a zigzag as report followed report, as distress signal followed distress signal, as Mortimer Jones put light years between one piracy and the next. It hurt Trafford's pride that the Empress had now taken over the navigation in its entirety. Once when he dared to make a mild complaint, she flared, "In the Dog Star tramps, Commander, we regarded navigation as an art, not as the exact science that you people try to make of it. It's something that you must have the *feel* of, not something that you can leave to a clutter of imaginationless computers!"

So there was little for Trafford to do. With the ship so fully automated, without large numbers of officers, petty officers and ratings to worry about, there were no disciplinary problems. He was little more than a passenger aboard the ship of which he was legally in command.

Automation notwithstanding, the other officers were kept busy enough. Bronheim had his machinery to worry about. Tallentire, the gunnery specialist, had to work hard to bring his weapons to the peak of perfection demanded by the Empress. And Metzenthier, the telepath, was required to keep a continual listening watch for any psionic

signals, intentional or unintentional, that would give information regarding Mortimer Jones' movements.

So it was that Trafford found himself thrown, more and more, into the company of Lady Susanna. It was she who suggested an investigation of the ship's library—a means of diversion that Trafford had not considered—after all, in normal circumstances the captain of a warship engaged upon a chase has no time for recreation. Accompanied by the girl he visited the large compartment abaft the wardroom, in which were stored the numerous spools, and the facilities for viewing.

She gasped in delight and amazement. "Commander, there's a treasure here!"

"What do you mean, Lady Susanna? It's just books, and reels of film."

"Just books, and reels of film," she mimicked. "But what books! Who was Librarian of this ship before we took her over?"

"The Paymaster Commander, of course."

"What sort of man was he?"

"I couldn't say. Just a run-of-the-mill Purser, I suppose."

"He was more than that, Commander Trafford. Judging by this list of titles he must have been an authority on late Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Century thrillers. Here's

Burroughs—all the Tarzan novels and all the Martian novels. And Conan Doyle—the Sherlock Holmes stories. And Dumas—the Three Musketeers, of course. Fleming—the James Bond series. P. C. Wren—the French Foreign Legion novels . . . and then there are the films. James Bond again. And . . . look!" She waved the catalogue under Trafford's nose. "The Wizard of Oz!"

"Sherlock Holmes? James Bond? The Wizard of Oz?" demanded Trafford, puzzled. "Who are, or were, these people?"

"You don't know? You honestly don't know? Really, Commander, I shall have to take your education in hand."

"Then do so," said Trafford, amused. Then, half to himself, "It will help to pass the time."

And so, they set up the film projector. Spellbound, he sat watching the make-believe world into which Dorothy was carried by the Kansas tornado, saw her walk the yellow brick road and the colorful streets of the Emerald City, stood with her and the Strawman and the Tinman and the Cowardly Lion against the forces of the Wicked Witch of the West.

When it was over he felt let down, acutely conscious of his drab surroundings of gray enameled metal; like the heroine of the film, he had suffered the shock of abrupt

transition from a world of glorious color to one of very ordinary black-and-white.

"And what did you make of it?" asked Susanna.

"I liked it," he said simply. "Oh, it was just a dream. I know that. But the storytellers in those days *could* dream, and dream well. I'm assuming, of course, that this was a fair sample."

"It was. Well watch it again some time. But there are all the others."

Yes, there were all the others. But the books, Trafford decided at last, were the best.

He marveled at Burroughs' conception of a Mars that never could have been, never could be—and while he was reading of the heroic deeds of John Carter the magic took hold of him and it was real, all real—the twin moons hurtling high over the arid sea beds of Barsoom, the swordsmen locked in combat on the heeling decks of the flying ships, the Green Martians on their six-legged thoats in thunderous charge across the lichenous plain.

And there was Fleming—whose hero, like Trafford himself, held the rank of Commander in Naval Intelligence. Trafford envied the mythical James Bond. Bond's women were not unapproachable super-beings (but what would Bond have made of, or done with, the Empress Irene?) and Bond never seemed to be in a situation, however perilous,

in which excellent food and the wherewithal to wash it down were unavailable.

He was sitting in the wardroom, quietly reading, wishing that he could have some of the caviar and champagne that

Bond was enjoying, when the alarm bells sounded. Over the metallic shrilling sounded the calm voice of the Empress Irene. "Action stations! All hands, action stations!"

Trafford did not waste time switching off the portable viewer. He was out of his chair as though it had been fitted with an ejection device, was running through alleyways and up ramps to the Control Room. When he got there he found that the others were there before him, were already seated in acceleration chairs. The Empress was in the Captain's seat so Trafford, glowering, had to take one of the others. As he did so he noticed that the armored shields were already over the viewports, and that the indicator lights on the panel before Tallentire showed that the ship's armament was in a state of readiness.

The Empress Irene spoke, peering into into the screen set before her, "According to the Mass Proximity Indicator it's either one impossibly big ship, or a fleet of smaller ones. . . . Any indications on your screen, Commander Tallentire?"

"No, ma'am. Until they achieve temporal synchronization the radar won't pick them up."

"I know that. Your missiles and laser projectors?"

"Ready, ma'am."

"Susanna—communications?"

"Still hunting up and down the wavebands, ma'am. But there'll be no joy until they synchronize."

"I doubt if there'll be any joy then, girl. But go on hunting."

"A flicker!" cried Tallentire. "Yes. There it is again. It's a fleet, all right. Twenty ships at least."

"Then it can't be Mortimer Jones. All right, Commander Bronheim. Let them synchronize."

"Is this wise?" asked Trafford.

She glanced at him contemptuously. "Of course it's wise.

We're well enough known, and those who don't like us fear us. Synchronize!"

"Ma'am," whispered Metzenthler urgently. "Your Imperial Highness!"

"Yes, Commander?"

"I don't think that those people, whoever they are, have any trained telepaths among their communications personnel. But I sense, and strongly, a burning, righteous hostility rather than either respect or fear."

Trafford could see the Empress's face reflected in the dark surface of the screen into which she was looking. It was, he thought, no longer the face of a woman, a human woman. It was the face of some female supernatural being out of Earth's mythology—not a true goddess, but one with godlike powers at her command. He heard her order harshly, "Stand by all weapons!"

The Commander was about to protest, but Pettigrew spoke first. His face, as he looked at the Empress, was almost as hard as her own—but it was somehow, a more human hardness. "All right, *ma'am*," he said coldly. "But only on the understanding that there's no shooting first and asking questions afterwards."

"That is the way to win a battle," she stated.

"That is the way to start an unnecessary battle. Meanwhile, Commander Bronheim, please to continue to avoid their attempts at synchronization."

The engineer looked from the Empress to her physician, and then to Trafford, his gaze appealing. "Do as the doctor says, Commander," Trafford told him.

"Mutiny!" whispered the Empress viciously.

"No, Your Imperial Highness. As you well know, the Selection Committee, even after it has carried out the duty of selection, has certain powers of veto. Also, any member of the committee, should no other members be present at a

time of emergency, can appoint temporary members to aid him in making a decision. Gentlemen of the Imperial Navy, and Lady Susanna, I so appoint you."

The Empress Irene shrugged. She said, "This sort of thing could never happen aboard even the humblest tramp of the Dog Star Line."

"Perhaps not, ma'am," admitted Pettigrew. "But I would point out that you are not the captain of this ship."

The Empress shrugged again. "All right. Set up your committee. But you may rest assured that I shall not forget this."

VI

This couldn't happen aboard a Dog Star Line tramp, thought Trafford, and it certainly shouldn't happen aboard a warship of the Imperial Navy. It shouldn't happen, but it is happening. He looked around him. Bronheim was hunched over his Mannschenn Drive controls, intently watching the wavering traces of green, pallid light on the oscilloscopes. Tallentire, wearing a deceptive air of nonchalance, was relaxing in his chair—but his long, slender hands were ready to pounce on his firing panel. The Lady Susanna was intently adjusting the dials of the main transceiver. Metzenthner was sitting stiffly erect, staring

into vacancy. And Pettigrew was looking calmly at the Empress, who glowered back at him.

"Well?" she snarled. "Let's hear from this famous committee."

"I think that Doctor Pettigrew is right, ma'am," volunteered Susanna.

"No," snapped Tallentire. "No. Synchronize and shoot it out—as long as we get in the first shot!"

"I'm no spaceman, ma'am," contributed Pettigrew, "but I've been knocking around this Galaxy for a long, long time.

I suggest that we avoid all attempts at synchronization and run.

"As you say, Doctor, you're no spaceman. Commander Bronheim, what's your opinion?"

"I'm just the engineer, ma'am. I carry out the orders of Control. And *you*, ma'am, are Control."

"Commander Metzenthier?"

"They hate us, ma'am. And they outnumber us. I think we should run."

"Commander Trafford casts the deciding vote," said Petti-grew.

"All right," said Trafford. "I cast it. I recommend that we get the hell out of here before the shooting starts. We're outnumbered, and Metzenthier assures us that the people in those ships hate us. Furthermore, any senseless skirmish

will, putting it mildly, distract us from our real purpose, the pursuit and capture of Mortimer Jones."

"I was forgetting that. . ." admitted the Empress.

And then, subtly, yet unmistakably, the whining song of the Mannschenn Drive unit altered, deepening in pitch, wavering uncertainly; the hostile fleet had at last succeeded in its attempts at synchronization and *Vindictive's* interstellar drive was subject to the powerful field of the strangers' massed apparatus.

Then the small vision screen used for intership communication came to life. There was a flicker of light and color that brightened, that coalesced. The image, faint and fuzzy at first, clarified and deepened. Then, on the screen, there was the picture of the interior of a control room not dissimilar to their own. Seated before a great bank of instruments was a being who, notwithstanding his green skin, his pointed ears and the little horns that supported his ornate helmet, was undeniably humanoid—and, judging by the weight of gleaming metal with which he was bedecked, a humanoid of no little consequence. His wide mouth opened, displaying pointed yellow teeth, and as he spoke his voice came booming out of the speaker below the screen. His words were in heavily accented English.

"Calling spaceship *Wanderer*. Calling Terran spaceship *Wanderer*. Heave to at once for examination!"

"Examination!" growled the Empress. "Those are Thalami Ships, and the Thalami are no better than pirates themselves. I remember when I was Mate of the *Schnauzer*. . . ."

"They think that we're the *Wanderer*, ma'am," said the Lady Susanna.

"They'll soon find out that we aren't. Go on, girl. What are you waiting for?"

Susanna flipped a switch, and *Vindictive* was now transmitting as well as receiving.

"Her Imperial Highness's light cruiser *Vindictive*," announced the Empress. "And this is Her Imperial Highness speaking. I demand free passage."

The green-skinned man laughed unpleasantly. "Yes, Your Imperial Highness. Of course, Your Imperial Highness. And would Your Imperial Highness deign to accept a salute of forty-one guns, all aimed at Your Imperial Highness's control room, if your Imperial Highness does not heave to, as ordered?"

"The Empress does not take orders from a Thalami pirate."

"The Empress mightn't—but I recognize you from the description broadcast by the *Thanukin*, you tow-haired trollop." Again he laughed. "The Empress Irene, aboard the light cruiser *Vindictive*! A brassy blonde aboard the pirate

ship *Wanderer*, with the real name painted out and a false name painted in! Heave to, damn you! Heave to, you bloodthirsty bitch!"

The Empress shouted, "Did you hear what he called me? Open fire, Tallentire! We blast our way through!"

"No!" cried Trafford and Pettigrew simultaneously, but they were too late. The gunnery officer's slim hands fell to his console and the ship shuddered as all her weapons were discharged. But itchy trigger fingers were not the monopoly of *Vindictive's* crew. In the narrowing gulf of Space between the single ship and the squadron, missile met counter-missile, and the big screen blazed with hellish light. Machinery whined and growled as the automatic reloaders fed the rockets into the projectors, as those same projectors fired and fired again, striving to protect the cruiser from the deadly swarm that was homing upon her lightly armored hull. There could be only one outcome to the action; *Vindictive* was outnumbered, must soon be battered into incandescent fragments by the vastly superior fire power.

The Mannschenn Drive unit whined frantically as Bronheim strove to break out of synchronization, and a sudden, vicious surge of acceleration threw Trafford to the unyielding deck. He realized dimly that the ship was rocking under repeated impacts, heard the hiss and crackle

of arching electricity as instruments were jolted loose from their seatings.

And then he, together with the ship and his companions, was falling through a darkness more intense than any that he had ever seen through the unscreened viewports.

VII

WHEN TRAFFORD regained consciousness he realized that he was strapped in his acceleration chair, his weight pressing down oddly on one padded arm. He opened his eyes, hoping to rid himself of the disturbing sensation of disorientation—and that made matters worse. *Down* was at the angle made by the curved inner plating of the hull and the control room deck, and *up* was in a more or less opposite direction, somewhere on the inner surface of the dome that housed the control room but not, as it should have been, at the apex. Only a few lights were feebly burning—and more feeble still was the faint radiance of the sparse stars that glimmered through the now-unshielded viewports, stars undistorted by the Space-Time twisting field of the Mannschenn Drive, undistorted but, nonetheless, in crazy motion, in apparent wild gyration around the crippled hulk.

But it was not the stars, the Commander knew, that were in motion; it was the ship herself, spinning about a short axis, the resultant centrifugal force producing an odd, off-center substitute for gravity. And then, with shocking suddenness, a great sun blazed through one of the ports, brightly illuminating the wrecked control room, and was gone again. In the brief seconds of full "daylight" Trafford saw that the Empress was still seated in her chair and that the others, their bodies angled to counteract the apparent list of the deck, were standing about her. They were all spacesuited, although they had opened their helmet visors. Obviously they had just completed an inspection and were making their reports.

The Empress was speaking. "I suppose that we're lucky to have come out the engagement alive. This flimsy crate couldn't take the punishment. Meanwhile, the Mass Converter's smashed . . ."

"But not irreparable, ma'am," put in Bronheim.

"And the Inertial Drive unit no more than useless wreckage," she went on. "And the Mannschenn Drive . . ." She smiled bleakly. "But we still have the emergency rockets." The strange sun shone again through the viewports and the Empress, who was looking in Trafford's direction, saw that he had regained consciousness. "So you're with us again, Commander. Welcome aboard—

although after the mess that the Thalami made of your ship, there's not much left to welcome you aboard to."

Tour own trigger-happiness contributed to the mess," snapped Trafford, adding, as a reluctant afterthought, "ma'am."

"Please!" Pettigrew's voice held the crack of authority. "This is no time for recriminations."

"Perhaps it isn't," admitted the Empress reluctantly, but glowering at the Commander. She turned to her Lady-in-Waiting. "Get me my spacesuit, Susanna, and Commander Bronheim and I will start work on the Converter. The most urgent need is power—the emergency batteries have only a limited life. And then we shall have to jury-rig plumbing from the water tanks to the firing chambers of the rockets . . ." As she spoke, she was struggling into the cumbersome armor that Susanna was holding open for her. "You stay here, girl. Maintain a listening watch but do not utter so much as a squeak yourself. I'm afraid that everybody will have identified us with Mortimer Jones and his pirates in my *Wanderer*, and every being's hand will be turned against us. . . ."

"If you had let the Thalami board to identify us . . ." began Trafford.

"Shut up, you!"

"But we should be safe enough from attack, ma'am," said Tallentire respectfully. "The engagement took place in the Thalami Sector, a mere stone's throw from the Galactic Center. And the Mannschenn Drive and Inertial Drive units, before they went completely out of kilter and shook themselves to pieces, flung us out to the furthest Rim."

"And not to a colonized sector, unluckily," said the Empress. "I never thought that I'd be glad to see Lorn or Faraway again—but now they, with their ship repair facilities, would seem like veritable paradises. . . ." She turned again to Susanna. "But do as I say, girl. Just listen. That brassbound Admiral could have followed us, although at a more leisurely pace. The Thalami are no fools in the field of electronics, and they have detectors whose performance is little short of miraculous." Then, to the engineer, "Are you ready, Commander Bronheim?"

"Not so fast," growled Trafford. "I'm responsible for this ship. Or had you forgotten? Ma'am."

"No, Commander. I hadn't forgotten. But my good Dr. Pettigrew urges that you be immobilized for several hours, at least. So I suggest that you just keep out of the way."

"Don't move any more than you have to," advised Pettigrew. "You're badly bruised and shaken up, and there're a few yards of tape around your rib cage. There's nothing broken, but a rest will do you good. And don't

forget that Her Imperial Highness probably has more experience in carrying out repairs in Deep Space, with a minimum of personnel, than you have."

I suppose you're right, thought Trafford. "I suppose you're right," he admitted grudgingly.

And then he watched the Empress and her party, helmet visors now shut, vanish through the airlock diaphragm into the body of the stricken ship.

Susanna removed the gloves of her suit, then busied herself with the controls of the transceiver. Nothing came through the speaker but the hiss and crackle of interstellar static. Her face intent, she hunted up and down the wavebands. She muttered, "Of all the useless jobs . . ."

"If a mere commoner, a non-member of the Court, is permitted to ask a question," said Trafford sardonically, "just what, or whom, are you listening for?"

"Anything or anybody," she snapped. Then, in a softer voice, "That star astern of us—although we seem to be falling towards it—that sun has a family of planets. They may be inhabited. If they are inhabited, one or more of them may run to an industrial civilization. In which case—unless the locals unlimber their artillery to blow us out of their sky—we may be able to get this scow of yours repaired properly. Provided, of course, that we can make a

landing or throw ourselves into a stable orbit about one of the worlds." "What star is it?"

"Don't ask me. I'm only the cabin girl. Nobody ever tells me anything." She turned in her chair, regarded Trafford with a quizzical lift of her fine eyebrows. "But you're a full Commander, Imperial Navy. Suppose *you* tell *me* something."

Trafford grinned in reply. "I missed the conference. But I've worked out to my own satisfaction—if to nobody else's — what's happened."

"Which is?"

"Well I hardly need tell you that we were flung from the Center clear to the Rim. Much of the Rim is still unexplored—but this much we do know; there are far too many antimatter systems in this neck of the woods for comfort. But I don't think that this planetary system into which we've been dumped is anti-matter."

"Why not?"

"Because, Lady Susanna, Space is not empty—although one hydrogen atom to a cubic meter is near enough to a hard vacuum for all practical intents and purposes, as long as that atom is normal matter."

"And if it's not?"

"If we were falling through anti-matter Space, there'd be a continuous fireworks display all over the shell plating,

all over the surface of the viewports. Every time that an atom of anti-matter came into contact with an atom of normal matter there'd be a coruscation of liberated energy. Oh, it's not too dangerous, as long as you stay in Space—but if you attempt to make a landing, to come in through an atmosphere, then ...” He flung up his hands in an expressive gesture, winced at the sharp pain in his badly bruised chest.

”So we haven't got that to worry about, Commander. But this is your ship. You know what makes her tick—or what made her tick. Just what *did* happen? Could you put me into the picture?”

”I thought that you were an experienced spacewoman, Lady Susanna.”

”I've made quite a few voyages in the Empress's yacht, but you must have realized that she's not the sort of person who likes answering silly questions. When I was aboard the *Wanderer*, I was allowed to play with the communications—and apart from that I had to keep from underfoot.”

”I can imagine it.” He paused. ”Well, to begin with, this vessel had two systems of propulsion—the Inertial Drive, which, essentially, boils down to using the power derived from the conversion of matter into energy for lifting ourselves by our bootstraps, and the Mannschenn Drive. This latter, of course, by means of the temporal precession

field that it propagated, enabled us in practice, if not in theory, to exceed the speed of light. Now all that we have left is the emergency rocket drive." He paused. "You're an expert on Twentieth Century adventure stories, so you'll be able to appreciate this analogy. The situation is similar to the one that existed in the early days of mechanically propelled ships on Earth's seas. There were the engines—but, just in case the coal ran out or the screw propeller fell off, there was also the suit of sails."

"I see. But why is the Empress rigging plumbing from the water tanks to the rocket firing chambers? Surely there is enough power in the Matter Converter to drive a fair-sized planet into a new orbit."

"There is. But the trouble with rockets is that you must have reaction mass. There have been various ion rockets and the like, the so-called plasma drives, and they've worked well enough over long distances and long periods of time. But such a drive would be quite useless in our present circumstances. We must have something that can throw out tons of mass in microseconds, something with real brute strength. We must *push* ourselves away from that sun into which we are falling, and *push* ourselves towards what seems to be the most suitable planet, and then *push* against it so that we can make **a** soft landing. With no braking rockets we'd come down like a blazing meteor."

"I see," she said. And then, Thank you."

"We've **a** chance," Trafford told her. "A good chance."

"A very good chance," she agreed. "If the Empress can't pull us out of this mess, nobody can."

The Empress got us into it, thought Trafford, but said nothing.

VIII

AND THEN, for Trafford, time dragged, although it could not have done so for the others, who were working with increasing urgency. If they failed to have the emergency rocket drive ready in time then, inevitably, *Vindictive* would fall into the sun, into the blazing orb whose observed diameter was now increasing appreciably with every passing minute. This was his ship, he knew, and he should have been in charge of repairs—but Pettigrew insisted that he should take things easy until fully recovered. Furthermore, he knew that should he join the working party there would be a clash of personalities between himself and the Empress, and the consequent delay to the job in hand might well prove fatal.

At intervals the Empress and her companions would trudge wearily into the control room, there to bolt down the meal that the Lady Susanna had prepared for them. Now and again one of them would collapse onto an acceleration

couch to sleep like a dead man, but the~Empress Irene was never among their number. She was driving the others, but driving herself even harder. Trafford realized then that the Committee of which Pettigrew was a member had indeed succeeded in producing a superwoman. He respected her, admired her, even. But he still didn't like her.

And then the Lady Susanna was called upon to bear **a** hand and the Commander was left alone, to maintain the listening watch and to carry out what simple navigational duties were required. And so he sat there, struggling to stay awake, hearing only the hiss and crackle of interstellar static that was the voice of giant suns and of nascent hydrogen atoms, jerking to full awareness when, every now and again, some freak of reception shaped the incoherent signals into the semblance of Morse or some similar but alien code.

He contented himself with getting the closed circuit TV into operation, and with it he was able to peer into compartment after holed compartment, watching the spacesuited figures as they worked, at times illuminated by relatively dim emergency lights, at other times by brief, glaring sunlight, at other times by the fitful flare of welding torches. Then, belatedly, he realized that he was consuming precious power from the already depleted batteries and, guiltily, desisted.

It was when the main lights in the control room sprang into startling life that he knew that the repairs to the Mass Converter had been completed, and that with the controlled transmutation of matter into energy the ship was no longer so helpless as she had been—but still, nonetheless, little more than a derelict.

Hours passed—and then, for the last time, the Empress and her shipmates returned to the control room. With slow, fumbling hands the woman removed her helmet, clumsily dropped the transparent sphere to the deck. There were lines of strain and exhaustion on her smudged face, blue shadows under her eyes. She stood there, swaying a little, fumbling with her gloves. She got them off at last, and then Susanna, who had removed her own gloves, helped her mistress to get out of her armor.

"Commander Trafford!" said the Empress Irene, and there was more than a mere hint of the old snap and crackle of authority in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I have not been able to devote any time to navigational matters. How much time have we?"

"According to my calculations, ma'am, we should be able to commence deceleration in ..." he looked at the clock ". . . in exactly five hours, forty-three minutes and ten

seconds from now. That is, if the emergency rockets are working."

"Of course they're working. All right. We get cleaned up, we have a hot drink, and then we sleep. Susanna, will you prod the auto-chef into producing a bowl of soup for each of us?"

As she spoke she was loosening the fastenings of her plain, black leather uniform and walking towards the toilet cubicle that occupied a corner of the control room. Trafford thought, *But there's no water on the shower. I'd better warn her. . . .*

Metzenthier said, "You'd better not, Commander. Her Imperial Highness insisted that we get the toilet facilities back into full working order before we knocked off."

Trafford grunted in reply. He was grateful for the warning, but resented the fact that the telepath had pried into his mind, however briefly. He heard the door to the shower cubicle shut, heard the hiss of water falling under pressure.

When the Empress Irene came out of the cubicle, she was wearing one of the light robes that were kept in a locker there. Her blonde hair was gleaming with dampness and tied back in a ponytail. She was barefooted. She looked very young—and she looked, thought Trafford, for the first time, like a woman, like a *real* woman. She accepted the

bowl of steaming soup that Susanna had produced from the little auto-chef that was part of the control room's emergency equipment, sipped it gratefully while the girl, with a few deft touches, transformed an acceleration chair into a couch. She sank on to the makeshift but comfortable bed and then, with her hot drink only half finished, went out like a light.

Susanna was next to use the shower, and then she was soon asleep. The officers stood back to allow Trafford third turn at the toilet facilities, but he refused, saying that they had been working while he had not. Finally, when the control room resembled a dormitory, he had his own shower, leaving the door open so that he would be aware if any message did, after all, come through the speaker of the transceiver. He washed out his uniform, hung it to dry with the others' in the drying room. Then he took the last of the robes —black, with a military cut, it was itself almost a uniform— from the locker, put it on and returned to his chair. He felt sleepy, so obtained a large mug of black coffee from the dispenser, used it to wash down one of the tablets that were known in the Service as "corps revivers."

And then, until it was time for the others to be awakened, he amused himself by working out all the details of the approach orbit to the third planet of the unknown sun.

IX

TRAFFORD WAS once again in uniform—a delightfully clean and fresh-feeling uniform—when he called the others. He awakened the Lady Susanna first so that she could call the

Empress, made sure that there was an ample supply of black coffee for all hands. And then, with a minimum of fuss and bother and with surprisingly little embarrassment, everybody was properly attired and at his station, Trafford himself in his rightful place in the Captain's chair.

It was then that the atmosphere of easy comradeship was abruptly dispelled. Standing over him was the Empress, looking down at him with cold distaste. She said, "If you don't mind, Commander . . ."

"If I don't mind what, ma'am?"

"If you don't mind letting me take my seat at the controls. I am landing this ship."

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. According to Imperial Navy Regulations an emergency landing is to be carried out by the Captain, unless he orders otherwise."

"Then order otherwise, Commander Trafford."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but . . ."

"Irene!" It was Dr. Pettigrew, his voice authoritative, the voice of the powerful Committee of which he was a

member. "Have you ever made an emergency landing under rocket power only?"

"Yes. When I was Mate of the old *Boxer*."

The physician persisted. "But did *you* make the landing?"

"No," she admitted. "Captain Dennison was at the controls. But I was ready to take over."

"Thank you, ma'am. And you, Commander Trafford?"

"Yes. When I was Captain—Lieutenant Commander, as a matter of fact—of *Thetis*, after the Battle of Lesseran."

"A *T Class corvette," sneered the Empress. "No more than a pinnacle with a couple of laser projectors tack-welded onto it."

"But you made the landing, Commander," said Pettigrew. He turned to the Empress Irene. "Ma'am, the Lady Susanna and these gentlemen have already been co-opted as emergency members of the Committee. Do you wish me to take a vote?"

"Don't bother," she told him coldly. "What with Imperial Navy Regulations and your precious Committee this ship is so festooned with red tape that it's a wonder that she functions at all. But when I get back to Earth, there'll be some changes made. . . ." She walked stiffly to one of the vacant chairs, snarling, "Carry on. Commander."

"Aye, aye, ma'am!" replied Trafford.

He settled down into the resilient padding of the chair, buckled the belt across his midriff. He studied the screens and the dials, before him, made his decisions—although, in actuality, he was merely re-affirming the decisions he had made while the others were sleeping. He watched the sweep-second of the chronometer, and then, as his fingers played briefly over the keyboard, steering rockets belched incandescence as the spin of the ship was killed. He could not hear the blasts but he could feel them as the vibration was transmitted through the structure of the vessel and then through the framework of his seat.

Now that there was no longer centrifugal force to act as a substitute for gravity he was weightless. The ship was falling free. Instead of the pressure of the padded seat on his buttocks he could feel the slight tug of the restraining straps as they held him in his chair, preventing him from drifting aimlessly about the control room. But the sensation did not worry him. It was all part and parcel of the series of maneuvers upon which he was engaged.

Outside the viewports the few, faint stars were steady—and then they started to drift slowly from port to starboard, and Trafford felt a brief, off-center accession of weight. Again he used the steering rockets, and again he felt the vibration as they were brought into play.

On the viewscreens which depicted Space as seen from directly astern, the image of the sun swam into sight, but its illumination was filtered, was robbed of its eye-searing brilliance. It swam into sight and then sagged out of view, and was replaced by a bright crescent. Again the steering jets, and the crescent hung there, centered in the screen.

Trafford snapped, "All hands! Stand by for deceleration!"

The renewed vibration of the rockets was more powerful, and this time it was not immediately cut off. There was weight again—blessed, normal, up-and-down weight—as the ship began her controlled fall towards the world that was still no more than a distant new moon, but that would soon reveal (he hoped) seas and continents, mountains and rivers, and perhaps the smoking chimneys of an industrial civilization by whose technicians *Vindictive* could once again be made spaceworthy.

Days had passed, and the crippled ship was still hanging in orbit about the third planet. There were seas and archipelagoes and continents, and mountains and rivers. There was vegetation. But there were no cities.

The spectroscopic analysis of the atmosphere was favorable. It seemed that the planet possessed an atmosphere very similar to that of Earth. There was oxygen, and there was nitrogen, and carbon dioxide and

water vapor in the right proportions. So far as could be determined from Space there were no noxious vapours. In this, their first choice for a landing, they had been fortunate. There were so many worlds upon which the life-sustaining element of the atmosphere was either fluorine or chlorine.

"I'm afraid, ma'am," said Trafford, who had been taking his turn at the big mounted telescope, "that there seem to be no indications of intelligent life. But," he added tactfully, "your experience is wider than mine. What is the possibility of a civilization of marine creatures, beings analagous to Earth's porpoises?"

"There are such creatures throughout the Galaxy," she said. "But such sea people, no matter how intelligent, could do little to help us."

"I suppose not," he admitted. "After all, the history of Man is the history of the fire-making, tool-using animal, and if the very nature of your environment precludes the use of fire . . ." He shrugged.

"So what do we do?" asked Pettigrew. "Tush on to one of the other worlds of this planetary system, or set course for another sun?"

"And what do we use for reaction mass?" countered Trafford. "We've already blown away most of the reserve water. And, in any case, with our Mannschenn Drive unit

still on the blink, an interstellar voyage would be quite impossible. We should all be dead of old age before the ship had covered one tenth of the distance."

"You're forgetting Relativity," the Empress reminded him. "If we can build up to a speed barely less than that of light . . . then, subjectively, we shall all of us age only months."

"True, ma'am," admitted Trafford. "True. But don't forget that the rest of the Universe will not be keeping time with our retarded clock. When we finally do get to some place it might be to find that Mortimer Jones, long since, has made himself the ruler of the Galaxy. . . . After all, with Your Imperial Highness safely out of the way he may be able to pass off your double and stand-in, the Lady Eleanor, as Empress. . . ."

There was silence for a minute or so, and then, "Civilization or no civilization," snapped the Empress Irene, "we make a landing. If the worst comes to the worst there is ample reaction mass for our rocket drive in those seas. We can convert quite a great deal of the waste space in this wagon into water storage tanks." She paused. "And, in any case, as soon as we set foot on the surface we turn geologists." Then, to the Psionic Radio Officer, "Commander Metzenthner, is dowsing among your talents?"

"It is a very common talent, ma'am, but to be able to dowse for specific minerals requires training."

"I know that. Have you been trained?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Metzenthler, his voice pained.

"That's all." She addressed Trafford. "Well, that's all fixed. We must prospect for useful metals—iron, copper, titanium and, of course, the radioactives. We shall mine and smelt. We have ample power, and there is automatic equipment that can be cannibalized for the manufacture of crude, but effective enough, robots. I know that we haven't the facilities of a Naval Base at our disposal, but I don't think that it is beyond our capabilities to reconstruct and calibrate a Mann-schenn Drive unit, or even to build an inertial drive unit from raw materials. After all, Commander, some of us are used to operating on a shoestring."

While Trafford was pondering the advisability of a reply to the effect that the Dog Star Line was noted for its parsimony, the Lady Susanna broke in. "I wonder," she murmured, "what James Bond would have done if he'd ever been cast away on an uninhabited planet?"

"Who *is* James Bond?" demanded the Empress.

"He was before our time, ma'am," replied the girl, adding, almost inaudibly, "unluckily."

"Perhaps John Carter would be better," suggested Trafford.

"Perhaps he would," agreed Susanna. "But he and Commander Bond aren't here, and we are, and we just have to make the best of it."

X

AND NOW, seated at the controls, Trafford was bringing the ship to a landing on the unknown planet. Intently he watched his own console, and heard the reports of his officers, delivered in monotones. *Altitude—decreasing steadily. Skin temperature—rising fast. Reaction mass—exhausting.* At this early stage of the game his mind rejected the actual readings; soon enough he would have to become really concerned about kilometers and the decimals thereof, about degrees Celsius, about the tonnage of water remaining in the tanks. Already the first tenuous wisps of atmosphere were streaming up and around the hull, were screaming around projections, every least rivet head contributing its own tiny, eldritch screech. With a clang, audible above even the strident roar of the rockets, the armored shutters came up over the viewports. With a normal landing, in normal circumstances, this would not have been necessary. But this was not a normal landing.

The ship continued its controlled fall, a descent that was braked both by the thickening atmosphere and by the

down-stabbing rocket exhausts.

"A cross wind," announced the Empress as quietly as possible. "I suggest that you correct for lateral drift, Commander."

"Thank you," acknowledged Trafford. "Correcting." The ship shuddered as the steering jets flared and thrust briefly.

The Commander, his fingers sensitive on the familiar controls ("touch-typing," as it was called, was one of his qualifications), looked up to the screen. He could make out details now. He could see the long, long shadows cast by the rising sun. He recalled his last tour of duty in the Survey Service and how it had been drummed into him that this was the best time of day for landing on an unknown world—the level rays of sunlight threw every irregularity of terrain into sharp relief and, too, explorers would enjoy a full spell of daylight for settling in.

Trafford decided to make for the wide beach that rimmed the bay—and changed his mind. Sand could be soft and treacherous, and he did not yet know what tidal influences swayed the seas of this world. There was no satellite, but the gravitational field of the sun would be sufficient to cause periodic fluctuations of water level. But inshore there was a great plain, a roughly circular area set between sea and hills and what looked like a forest. It was on a spot towards the western border of this plain that he

set his cross-hairs— and from which they were again drifting..

With a muttered curse he brought his steering jets into play once more. He was reasonably sure that the reaction mass would last out, but he could not afford to be extravagant.

The ground was close now, an expanse of pallid green. *Could it be swamp? Or the surface of a wide lake, covered with weed and algae?* As though in answer to his unspoken question he heard Tallentire report, in a bored voice, "Solid surface, one kilometer. Point nine . . . point eight . . ." The screaming roar of the rockets rose in intensity, and above it the Gunnery Officer's clear, calm tones were still audible. "Point seven . . . point six-five . . . point six . . ."

The ground was closer now—and was suddenly obscured as a spear of incandescent vapour stabbed into it. There was flame, and there was smoke, and there were great, billowing clouds of steam. Into the center of the conflagration dropped *Vindictive*— and then there was the slightest of jars as her tripedal landing gear kissed the surface, a barely felt tremor, and then the creaking and complaining of powerful springs and the hissing of recoil cylinders. She rocked with a hardly perceptible motion, and then was still. The silence, when the rockets were shut off, was like a blow.

The armor screens dropped, and outside the viewports there was nothing to be seen but the roiling clouds of steam, golden in the morning sun.

The fire soon burned itself out; the lichenous growth onto which the ship had dropped was too succulent to make good fuel. But the air could not be tested until the fumes of combustion had cleared, and while the others waited, old Dr. Pettigrew set up what was, in effect, a miniature laboratory to one side of the control room. Trafford, knowing that the elderly physician had served as biochemist in the Empress's yacht, let him carry on with it. The landing had taken rather more out of him than he cared to admit, even to himself. And then, while Trafford and the others were gazing out through the thinning smoke at the yellow-green plain, at the purple hills in the distance, at the clumps of tree-like growth where the ground started to rise, Pettigrew drew his sample through the valve in the shell plating.

"Still traces of burning hydro-carbons," he reported. "But that's to be expected. Otherwise the tests confirm our original spectroscopic analysis. Earth-type atmosphere. Proportions not quite the same, but not enough to worry us."

"What about microorganisms?" asked Trafford.

It was the Empress who answered. "You should know, Commander, that after two weeks of testing the Doctor should be able to answer your foolish question. And you should know, too, that it is extremely unlikely that the microbes and viruses of one planet will prove injurious to the higher life forms of another."

"Even so," insisted Trafford, "it will be advisable for us to wear full spacesuits when we go outside, and to sterilize ourselves with low intensity laser when we come back in through the airlock."

"And is there no universal antibiotic in the ship's medical stores? Even in the Dog Star Line we used to carry a supply."

"There is, ma'am," Pettigrew told her. "I agree with the Commander that we should take precautions—but a shot of U.A.B. should be sufficient."

"All right," said Trafford. "Well take the risk." Looking out at the blue sky and the green plain he was suddenly aware how stale the air inside the ship was. He wanted to breathe a real atmosphere once more, not something out of cans strapped on to the back of a spacesuit. He saw that Pettigrew had produced an injection kit, and that the others had already bared their forearms. He followed their example. The high-pressure spray stung slightly, and there was a brief tingling of the skin, and that was all.

The Empress was giving her orders. "Prepare for the preliminary exploration. You're the official diviner, Commander Metzenthier. If there are any useful metals around here your rods should be able to sniff them out. You're the biochemist, Dr. Pettigrew. You'll be able to test the vegetation for food value and also as possible replacements for the ship's hydro-ponic farm. Commander Bronheim, there's nothing much you can do to or about your engines yet; you may as well come along to look after the cameras and other recording equipment. As for you, Commander Trafford, I suppose you're still attached to the Intelligence Branch, so you may as well come along. Susanna, you can be my doggy . . ."

"Not so fast, ma'am," objected the Commander. "Not so fast."

"Your precious ship is down now, Trafford. Rather than waste valuable time in squabbling, I let you assume control for the landing. But now I'm back in the saddle."

"Yes, ma'am. But Regulations insist that in circumstances such as these a watch of at least two competent persons remain on board. I suggest that Lieutenant Commander Tallentire be Duty Officer—after all, most of his armament is still functioning. And I suggest that the Lady Susanna, as the nearest we have to an electronic communications expert, remain on board with

him. We shall all be carrying our personal transceivers, and she will be able to keep in touch at all times."

The Empress glared, but Pettigrew broke in hastily, saying, "The Commander is right, Irene. Those Regulations weren't framed by fools. It will do us no harm to do things the Navy way."

"Then why can't *he* stay to look after his precious ship?" demanded Susanna mutinously.

Pettigrew grinned at Trafford, murmuring, "Perhaps he should. . . ."

Surprisingly, it was the Empress who vetoed the suggestion. "No," she said firmly. "I know something about my own Navy. Lieutenant Commander Tallentire will be more useful where he is, with the firing studs of the ship's main armament at his fingertips. And Commander Trafford has done time in the Survey Branch—and that, I know, means that he has been well-trained in the use of hand weapons. As long as he's with us, we shall be free to carry out our investigations and observations." She paused, her icy-blue gaze sweeping each of her officers in turn. "All right, all of you. Muster at the after airlock as soon as you have your gear—not that it's been much use as an airlock since the shooting party."

The Commander went to his cabin—no longer a cell of vacuum, now filled with the clean, sweet air of this new

planet—to make his choice of weapons. He decided to take with him a hand laser projector, checking to see that it was fully charged. In the other holster he put an old-fashioned but effective projectile pistol, point-five-caliber. Then he made his way through the holed and battered after-section of the ship, down to the steps that had been extruded from the airlock to the still charred and smoking surface of the ground.

XI

THE EMPRESS LED the way down the gangway, pushing rudely past Trafford in order to be the first to set foot on the soil of this new world. Not that the Commander cared—the age-old rule, that the Captain is always last ashore and first aboard, still held good. He was amused rather than annoyed by her lack of courtesy. He stood back and motioned to the others to follow her, and then descended the ladder with what he hoped was fitting dignity—and with his automatic pistol drawn and ready in his right hand, his laser projector in his left.

Gray ash puffed and eddied about his booted feet as he reached the surface of the ground. He sneezed as the acrid reek of burned vegetation filled his nostrils, but did not allow the minor discomfort to affect his vigilance. He glanced with seeming casualness at the other members of the party—at Metzenthner, who held in his right hand a

divining rod of gleaming copper, who carried, in the quiver at his belt, other rods of iron and silver and platinum, titanium and germanium and, lead-sheathed, uranium; at Bronheim, hung around like a Christmas tree with cameras and other recording equipment; at Dr. Pettigrew, loaded with specimen boxes. Like himself, the Empress was relatively unhampered. Like him, she had two hand weapons, both of them projectile pistols. She saw that he was looking at her, and smiled thinly. "The trouble with laser projectors, Commander, is that they make no noise. I have found that many wild animals are not at all frightened by a gun that kills without making a fuss about it."

"But they have their uses, ma'am."

"Perhaps. But we didn't come out of the ship to hold a discussion on small arms."

Swiftly she led the way from the center of the charred circle to the undamaged vegetation at its periphery. They halted briefly while Pettigrew knelt to examine the succulent, yellow-green growth. He was muttering, "It could be a lichen. . . . It could be a fungus. . . ."

"Don't bother with it now," snapped the Empress. "You've all the specimens of this weed you'll ever need within a few yards of the ship. We'll make for the hills. There's a greater variety of vegetation there, and almost

certainly animal life. And there will be mineral outcroppings . . ."

"Talking of animal life . . ." said Trafford, pointing with his pistol.

The object that he had indicated was a low mound, a hummock covered by the pulpy growth, a deeper green here than elsewhere. Its outline strongly suggested a large, six-legged animal, sprawled out as though in sleep, or death.

"Well, Commander?" asked the Empress.

"I could be wrong, ma'am," said Trafford slowly, "but I don't think so. That looks very much as though some beast died here, or was killed here, and has been overgrown by the lichen or the fungus or whatever it is. . . ."

"I think you're right," agreed Pettigrew. "The outlines suggest something on the lines of a horse, although a six-legged one. But it would be a strange world indeed on which there were no predators. I suggest that you keep your guns handy in case whatever killed *it* comes to kill *us*."

"I," said the Commander, "am doing just that."

He was beginning to enjoy himself for the first time since he had left Earth. (The interlude on Serengor, with its interrogations and executions of old shipmates, had been far from enjoyable.) Even though this was a new and utterly

strange planet he felt far more at home than in the tiny artificial world that he had just left, the little world of shining metal and gleaming plastic and ingenious machinery. Normally, as a spaceman and a naval officer, he liked ships—but *Vindictive*, with the Empress on board, was no longer a normal unit of the Imperial Navy. It was good to get off the ship. Too, now and again during his career in the Survey Branch, he had been both hunter and hunted, and now he was reverting to one or the other of the two roles, or perhaps to both at once. Not that it mattered. He had solid ground under his feet, and a tried and trusted weapon in either hand, and he was filling his lungs with good fresh air that did not carry the taint of machinery. . . .

As he walked he kept a keen lookout—ahead, to both sides, behind and above. All his senses seemed to be sharpened to a preternatural keenness. He perceived a distant black speck in the blue sky that wheeled lazily, that was neither advancing nor receding. He heard the chirruping of some insect, if it was an insect, in the ankle-deep lichen. He heard something rustling, but whatever was making the sound was retreating, not advancing. He noticed that the party was leaving a well-defined track through the succulent growth, like footprints made in deep snow. He thought, *We shall have to do something about that. If anything should be stalking us ...* He laughed

briefly. What did it matter? They were within sight of the ship and covered by her weapons, and anything attacking them would be shot down before it could come to within half a mile of them.

They passed the mound of greenery beneath which was, perhaps, the body of an animal. There were similar mounds, some larger, some smaller. Then, proof that Trafford's theory had been correct, there was a dead beast, still less than halfcovered. It was a scaly brute that yet looked more mammalian than reptilian. It reminded Trafford of the thoats in Burroughs' Martian novels. It had six legs. It must have been dead for a long time; the stench from its rotting flesh was intolerable.

Like the others, the Commander held his breath until he was well clear of the decomposing carcass. Then he inhaled deeply and gratefully. He noticed a strong perfume in the air, sweet, and yet with a subde acid quality. It must be, he thought, from the broad, juicy stems that were being crushed by their booted feet. It was a heady scent.

Ahead the outlines of the purple hills were wavering, guttering almost. *Mirage*, thought Trafford. Ahead, the outline of the purple hills was tall and jagged against the impossibly deep blue sky, towering in insubstantial crenelations, turret upon turret, spire upon spire, topped by lofty masts from which streamed and snapped gay,

fantastically bright pennons. And down the wind drifted the high, clear notes of a bugle and the throb and rattle of little drums.

Trafford said, his voice sounding to himself unnaturally resonant, "I must say that they keep a very good line of mirages in stock here."

"A mirage?" The Empress turned to face him. She was tall and supernally beautiful, and her scorn was that of an amused and contemptuous goddess. "That is the city, my little Commander. That is the city, and if its people refuse to give us aid . . ." Her strong, tanned hands made a vicious, neck-wringing gesture.

A man is a man is a man, thought Trafford, and from the thought he derived the strength to stand to face the scornful woman. Oddly, she seemed to dwindle in stature as he stared her down, and beneath the trappings of power and authority he could see a little girl—a lost and frightened little girl. He repeated, with the authentic quarter-deck snap and crackle to his voice, "It is a mirage."

"It is a city." The woman stood before him again, not the briefly-glimpsed bewildered child. "The arts of its people have hidden it from us until now. I don't know what they are playing at, but . . ." With her right hand she made a down-sweeping gesture. "Cards on the table it is! And we shall see who holds the aces."

"I have my pair of trumps!" boasted Trafford, hefting his guns.

(But what need of weapons in the Emerald City? And what weapons could prevail against the Wizard himself?)

"Then, Commander, shall we press onward?" She drew her sword *(and where did she get that from?* wondered Trafford briefly) and raised it, flashing golden in the golden sunlight, high above her head. "Forward!" she cried, and her voice was a trumpet call, higher and clearer than the bugle notes drifting down the wind, and the thudding of Trafford's heart was louder and more insistent than the mutter of the distant drums.

Side by side with the Empress he marched over the springy green turf—and then, suddenly, Metzenthier was before them, blocking their way, his pale face contorted by a dreadful anxiety. "Back to the ship!" he was shouting. "Back to the ship!"

Trafford started to lift his pistol, but the Empress was faster. She thrust at the man with her sword, snarling, "Out of the way, you damned teacup reader!" And then Metzenthier was gone, vanished, and the pair of them was marching on.

There were the bugles again, and the drums, and ahead of them the gleaming spires and towers of the City, the Emerald City, and winding towards through the

flowerspangled grass was the road, the Yellow Brick Road
.'. . Trafford suddenly realized that he was singing—

*"We're off to see the Wizard, The
Wonderful Wizard of Oz!"*

*But the Empress cant be Dorothy ... he thought. Or
can she? And what am I? Am I the Strawman, or the Tin
Woodman, or the Cowardly Lion? Or that little dog whose
name I can't remember?*

At first it seemed vitally important that he recall the
name of the dog—and then, as the hallucinogenic vapors
drowned what remained of sanity, it didn't matter anymore.
All that mattered was the bugles—imperious, insistent—and
the compelling throb and mutter of the little drums.

XII

UNDERFOOT the road was firm and resilient. Its
appearance was that of yellow brick, but its texture was
almost that of living flesh. Trafford felt that he could march
upon it thirty miles with ease—and then another thirty. It
wound upwards at a gentle slope between low hills, softly
contoured, through groves of tall, graceful trees in whose
verdant foliage fluttered birds with jeweled plumage, and
huge butterflies that, even in the bright sunlight, seemed
luminescent. Onward it wound, finally leading them
through a huge, natural arch in a sheer cliff, and beyond to

lush, flower-starred meadows; and diminishing to a mere golden thread in the distance, it led to the city on the mountain, to the Emerald City that was itself a fantastic man-made mountain.

Trafford, the Empress at his side, marched on steadily. He was aware that the others were not with them, assumed that

Metzenthler had persuaded them to return to the ship. Well, that was their hard luck. Let them stew in the battered tin coffin. . . .

Suddenly he halted, stiffened.

"What is it?" demanded the Empress.

"Company," he replied shortly, pointing ahead with his pistol.

At first it was no more than a scattering of tiny black beads along the golden thread, and then the black specks became mounts and riders, and the largest of them was a wheeled vehicle drawn by a team of animals.

Trafford stood firm, his laser projector ready in his left hand, his automatic pistol in his right. The Empress had drawn her own weapons and, her face alight with a reckless abandon, looked all too ready to use them. Soon Trafford was able to make out details. There were twenty brightly-uniformed men, gay pennons streaming from the heads of their lances, mounted on beasts that looked, at

glance, like the war horses of the long-dead days of chivalry on Earth. But the armor that the steeds carried was their own scrubbed and burnished scales, not the product of some medieval smithy, and each of them was six-legged. The riders were human enough—huge fellows in spotless white breeches and gleaming black boots, scarlet jackets and plumed, silver helmets, each man sporting a fearsome cavalry moustache.

As one, the lances dipped in salute and the well-trained steeds roared to a spectacular halt. From the coach came a long, golden fanfare as the postilions raised their gleaming trumpets to their lips.

The Commander felt no surprise. There was a vague, nagging feeling that he should have, but it was no more than a fleeting unease. He *knew* that this ceremonial was only right and fitting. By his side, tall and straight, stood the Empress Irene, calmly accepting the homage that was no more than her due, and when the silver-haired, black-clad man who emerged from the coach bowed deeply, she acknowledged it with only the slightest inclination of the head.

"My Golden Lady," murmured the man in black. "My Lord Benjamin. We are gready honored."

Trafford tried to place the accent. It was familiar. French? Yes, that was it. But this man was far more . . .

civilized? Yes, that was the word. This man was far more civilized than the rough peasants and fishermen of Nouveau Lorraine. His silver hair was not his own, but an elaborate, powdered wig. His moustache and little, pointed beard were beautifully trimmed and combed. His clothing was not as plain as had appeared at first glance; little silver buttons, discrete touches of silver braid and the silver buckles of his pointed shoes glittered in the sunlight.

"Golden Lady, Milord Benjamin. The carriage awaits you. Be pleased to enter."

Even now Trafford was reluctant to holster his weapons. He demanded brusquely, "Sir, what is all this flummery for?"

"You jest, Milord. Have not our seers foretold, for many a long year, that in our time of need the Golden Lady and the Lord Benjamin would come to our aid from the stars? Surely it is not for me to remind you of the prophecies?"

Before Trafford could think of a reply the Empress's elbow was sharp in his ribs. "Sir," she told the stranger, "most things are, of necessity, revealed to us. Have we not roved the starways, succoring the oppressed, meting out just retribution to the oppressor? But perhaps you will be so good as to furnish us with details, to . . . to . . ."

"To put us in the picture," completed Trafford.

The Empress glared at him, but the dignitary chuckled. "Very good, Milord. Very good. You have the gift of the ready, telling phrase. But please to accompany me. On our journey to the city I will—ha, ha—endeavor to 'put you in the picture'."

"But who are you?" persisted Trafford.

"I, Milord Benjamin, am le Due de Richelieu, High Chancellor of the Kingdom."

"We shall be pleased to accompany you, M'sieur le Due," announced the Empress regally.

She and Trafford followed the dignitary to the coach, to the huge, ornate vehicle that was literally encrusted with gold and precious stones. They mounted the short ladder that had been placed at the open door, the Empress waving aside the sumptuously liveried lackeys who sprang to assist her. They seated themselves upon the deep, lavishly embroidered upholstery. They sat in silence while, not without confusion, the cumbersome contraption was turned around and rumbled back towards the city.

"May I offer you refreshment, Milady? Milord Benjamin?" asked the Duke.

"I could do with a pint of wallop," agreed the Empress, lapsing suddenly into space tramp idiom.

The Duke chuckled. "You, too, have the way with words, Milady. But it is as good a way of describing our

Barsoomian wine as any." He opened the hamper that occupied part of the floor space between the seats, produced a squat bottle, three crystal goblets. He poured dexterously, not spilling a drop in spite of the swaying motion of the coach. He handed one glass to the Empress, one to Trafford, and the third he kept for himself. This he raised ceremoniously, saying, "Confusion to our enemies!"

Trafford sipped cautiously. The wine was like a dry sherry, but better than any dry sherry that he had ever sampled. There was body without heaviness, and fire combined with mellowness, and the aroma was almost as intoxicating as the liquor itself.

"To your taste, Milady?" de Richelieu was asking.

"Yes, M'sieur le Due. It reminds me a little of the Dragon's Blood that we used to get at Port Vonnegut, on Lesseran."

Dragon's Blood, Trafford knew, was heavy and sweet. He thought, *One of us doesn't know anything about wines. And I don't think it's me.*

"And now, Milady, and Milord Benjamin. I shall recharge your glasses and do my poor best to 'put you in the picture'. Know you that the affairs of Oz have reached a perilous pass. His Majesty is amiable—and weak. His Ministers of State are but affable nincompoops. And the Barbarians of Smersh are hammering at our gates. They

have strange engines of warfare, cunning and evil devices against which the bravest of our soldiers are all but helpless. Already Helium has fallen and Zindemeuf, key fortress of the Northern Marches, is sore beleaguered. Yet Milord the King talks of treaties, and concessions, and he and his ministers are ever readier with the pen than with the sword."

"And you want us to pull your chestnuts out of the fire for you?"

De Richelieu was so amused that he spilled his wine. "Milord Benjamin, if you are as adept with weapons as you are with words, than of a certainty the victory is ours."

"Milord Benjamin," remarked the Empress coldly, "you will cut the cackle."

The Chancellor started to laugh again and then, seeing the look on her face, froze into silence.

XIII

THAFFORD'S IMPRESSIONS of the entry into the city were confused, there was so much shouting, so much cheering, so much blaring of trumpets and pealing of bells. And louder than all was the measured thudding of the cannons as they boomed out what was surely more than a twenty-one gun salute. Through the jubilant crowds of gaily attired people the great coach slowly pressed its way, the mounted men of the escort clearing a path through the streets by the brute weight of their well-handled steeds. But it was done with no less of good humor on either side, to the exchange of rough jests between populace and cavalrymen.

Up the steep streets toiled the coach, past garlanded standards, under balconies all a-flutter with gay bunting, all a-swarm with beautiful, brightly clad women, with near-naked women (but surely this was a false note) who tossed down handful after handful of huge, gaudy blossoms until the air was heavy with the scent of crushed petals. They rolled past regiments drawn stiffly to attention, and the sunlight flashed blindingly from the saluting swords, from burnished breastplates and helmets.

Up the last, steep hill to the castle the coach creaked and lumbered—and then the sheer stone wall and the massive, iron-bound gates towered before them, locked and

barred against their passage. On top of the wall, lining the battlements, the musketeers stood, tall in their plumed hats, weapons at the ready. The evil black snouts of cannons poked from embrasures.

An officer called loudly from the gatehouse turret, "Who comes?"

The leader of the cavalry escort answered, "The Golden Lady, the Lord Benjamin, and M'sieur le Due de Richelieu, the Lord High Chancellor!"

"Tell de Richelieu to return whence he came, and to take the imposters with him!" Then, in an almost conversational voice, "My guns are loaded with grapeshot."

The cavalry officer gestured with his drawn sword towards the crowd pressing behind the coach. "Would you fire upon the citizenry?"

"Damn right I would, when they are rebels against our Lord the King!"

De Richelieu was murmuring, "We must withdraw, Milady, until we can bring up our own artillery."

"There is no need for your museum pieces!" snapped the Empress.

She flung wide the door of the coach and jumped to the cobblestones—a tall, lithe figure, superb in her form-fitting black, her golden hair cascading down to her waist. She

strode imperiously towards the huge gates. "Open!" she cried. "Open—in the name of the Federation!"

"Get me that brassy trollop!" shouted the gate officer to his musketeers.

But Trafford was out of the coach now, his laser projector humming viciously. The broad beam swept the ranked musketeers as they were in the very act of taking aim. Weapons exploded and men screamed, and there were more explosions as the contents of powder horns were detonated. Swiftly he lowered the projector and brought its beam, narrow now, to play on the gate itself, on the massive hinges. The great valves sagged—and then, with a splintering of wood and a screaming of tortured metal, the gate collapsed inwards.

The cannons fired as the gate collapsed—first one, and then two in unison. The whirling grapeshot mowed down the Chancellor's cavalry, reduced the ornate coach to matchwood, ploughed a bloody furrow through the helpless crowd.

Trafford was aware of all this as he jumped over the ruins of the gate, both weapons hot and his pistol hammering, a veritable devil turned loose among the hapless cannoneers. And the Empress was beside him, her own guns leaping in her hands as she picked off the artillerymen.

Even so, it was two against many. Great stones were sent crashing down upon them from the battlements, some of which were intercepted in mid-air by the Commander's laser beams, some of which landed so close to them that they were cut and bruised by the flying fragments. A squad of pikemen charged at them through the smoke, and it took the combined fire of Trafford and the Empress to stop them. Clumsy hand weapons were discharged and balls whistled past their ears, barely missing, and in the confusion a party of gunners contrived to reload their cannon and to traverse it so as to cover the Empress and her companion.

Trafford saw this—but only as the slow match was being brought down to the touch-hole. He whipped up his laser projector—and knew that when he pressed the stud he must, inevitably, fire the gun. But he, would take the gunners with him.

And then the Empress was in his line of fire, leaping to the very muzzle of the cannon, seizing it with both hands and heaving upwards. The thing tipped up on its carriage, tipped and tumbled, crashed over backwards, crushing its crew.

That, somehow, was the climax.

There was one lone, tattered figure who stood before them, slowly raising a heavy, muzzle-loading pistol in his

right hand. Trafford lifted his own automatic, thinking that he must have reloaded it more than once, although he could not recall having done so. At the last moment he deflected his aim a degree or so to the left and, instead of shooting to kill, blew the weapon out of the other's grasp.

Somebody was making a fuss about something. It was de Richelieu, who, miraculously, had escaped unharmed from the blasted coach. "Milady," he was saying. "Milord Benjamin. I did not expect opposition."

"Neither did we," said Trafford tiredly. "Not after the initial build-up." He gestured with his pistol. "Who are those people?"

Slowly the group of men and women descended the broad, stone steps from the castle terrace. They were sumptuously attired, obviously persons of some consequence—but if they had been stuffed shirts, now all the stuffing was gone out of them. One of them detached himself from the main party, came on alone. His long, fur-trimmed robes swept the flagstones. A full gray beard lent authority and dignity to what was probably a weak face. A little, golden crown was perched with absurd jauntiness on his balding head.

"The King," murmured de Richelieu.

"Then I'm the Ace of Trumps!" growled the Empress.

XIV

"DE RICHELIEU!" demanded the King. "What is this?"

"The fulfillment of the prophecy," replied the Chancellor, adding, as an afterthought, "Your Majesty."

"Prophecy? What prophecy?"

"That in our time of need the Golden Lady and the Lord Benjamin would come from the stars to render us aid."

"So you listen to the rabble, and you rouse the rabble, and you dress up two mountebanks in tawdry costumes and pay them to lead a rebellion against my authority . . ."

"Did I hear you call me a mountebank?" asked the Empress with dangerous calm.

"Yes. You and that little rat of a fellow with you."

Trafford laughed. It was impossible for him to take this pompous monarch seriously. But the Empress was not amused. She bounded forward and with one hand grasped the King by the collar of his robe, bunching the rich material so that he began to choke and splutter. With the same hand she lifted him clear of the ground, held him there, kicking and struggling and strangling.

There were angry cries from the courtiers and swords flashed from their scabbards. Trafford grinned viciously as his thumb depressed the firing stud of the laser pistol—and the would-be swordsmen were staring stupidly at useless hilts from which dripped gobbets of molten steel.

"What would you, Milord?" demanded de Richelieu sardonically, looking up at the impotent, dangling King. "What would you?"

"Let me down!" croaked the unhappy monarch. "Please, please let me down!"

Contemptuously the Empress unclenched her fist, released him. He fell heavily, sprawling on the flagstones. His absurd little crown was jolted off his head, rolled slowly away from him. Nobody made a move to pick it up. On an impulse Trafford whipped out his automatic, loosed off four shots in quick succession. The crown, battered beyond recognition, was driven skittering across the courtyard by the impact of the heavy slugs. Then, when the Commander saw the King's face, he was sorry for what he had done—but there was no way to apologize or to make amends.

A tall man in military finery stepped forward. He grinned wily beneath his sweeping moustache as he extended the hilt of his sword towards the Empress by what little remained of the blade. He said, "Milady, we all know of the prophecy—but we thought that it was no more than a fairy tale to comfort the little ones. But we see, now, that it is more than a fairy tale. Here is my sword, Milady."

"Then you are with us, General Porthos?" asked the Chancellor.

"No, M'sieur le Due. Not with *you*. You I know too well. When the Golden Lady and the Lord Benjamin dropped down from the stars you tried to use them in your plot to overthrow the monarchy and to seize power for yourself. I will follow the Golden Lady to the Gates of Smersh, and beyond, but for you I have only contempt."

While he was speaking the King had scrambled to his feet. "Arrest them!" he cried. "Arrest them, Porthos! Throw them in the dungeons!"

"Ho, guards!" shouted the General. "To me!"

Men appeared as though from out of the ground—big men, clad in light body armor, some armed with swords and some with pikes. The Empress raised her pistols, but Trafford checked her with a hard stare and a negative gesture. And Porthos ordered, pointing twice, "Take them away!"

De Richelieu did not struggle, but the King put up a feeble fight. And then the tall General, his face grim, removed his plumed hat and bowed to the Empress. He said, "I am at your service. Please tell me how I can help you to help us."

Torches flared in the underground chamber, throwing a fitful light on the big map that was spread out on the huge table. Porthos stabbed his thick forefinger down towards a green splotch from which radiated a web of black lines.

"Zindemeuf," he said. "Fort Zindemeuf. The fortifications are built around the oasis and command the caravan routes. Who holds Zindemeuf controls the commerce of this continent. We still hold it, but. . ."

"But what?" asked Trafford.

"But Zindemeuf is besieged by Kars Karkovitch, the Red

Jeddak of Smersh. The garrison still holds out, but trade is at a standstill."

The Commander studied the map. "H'm," he muttered. "On the face of it, you people are sitting prettier than he is. Your supply lines are relatively short and, furthermore, you hold the wells. His are long, too long for comfort. I should think that a few sorties to cut his own lines of supply would do the trick. . . ."

"My dear James," put in the elderly man in the well-worn tweed suit, a garment that was almost as archaic as the General's finery, speaking through the cloud of acrid smoke that drifted from his briar pipe. "My dear James, how many times must I tell you to leave purely military matters to the military? We have our own ways of getting results, ways far less expensive than the deployment of huge bodies of troops."

"M'sieur l'Admiral," said Porthos, "need I remind you that your methods have not, to date, been effective?"

"Mainly, my dear General," replied the man known only as M, "because we have been given no backing whatsoever from your people." He gestured towards Trafford with the stem of his pipe, looking at him with his steely gray eyes. "I am sure that 007, given a free hand, could dispose of the Red Jeddak with no more fuss or bother than that involved in swatting a fly. A suitable disguise, a sleeper booked on tonight's Stamboul Train . . ."

"I," said the Empress Irene, "have learned, from long and bitter experience, that intelligence is the one thing lacking in any Intelligence Service. Will you carry on, please, General Porthos?"

"But of a certainty, Milady. Have I your permission to reply directly to M'sieur le Commandant?" He transferred his attention to Trafford. "We are not amateurs in military matters, M'sieur. We have tried to cut his supply lines—but the weapons at his disposal are such that the bravest men are all but helpless." "What weapons?"

"Had I not seen yours in use, I should hesitate to tell you, for fear of being met with incredulity. But you, I know, can harness the lightnings, and with your aid we shall meet the Red Jeddak on equal terms."

"Enough of the hifaluting language," ordered the Empress harshly. "What are his weapons?"

"A green, noxious vapor, Milady . . ."

"Poison gas. Probably chlorine. Has nobody thought of making masks?"

"But how, Milady?"

"A bag that covers the head, with transparent eyepieces and a charcoal filter to breathe through. It should be simple enough. And what else has he?"

"Flying ships, Milady, that soar overhead, beyond the reach of our muskets and our strongest bowmen. They drop bombs on the fort—some filled with gunpowder and some with the green vapor."

"Once again we have the answer," said Trafford. "Rocket batteries. Barrage balloons."

"There's no need for 'em," the Empress told him. "With our weapons we're capable of taking on an army." She turned to the big General. "We're just wasting time talking about it. There'll be no need to waste time manufacturing gas masks and rocket projectors and barrage balloons. The Red Jeddak's weapons are no more than toys. Take us out to Fort Zinder-neuf."

"James," said M warningly, "why must you always get involved with women? They'll be the death of you yet."

"There'd be no story without them, sir," replied Trafford.

XV

A HUGE RAFT riding the sand waves of the desert sea—that was Fort Zindemeuf. A raft with a blocky

superstructure, dominated by a squat, square tower from the flagstaff of which proudly flew the tricolor of France, clean and bright against the bright, cloudless sky. Trafford leaned back in the saddle of his thoat to stare at the oddly familiar structure-familiar, yet unfamiliar. It was somehow wrong. Surely there should have been archaic machine guns along the battlements, not these even more archaic muzzle-loading cannons. And the steeds that he and his companions were riding should have been horses and camels, not these ungainly, six-legged monstrosities.

From inside the high walls drifted the sound of music, of blaring bugles, of throbbing and rattling little drums—and before the Commander's eyes the hard outlines of the fortifications wavered, dissolved, and in their place was a brightly lit stage upon which a small army of waiters, their black and white livery absurdly topped by military *kepis*, marched and counter-marched.

Trafford sang softly to himself:

*"In some Abyssinian French dominion I shall do my
bit And fall for the flag if I must,*

*Where the desert sand is nice and handy I'll be full
of grit—*

You won't see my arse for the dust!"

"What was that?" demanded the Empress sharply. "Just a song," muttered Trafford. And, as he replied, the scene

from the ancient comic opera faded out, was replaced by the harsh silhouette of the fort. "Just a song. Just *The Legionnaire*, from *White Horse Inn*."

"Never heard of it," she snapped.

"You wouldn't," he snapped back.

"Commander Trafford, I'll not tolerate this insolence. I order you to apologize. At once."

"Pipe down," he replied tiredly. "I take my orders from M, not from some superpopsy with an absurd nickname like Solitaire or Pussy Galore or Empress. My job is to find out what sort of mess those stupid clots in the fort have gotten themselves into, and then to get them out of it. Come on."

Surprisingly she said nothing in reply, and in silence the party rode on towards the fort. As they approached the building they could see that it had suffered considerable damage. In many places the walls had been broken by explosions and were roughly patched with rubble, and the stretches of wall that were still intact were scarred and pitted by flying fragments. And there were shallow craters in the sand, around which still hung the stench of exploded gunpowder.

The gates slowly, crealdly opened. The bugles blared their welcome.

The Empress looked up to the silent cannons along the battlements. "What? No salute?" she demanded.

Porthos smiled apologetically. "There was powder to bum on ceremonial in the city," he said. "Here, Milady Irene, it is urgently required for more serious matters."

"Now that Commander Trafford and I are here," she said arrogandy, "you'll not be needing your noisy antiques for warfare."

"But we may still need the powder," Trafford pointed out, "for our ground-to-air missiles."

They rode in through the gates, into the midst of a crowd of wildly cheering men, into a confusion of flashing swords and caps tossed high into the air. But Porthos gave them little time to acknowledge the salutes, sprang down from his saddle to the ground. He made to assist the Empress from hers, but she was dismounted before he could do more than extend his hand. Trafford followed more slowly and much more clumsily.

"Colonel Lejeune," the General said briskly, "you know of the Golden Lady and the Lord Benjamin. They have come to us, as prophesied, in this, our hour of crisis."

"Mais oui, mon General" replied the Colonel, a tall, dark man in a dark blue uniform. "I know of them—as who does not?" He bowed deeply. "My Lady, I am honored."

It seemed as though the Empress wished to prolong the exchange of courtesies, so Trafford said briskly, "Please take us to your lookout post."

"Mais certainement, mon Commandant. Please to follow."

The cheering men—many of whom, Trafford noted, were wearing stained bandages—fell aside to allow them passage. Lejeune led the way to a door at the base of the tower, through it and up a stairway. It was a long climb, made no easier by the uneven treads. At last they came to a platform on which, on a tripod mounting, was what at first glance Trafford took for some cumbersome weapon. And then he saw that it was a big telescope, a refractor, as archaic as the cannon that it resembled. The two men standing by it stiffened to attention as the Colonel and his companions came on to the platform.

"At easel" snapped Lejeune.

He stood there and slowly raised his right arm, pointing to a spot on the Eastern horizon. "There," he said. "There is the Red Jeddak's encampment."

Trafford stared out in the direction indicated. He could see a distant smudge, a dark stain on the yellow waves of the sea of sand. He thought that he could see the occasional flash of sunlight reflected from bright metal. Meanwhile, the Empress was stooped over the telescope, her face to the eyepieces. She was grumbling, "What's all the fuss about? It's no more than a nomad camp, such as I have seen on at least a dozen underdeveloped worlds."

"Those are more than mere nomads, Milady," Porthos told her.

Then Trafford took his turn at the instrument. Magnification and definition, once he had mastered the simple controls, were better than excellent. They were fantastic. He studied with interest the orderly rows of dark tents, from the peaks of which floated the crimson banners, each with its golden star. . . . And there were the lines of tethered thoats, and the cannons peering, open-mouthed, from behind their parapets of sandbags. There was an air of grim, military efficiency that was lacking at Zinderneuf, that would have been utterly undreamed of in the Emerald City. He realized that it was impossible for him to share the Empress's optimism—but still hoped, without much hope, that it would be justified.

He traversed the telescope slightly to bring a working party within the field of view. There was something on the ground that looked like a latticework tower, like one of the pylons used to carry power lines, or like a radio mast. There was a team of the six-legged brutes standing by it, harnessed to a tow line. He thought at first that they were being used to raise the mast—a lookout tower, perhaps, or the aerial of a radio station. But did these people run to radio? Surely not. There had been no sign of it, in any of its manifestations, in the Emerald City—but, to judge from

what he had already learned, the Hordes of Smersh commanded a more sophisticated technology than did their adversaries.

Then, suddenly, Trafford realized what the thing was. Something was being lifted onto the latticework construction, a flimsy affair, also of latticework, but with wide-spreading wings. A man climbed into it, settled himself into his seat. The team of thoats plodded over the sand, away from the catapult, obviously straining against the weight of the tow-rope. They halted. The man in the pilot's seat raised his hand, dropped it sharply. Trafford imagined that he heard the sharp *twang* as whatever elastic cordage that powered the catapult was released. And then the glider was skimming over the dunes, gaining altitude.

Trafford turned away from the telescope and remarked quietly to Lejeune, "You'd better sound your air raid warning, Colonel."

To the clanging of a great bell, the battlements were manned by archers and musketeers—and the Commander, watching the hasty preparations, was appalled by their inadequacy. The glider was high now, riding the thermals, no more than a black speck in the cloudless sky. It was high, and it was still gaining altitude, and it was already

almost above the fort. The ragged crackle of musketry was no more than a futile gesture of defiance.

"You can save your powder for salutes, Colonel," sneered the Empress. Her two heavy automatics were out of their holsters, slamming and bucking in her strong hands. But still the thing in the sky flew on serenely, ignoring the fire directed at it from below. Trafford could see that hand guns, no matter how modem, were utterly useless in these circumstances. Nonetheless, he pulled out his own laser pistol. It was no more effective than the Empress's weapons. The chances of a hit with the narrow beam were exceedingly slim, and the wide beam would do no more than inflict a mild discomfort upon the enemy pilot.

The Commander saw the black specks falling from the aircraft—the black specks that expanded as they fell, the stick of bombs that dropped in orderly succession, the first of which threw up geysers of fine sand, the last of which burst beneath the eastern wall of the fort, the crash of the explosion followed by the crash of falling masonry.

Porthos broke the stunned silence that followed the burst. He said, "We had hoped more from your weapons."

Trafford told him, "Let me have armorers and materials, and I'll turn out effective enough missiles."

The Empress flared, "To hell with your cheap fireworks, Trafford. Those people out there haven't the guts to come to grips with us—so we'll come to grips with them!"

"What do you mean, Milady?" asked the General.

"What do I mean? You're supposed to be a soldier, Porthos. You should know. A sortie, of course. A cavalry charge. That's the only answer to this war of attrition."

Trafford put in, "Don't forget that the Red Jeddak has his artillery well placed to defend his encampment."

"And so what?" She whipped Trafford's laser pistol from its holster and, before he could protest, snapped off a silent but deadly blast, incinerating a hapless, low-flying bird that had drifted down from the sky, probably in the hopes of finding some appetizing morsels of carrion. "I've got my pistols, and you have this thing. We shall ride in the van, and we shall be able to put those guns out of action long before they can do any damage to us."

Porthos looked down to the smouldering body that had dropped down to the platform, just missing the big telescope. He wrinkled his nostrils against the stench of burning flesh and feathers. He said slowly, "Yes. That may be the answer."

"Of course it's the answer. Attack is the best means of defense. I shouldn't have to tell you that."

"Colonel Lejeune?" asked Porthos.

"But we have already tried it, mon General. As the Commandant has pointed out, the Red Jeddak's artillery is well placed."

"Lejeune by name and le jaune by nature," sneered the Empress.

"I am not a coward, Milady," replied the Colonel with dignity. "But no good military commander throws lives away needlessly."

"I think, Colonel," said Trafford, "that with our weapons we shall be able to dispose of the guns before they can do us much damage."

"You did not dispose of the flying machine."

"It was a small target at extremely long range."

Thoughtfully, Porthos nudged the corpse of the incinerated bird with the toe of his boot. He said, "We will make the sortie."

XVI

BUGLES BLARED and drums rattled, the cavalry streamed through the gates of Fort Zinderneuf, lances raised high and gay pennons fluttering from each bright spearhead. In the van rode the Empress and Trafford, with General Porthos at their right and Colonel Lejeune at their left. It was almost sunset, but there would be daylight

enough for them to traverse the few miles of Sand between the fort and the encampment of the Red Jeddak.

Bugles blared and drums rattled—and Trafford squirmed unhappily in his saddle. He was no stranger to warfare, but he was used to fighting his battles from a well-padded acceleration chair in the control room of a spaceship. The saddle was not well-padded, and the lurching motion of the beast that he was riding was harder to cope with than sudden gravitational shifts during a naval action in Deep Space. Yet he hung on somehow, clutching the reins desperately in his right hand, the laser projector in his left. He managed a sideways glance at the Empress. She (she would be) was riding as though born to the saddle, looking like a legendary heroine from the Wild West of Old Earth. Her reins were draped negligently over her left wrist, and in each hand she gripped a heavy revolver.

The great, six-legged beasts plunged over the sibilantly shifting sand with ever-mounting velocity, driving over the dunes like small surface craft over a heavy ocean swell. Ahead was the encampment of the Red Jeddak, the smoky flare of the watch-fires already visible, the bright metal of weapons and gear throwing back the last rays of the westering sun. Ahead was the camp of the Hordes of Smersh—dark tents, their sharp peaks dark against the

darkling sky, flaring watch-fires, fleering trumpets, the ominous groan of smitten gongs.

Trafford stared ahead, trying to make out the parapets of sandbags that had masked the Jeddak's cannons. He had seen them plainly enough from the watchtower of the fort, but from ground level they were invisible. And the sun was down now, foundered beneath the sand waves of the desert sea, and the light cast by the twin, hurtling moons of Barsoom was feeble, and the shifting shadows deceptive. He could, thought Trafford, sweep the terrain ahead with the beam of his laser gun—but its charge was not inexhaustible and he could not afford to waste whatever energy remained in the power pack.

Bugles blared and drums rattled, and the column charged on. To the far right a gun opened fire, and then another. Shells burst in the sand, but there was no real explosion, only a relatively feeble *pop*. *Duds*, thought Trafford—and then he saw the green mist that was billowing in the hollow between the dunes.

He shouted, "Hold your breath!"

He was through the green fog, cresting the next rise, and inhaling deeply and gratefully. But his thoat was faltering, stumbling, retching horribly. Viciously—and hating himself as he did so—Trafford used his spurs, driving the rowels deep into the chinks of the poor brute's

armor behind its second pair of legs. It gave vent to a horrid, bubbling scream but kept on, lurching over the crest, slithering down into the next hollow.

More guns were firing now, ahead and to either side, and as well as the almost inaudible *pops* of the bursting gas cannisters there were the detonations of exploding shrapnel shells. But the Empress had opened up with her six-guns, shooting with cold deliberation, and Trafford's laser weapon, its beam almost invisible, was buzzing viciously. With a great, orange flare one of the Jeddak's cannons, together with its ammunition, exploded, and the crashing uproar of its destruction was followed by other explosions as the energy beam found its marks.

But the cannon were well-concealed and well-protected, and some batteries went on stubbornly firing, they and their crews seemingly immune to the Empress's and to Trafford's hand weapons, and others held their fire until the cavalry onslaught was almost upon them.

It was no longer a charge.

It was now no more than an exhausted stumble over the soft sand. All of the mounts and at least half the riders had been affected by the first gas attack, and each succeeding barrage of gas shells had exacted its toll, and the time-fused shrapnel, bursting in air, swept men from

their saddles and shattered even the natural armor of the thoats.

There were too many guns, and they were too well concealed, and too well protected, and too well served. Porthos was gone—dead or wounded—and Lejeune, and fully one third of the squadron. The General was gone, and the Colonel, but the standard bearer at Trafford's right was still in his saddle, the tricolor banner still lifted high, still gaudily defiant in the intermittent glare of the bursting shells. To the left there was, a flurry of activity as the riders overran one of the guns that had survived the attack of Trafford's laser projector, a brief crackle of small arms fire as the cannoneers tried vainly to defend themselves from the pitiless swords and lances. And from ahead came the volleys of massed musketry, and something that flew low, skimming the dune crests, something that swept overhead, scattering handfuls of heavy steel darts.

The Jeddak's musketeers must be within range now, thought Trafford. His thumb on the firing stud of the projector, he swept the sandbagged positions ahead. But there were no uncontrolled explosions of muskets and powder horns—only the continuation of a steady, deadly fire that was sweeping saddles clear of riders, that was bringing the already half-dead brutes, their lungs eaten away by the poison gas, to their knees.

The Commander glanced at the indicator light on the butt of his weapon. It was glowing dimly, too dimly—and then it went out. The charge was exhausted. He pushed it back into its holster—he had been brought up to take good care of Service property—and pulled out his automatic. He realized that all the ammunition he had left was the seven rounds in the magazine.

The Empress was still with him, still firing, and with each report one of the enemy fell. The Empress was still with him, but the standard bearer was gone, and only six riders plodded slowly in the rear, the tips of their lances scoring the surface of the sand, their animals staggering and coughing their lives away. There was a crashing volley, and another, and Trafford's mount was down and he was sprawling prone on the gritty surface. He scrambled somehow to his feet, spat the sand from his mouth, brushed his free hand across his smarting eyes. He knew that he had to keep on.

There was one more hollow between the dunes, and then he would be among the Jeddak's musketeers, and he would take seven of them with him. *Provided*, a coldly reasonable voice at the back of his mind remarked, *that your automatic's not clogged with sand*.

But he kept on, and stumbled down the declivity into the hollow, and the sweet-smelling, invisible gas that had

collected there filled his lungs, and before he lost consciousness he was vaguely aware of the Empress standing astride his helpless body, still firing her useless revolvers, until she, too, collapsed and crumpled to a motionless heap beside him.

XVH

IT SEEMED to Trafford that only seconds had elapsed—although it must have been far longer—when he opened his eyes again. He looked around dazedly. The hackneyed question, *Where am I?* was on his lips, but remained unspoken. He was lying on a bunk, he decided, the framework of which creaked as he experimentally stretched his limbs. He was on a bunk, and a rough, prickly blanket had been thrown over his body. A few feet away from him he could see the Empress, motionless under her coverlet, her long, blonde hair, bright even in the dim lighting, vivid against the drab material of her pillow.

Cautiously Trafford threw the blanket aside, swung his feet to the . . . the floor? No. Not the floor. The deck. This was obviously a ship's cabin. *But what sort of ship?* Deck, bulkheads and the scanty furnishings were of wickerwork. There was a lamp hanging from an overhead fixture, swaying gently. It seemed to be an oil lamp. Its flame was dimmed by a shield of wire gauze.

The lamp was swaying . . . but was it? Was the lamp swaying from its hook in the deckhead, or was the cabin swaying around the lamp? When Trafford tried to get to his feet he realized, as he fell back to the bunk, that it was the cabin that was swaying. So...

So he was aboard a ship. But what sort of ship?

For all he knew, the sea coast was only a few miles from Fort Zinderneuf—and then he remembered the map that he had studied before the departure from the Emerald City. Between Oz and Muscovy there was no sea, only mile after mile of desert.

But the deck was swaying underfoot, and from above there was a rhythmic creaking. Masts and sails, standing and running rigging? No, decided the Commander. No. For there were other noises. There was the throbbing of machinery of some land. And there was the noise of wind, of relative wind, the inevitable complaint of atmosphere when a construction is moved rapidly through the gaseous fluid.

A spaceship?

An airship?

But surely the Hordes of Smersh did not run to anti-gravity. That oil lamp, swaying from the deckhead, was evidence of that, was the produce of a technology that had

barely reached the steam-engine stage. Carefully, Trafford stamped his foot. The deck rang hollow. He knew, then, that there was nothing beneath the flimsy wickerwork but empty air. More than once, as a spaceman, he had been acutely conscious of the lightness of the metal plating that was his only armor against the hard vacuum of Deep Space—now he was even more conscious of the lightness and fragility of this decking of woven rushes held together with some sort of animal or vegetable glue.

Nonetheless, he got to his feet again, moved cautiously to

the other bunk. The Empress was still sleeping. Gently he pulled the coarse blanket back from her face, looked at her. This was no longer the Valkyrie who had ranged the star-ways with a heavily armed warship as her steed, who had led a cavalry charge, mounted upon a great, six-legged monstrosity, as though bom to the saddle. This was no more than a girl—but a beautiful girl. This was the girl who had been taken from her home, long ago and far away, by the Talent Scouts, whose feet had been set by them on the rugged path that had led, at last, to a Galactic throne. And to this.

Gently, Trafford stooped to kiss the full, curving lips.

The Empress sighed. The lids half lifted from her misty violet eyes. And then her arms were around Trafford and

she was holding him to her, pressing him to her, and their second kiss lacked the innocence of the first one. It lacked the innocence, but the awareness that flared up between them was more than adequate compensation.

And then the Empress's eyes snapped fully open. Her strong arms no longer clasped Trafford to her. With a swift motion she got her hands against his chest, thrust violently. He fell heavily to the deck, felt it give under his weight. For a long, panic-filled second he thought that he was going through it, but it held. Dimly he realized that the Empress was speaking. "What the hell do you think you're playing at, Commander?"

He managed to reply stiffly, "I could ask the same of you. *Ma'am.*"

"What do you mean?"

He said, "It seemed to me that you . . . reciprocated."

"Oh. Did it?" He was relieved to see a faint smile flickering over her lips, and then her face froze again. "All right. Well discuss the matter no further. But, since you have time to spare for philandering, perhaps you already have the situation in hand. Perhaps you can tell me what has happened to us, where we are."

Trafford got unsteadily to his feet, stumbled to his own bunk, sat down.

He said, after a long pause, "My guess is this . .

"So you're only guessing, Commander?"

"Yes. Only guessing. But I think that we're in some sort of ship. Not a surface ship. An airship."

"An airship? The only flying machines we saw were catapult-launched gliders."

"Agreed. But you've knocked around the Galaxy, ma'am — both as an officer in the Dog Star Line and in your Imperial Yacht. There's more than one world whose humanoid people have developed the art of flight—and flight without benefit of wings, rockets, inertial drive or anti-gravity. What were the beginnings of flying on our own home world? There was one of the books in *Vindictive's* library by a man called Wells, *The War in the Air*, which was a fictionalized forecast of what might happen, which told the story of an attack launched by Germany on America, using a huge fleet of dirigibles, zeppelins they were called, gas bags with engines. . . ."

"And so you think that we are prisoners aboard such a dirigible airship?"

"Yes. There's the motion. There's the extreme lightness of all the material used in the construction of this cabin. There's that copper gauze around the flame of the lamp—a most essential precaution if there's any leakage of hydrogen from the gas bag, or gas bags."

She frowned, then murmured, "You could be right, Commander. And if you are—what can we do about it?"

He told her, "My guess is . . ."

"Stop this damned guessing."

"All right. We're prisoners. We're being taken to the Red

Jeddak's capital. He'll make us talk, and his methods won't be at all pleasant. So we seize his pet airship, and take her to the Emerald City."

She looked at him amusedly. "Now you're talking, Benjamin. But how, man, *how*?"

"First of all we get out of this dogbox, and carry on from there."

"Once again, *how*?" She got to her feet, prowled around the little cabin. "This must be the door. If only there were some crack or crevice that I could get my fingers into . . . Trafford, watching the play of the muscles under the smooth, brown skin of her bare arms, had little doubt that she would make short work of the flimsy seeming panel.

He took an inventory of himself and his possessions. His pistols were gone, of course, but he was still fully clothed. He was still wearing his shoes. To even a more than casual glance they were merely standard items of uniform footwear. But M had always insisted that his agents be prepared for any and all eventualities—and in the last

eventuality of all there would be the cyanide capsule concealed in the hollowed out tooth. Trafford hoped briefly that it wouldn't come to that.

Still seated on the bunk, he raised his left foot, rested it on his right knee. With his right hand he twisted the heel of the shoe—to the left, to the right, back to the left again. There was a barely audible click. The heel pulled clear then—and with it came the six inch blade that had been sheathed in the sole, gleaming wickedly in the faint yellow light from the lamp.

His heelless shoe hampering him slightly, Trafford limped to the door. With the point of his knife he attacked the wickerwork. It was far tougher than he had anticipated, and it was impossible to get the blade into the hairline crack that surrounded the panel. But he persevered, chipping away, working as silently as possible. At his feet the little heap of shiny splinters grew slowly.

At last there was a hole—a small one, hardly greater in diameter than his forefinger. Trafford bent down, put his eye to it. He was looking into a narrow alleyway, dimly illumined by a lamp similar to the one that was hanging in the cabin. At the end of this alleyway was an open door through which he could glimpse movement, a coming and going of shadowy figures against a faint, yellowish light. That must be the control room, he decided—the control

room, or the bridge, or whatever it was called in a ship of this type.

Gently—but making no secret of her fantastic strength — the Empress pulled him away from his peephole, crouched to put her own eye to it. Then she straightened, turned to look at the Commander, smiling grimly. She said, "They'll not be expecting us. From my own experience of watch officers in any class of vessel, they'll just be pottering around their controls, trying to pass the time." She chuckled. "And they can't even smoke to keep themselves awake. . . ."

"Speak for the Dog Star Line, Irene. In the Imperial Navy . . ."

"In the Imperial Navy you're no more than spacemen, with the same virtues and vices as merchant officers. Rather less spacegoing experience, of course . . ."

As she talked, she was inserting one long, slim finger into the hole that Trafford had so painfully gouged in the door. With her free hand she motioned him to stand back. He stepped to one side to watch her, saw the muscles swell into prominence all along her right arm, saw the fines of strain and concentration on her face. He heard her grunt, and then he heard the creaking—faint at first, then louder—of the protesting wickerwork.

There was a *snap!*—startlingly loud, then a wrenching noise, and the Empress was staggering backwards, the panel still dangling from the stiff forefinger of her upraised hand. Somehow she contrived to maintain her balance; had she not done so the crash of her fall would surely have been audible in the control room.

Swiftly Trafford rid himself of both his shoes and then, in his stocking feet, the knife ready in his right hand, ran silently along the alleyway.

XVIII

THEHE WERE three men in the glass-enclosed control room. One of them was standing at a conventional enough ship's wheel mounted abaft a skeleton binnacle. Another was stationed at a second wheel, the axis of which was at right angles to the longitudinal axis of the ship. (*Coxswain and altitude coxswain*, thought Trafford, without wondering where this piece of specialized knowledge came from.) The third man—captain or officer of the watch—was peering ahead and downwards through the wide, rain-spattered forward window, holding his long, clumsy telescope against a stanchion for steadiness.

It was the altitude coxswain who was first to see the intruder. He cried out in some strange language, relinquished his grip on his wheel, fumbled a short knife

from the sheath at his belt. Trafford kept on coming, his body crouched, his right arm, with the blade in his hand angled upwards, held stiffly before him. He actually felt sorry for the other man who, so obviously, was not an experienced knife-fighter.

But he was wasting his sympathy.

The officer—a huge man, heavily bearded—had turned away from his lookout post and was lumbering aft with surprising speed, his telescope upraised like a club. He brushed the coxswain aside, sending the man sprawling to the deck, and charged at the Commander. Viciously, Trafford thrust at the paunch that strained the airman's tunic almost to bursting point, but he was not quick enough. The heavy brass telescope came crashing down and Trafford took the bone-cracking blow on his right forearm. The knife flew from his hand, clattered against the after bulkhead.

The officer raised the instrument—bent now, battered, useless for its original function—for a second blow, and Trafford threw himself sideways, out of the path of the descending bludgeon. He blundered into the binnacle, tearing that flimsy fitting from its holding-down bolts. The compass bowl, jolted from its gymbals, rolled under the feet of the altitude coxswain who, knife in hand, was about to

make his belated contribution to the fight. The man tripped, went sprawling again.

But the helmsman, now that his steering gear was ruined, was ready to play his part. A huge right fist caught Trafford a stunning buffet on the side of the head, his left hand reached out to grab the Commander by the throat. Trafford's right arm was still useless, but he managed to get his left hand up, closed his fingers around the thick wrist of the hand that was throttling him.

For long seconds the two men stood there, locked motionless and straining among the wreckage of the steering gear. Trafford was no weakling; neither was the coxswain. Each of them was fighting for his life. A red haze obscured the Commander's vision and there was a loud drumming in his ears. He knew that if he did not soon draw breath he would be finished. It seemed that every last ounce of his strength had been diverted to the fingers of his left hand. Convulsively, he tried to increase the pressure—and thought that he could feel the grating of bones, the bones of the other man's wrist, the slightest of crepitations. And then the grip of those other fingers relaxed, ever so slightly, and Trafford managed a brief, painful, whistling inhalation. But he knew that he was only postponing the inevitable. There was this man, and there was the other coxswain, and there was the airships Captain.

He had forgotten the Empress.

The red mist had cleared from his eyes and he could see her now, only a couple of feet from where he was standing, and she, like him, was locked in deadly embrace with her opponent. They were big, both of them, the woman and the bearlike man—but the man was the bigger of the two. He had his massive arms about her, was crushing her, was exerting all his strength to crack her ribs, to snap her spine. He was laughing, his big teeth yellow against his black beard —and she, fantastically, was smiling back at him, but her smile, coldly vicious, was even uglier than his laughter.

Standing well back and clear, knife in hand, was the altitude coxswain. It was not fear on his flat, yellow face. It was a sort of hopeless indignation, the expression that Trafford had seen often enough on the faces of a certain old-womanly type of petty officer, the resentment that such things as battles can ruin the routine of a well-run ship.

The airship Captain was laughing, and the Empress was smiling—and then she, too, laughed aloud. It was just after she sagged in the man's arms, all her strength apparently dissipated, and he (stupidly) relaxed, for only a second, but it was enough. The woman exploded into motion—lightning fast, deadly sure. She was down on one knee, and had pulled the huge airman with her. Then,

straightening like a released spring, she was up, still moving with all the fluid grace of a star ballerina.

As she straightened she flung the hapless Captain from her. Straight for the big forward window he hurtled. The crash of shattering glass almost drowned his scream—almost, but the sound of it, oddly high and pitiful, was to remain with

Trafford for a long time to come. An icy gale, with a fusillade of hailstones, howled through the broken window. There was a blinding flare of lightning, a deafening cannonade of thunder. The ship, her aerodynamic qualities impaired by the damage to her forward structure, lurched and staggered, and as the deck fell away beneath their feet Trafford was able to break free from the coxswain. The man blundered backwards, off balance, and the Empress chopped him down with the edge of her hand, slicing it on the back of his bull neck with such force that the crack of snapping vertebrae was audible even above the storm. But he was luckier than his Captain. He never knew what hit him.

Now, of the original crew, only the altitude coxswain was left in the control room. He scrambled towards the after bulkhead, where the door was, and Trafford thought that he was trying to make his way aft to call for help from the engineers or other crew members. That may have been

his intention—but before he could gain the fore-and-aft alleyway the Empress was there, barring his way, swaying lightly and easily to the heavy and uneasy swaying of the gondola.

Suddenly he veered, away from the door, to a row of toggles, each painted bright scarlet, that hung against the bulkhead. He seized two of them with his right hand, two with his left, and tugged downwards. They came away from the numbered panel, each on its length of cord. "Stop him!" shouted the Empress. "He's valving gas!"

Trafford did not need to be told. He had realized, almost at once, what the altitude coxswain was doing. He wrestled with the man, tried to get those toggles out of his hands. The airman made no effort to defend himself but guarded the valve controls with grim desperation, hugging them to his body. And when the Empress, intervening, had felled him with a karate blow, his dead fingers were still clenched around those seemingly harmless little pieces of wood, could not be loosened.

Trafford pulled the knife from the dead man's belt, slashed the valve cords. Spring-loaded, they vanished into their conduits. Presumably the valves had now automatically shut themselves. But how much precious lift had been lost?

The Empress was shouting to him, raising her voice to make herself heard above the tumult of the gale. Trafford saw that she was standing at the broken window at the forward end of the control room, looking out and down. He fought his way against the pressure of the wind, made an unsteady way over the heaving deck to her side. As he passed a rack of voice pipes he heard a plaintive whistling, guessed that the engineers were trying to find out what was happening. He thought grimly, *They'll find out soon enough.*

And then there was no wind. It seemed that the ship was floating motionless in a flat calm. But surely that could not be. Surely even on this crazy planet the laws of meteorology held good—although, perhaps the airship had driven into the dead center of a revolving storm. And then he knew what had happened. The engines had stopped, or had been stopped. The dirigible was a dirigible no longer, was no more than a free balloon, carried by the currents of the air.

He was at the window now by Irene's side, looking out and down. There was an almost continuous flare of lightning, and by the blue, fitful glare he could see the peaks below them, the jagged, snow-covered peaks that were sliding away beneath them, only to be replaced by other peaks, higher, more desolate, that came surging up

from leeward in chaotic procession. But it was not the craggy mountain tops that were rising to smash the fragile ship, it was the ship that was falling to smash herself on those dreadful barricades of rock and ice.

Trafford had the dead man's knife. He turned away from the window, saw his own blade gleaming among the glittering broken glass from the compass bowl. He ran back to pick it up, and, as he did so, saw a half dozen or so bulky forms running clumsily along the fore and aft alleyway to the control room. There was no time to lose. He rejoined the Empress. "Can you climb?" he asked. "Of course," she replied.

"We have to get out of here. Fast. Here. Take this." He handed her the coxswain's knife, then transferred his own to his mouth, gripping it between his teeth. She followed his example and then, just as the first of the engineers burst into the control room, she was out of the window. She sat for a second on the narrow ledge, leaning out and back, and then grasped something overhead. As she pulled herself up and clear, her feet dangled there briefly, then she lifted them from sight.

It was the number of his enemies that saved Trafford. There were too many of them to operate efficiently in the cramped compartment. They crowded in, shouting and screaming, some of them with knives, others brandishing

spanners and hammers. Their leader tripped over the body of the coxswain and fell heavily, but one of the others seized Trafford's feet just as the Commander was wriggling through the broken window. Trafford kicked back, but was unable to break the man's hold, and all the time he was groping frantically for the stay rope or whatever it was that the Empress had found.

A strong hand closed upon his own and then, with a wrench that almost dislocated his shoulder, he was jerked out of the window. The weight on his arm was such that it seemed that the bone would be pulled from its socket—and then, abruptly, it was halved. Below him, twisting and turning as he fell to the snow-covered rocks, was the man who had tried to prevent his escape, the man whose thin screams drifted back through the icy air, the man from whose hand still fluttered the black sock that he had torn from Trafford's foot.

Other men were leaning from the window of the gondola, slashing and thrusting with their weapons, but the Empress swung Trafford out and clear, dragged him aft until he was in line with one of the unbroken windows. Then she lifted him, still with one hand only, her other hand grasping one of the stay ropes by which the car depended from the balloon. Another jerk, and he was standing with her on the slippery roof of the car, not daring to look down,

holding on to her, gaining fresh strength from the firmness of her body, the calmness of her face.

His fit of vertigo passed.

He took the knife from his mouth and said, "You know what we have to do." She nodded in reply.

XIX

ABOVE THEM bellied the bulk of the huge balloon, lopsided now, its sldn wrinkled, the pressure of the gas in at least four of its compartments dangerously reduced and, if the valves had failed to shut properly, falling still. Whether or not the gas pressure was still falling, the airship was. The jagged peaks rushing by below were close, too close.

From the smashed windows of the gondola was ejected a desperate jetsam of fittings, weapons, tools and even clothing, and the dead bodies of the two coxswains. From aft there was a sudden splattering of fluid—oil fuel and water ballast. The aeronauts were working frantically to save their ship—and their own skins. Had it not been for the two escaped prisoners—whom they were ignoring, or had forgotten—they might well have succeeded.

Trafford had heard the noise of splintering glass as the windows were smashed, had seen the beginning of the

jettison. He knew that once the ship's buoyancy had been restored the crew would have time to deal with him and the Empress. There was no time to lose—but, even so, too great haste could spell disaster.

Already his companion was attacking the first of the stay ropes with her knife. He motioned her to desist. Puzzlement and resentment were on her face, but she obeyed. While she waited, the Commander located, among the cat's cradle of cordage, the valve lines. These he sliced through methodically, being careful not to put any weight on them. He explained briefly, "I had to do this. Otherwise, when we cut the stays, the drag of the gondola will open every valve and we'll drop like a stone."

"I see," she said, and the resentful expression was replaced by one of respect. Then, "Where do we start on the stays?"

"You take the port side, 111 take the starboard. First time round, cut every second stay. That way our friends down in the gondola won't realize what's happening."

"Until it's too late," she said.

"Until it's too late," he agreed.

Then, using their knives with vicious deliberation, they worked their way aft along the slippery roof of the car. Trafford lagged behind the Empress. He was hampered by his injured arm and by his frozen feet—one naked, one clad

only in a sock. She waited for him at the after end of the gondola, resting against the bracket from which was hung the big rudder.

"And now?" she demanded.

"We cut the rest of the stays, leaving only one at either end. That way there still shouldn't be any betraying motion."

She smiled grimly. "I hope you're right, Benjamin."

"So do I. But once we have that over and done with, the last two stays should be only a second's work."

Once again she said, "I hope you're right."

Their journey back to the forward end of the car was far more hazardous than their journey aft had been. When they had started their sabotage, they had been enclosed in what was, in effect, a cage, the bars of which were taut ropes. Now most of those bars were gone, were dangling vertically from the net that held the balloon captive, well out of reach from the cambered roof of the gondola. Now a false step would mean a certain plunge to destruction—and missed footing on the icy surface would be far too easy.

Trafford tried not to look down—but, inevitably, he did. The peaks were still streaming by below the gale-driven ship, jagged black rocks and jagged blue ice, even more desolate in the bleak, gray light of the dawn than they had seemed by the intermittent effulgence of the lightning.

They were no closer than they had been—but they were no more distant. The balloonettes must still be leaking, Trafford thought, and the dumping of all surplus weight by the crew had barely compensated for the loss of buoyancy.

Now, with most of the stays gone, the motion of the car was becoming lively. Trafford slashed the last one on the starboard side, then lunged desperately for the one remaining stay forward that was secured to the stem of the gondola. He slipped. He had no time to feel fear—the Empress was already clinging to the rope; she reached out with one hand and yanked him inboard. She pulled him to her, and their bodies came into violent contact. As in the cabin, when he had awakened her, he was acutely conscious of the warmth and the firmness and the softness of her. And she was aware of him.

She murmured, "You do choose the damndest times to make your dishonorable intentions obvious, my dear. . . ."

He said bitterly, "What do the time and place matter? With you an Empress, *the* Empress, and myself a humble three-ringer, how could we . . . ?"

She laughed softly. "The same as anybody and everybody else, of course. It's quite simple, really. . . ." She had to incline her head to kiss him, but it somehow didn't matter. She murmured, "That's just in case"

She left him then, clinging to the forestay with his good hand, and ran lightly and confidently aft. When she was half way to the stern of the gondola a hatch suddenly opened; belatedly, the airship's crew was investigating what was happening above their heads. Irene did not falter in her stride, but she jumped, landing fair and square on the panel of varnished wickerwork. There was a howl from below. Somebody had acquired a set of broken fingers. And that same somebody, thought Trafford, would soon have more than his fingers broken. He felt sorry for the airmen. They were doing their best to save their ship. But he knew that if they were allowed the chance to recapture the Empress and himself they would exact revenge for all that had happened to their Captain and their other shipmates.

Irene had reached the after stay, barely in time. There was no longer any danger from inside the car—that hatch, now, must be jammed tight shut. Suddenly the stresses and strains resulting from the cutting of the stays had taken effect. The car was sagging, had assumed an exaggerated banana shape; and overhead the balloon was more misshapen than ever, almost a mirror image of the warped gondola dependent from it.

Trafford shifted his weakened right hand to the stay, held his knife in his left. He told himself that he would have to remember to cut below his grasping point, remembered

the old story of the man who sawed through the tree branch that he was sitting on. He looked aft. Irene was ready. He saw the flash of her white teeth as she smiled at him, then was dazzled by a sudden reflection from her blade as a stray shaft of sunlight struck through the heavy clouds.

"Now?" she called.

"Now!" he yelled back.

His knife was still sharp, and sliced through the taut rope with fantastic ease. Shockingly the roof of the car fell away beneath him. His right hand started to slip on the stay—and then the severed end whipped around, coiled itself about his wrist. But he was barely conscious of his narrow escape—and was acutely conscious of the howl that issued from the smashed windows of the gondola—an outcry of rage and terror, but mainly of terror. He hung there, and watched the twisted fuselage falling, falling, watched the writhing bodies spilling from it as it dropped. There were no parachutes. The wreckage struck fair and square on a craggy peak. There must have been oil fuel still in the tanks—or, possibly there were reserve bottles of hydrogen. In any case, there was a burst of orange flame, a billowing of dirty brown smoke. And then the conflagration was far astern and dwindling fast as what remained of the airship bounded higher and higher into the sky.

Trafford dropped his knife, brought his left hand up so that it gripped the rope just above his right. Slowly, painfully, he lifted himself, shifting one hand at a time. But he knew that he would never make it to the apology for safety afforded by the gas bag. The rope was thin and slippery, his hands were weak and cold. It seemed that for every inch he raised himself he slipped back two.

Something struck his face. He cursed feebly, shook his head to try to brush away the annoyance. Then he heard

Irene shouting, "Benjamin! Benjamin! Try to get your body into the bowline!"

He opened his eyes properly then, saw the line, with its looped knot, hanging before him. He looked up. Irene was spread-eagled against the gas bag like a fly in a spider's web. Somehow she had contrived to get herself between the netting and the fabric of the balloon. She had both hands free to work with, and in them she gripped the bight of the rope whose end she had lowered to the Commander.

Trafford let go of the stay with his right hand, then managed to get his arm inside the bowline, to work it down to his shoulder, then over his head and neck. If he relaxed the grip of his left hand too soon, he would fall; in all probability he would hang himself. Or, he thought glumly, his head would be pulled off. Working slowly and cautiously, he got hold of the Empress's life-line with his right hand.

There was plenty of slack, so he was able to get a couple of turns around his wrist. Even so, the weight, when it came onto his damaged arm, was agonizing. Then there was his left hand to get through the bowline, and his left arm and shoulder. He—as are most spacemen, of necessity—was a fair contortionist, and after a warning shout to Irene, he eased his grip on the line, let his hands slip down it until he felt the comforting pressure of it under his armpits.

Slowly, jerkily, the Empress pulled his dangling body up to safety.

They were safe enough with the netting to support them, to hold them against the firm but yielding skin of the balloon. They would even have been comfortable had it not been so bitterly cold, had they not been hungry and thirsty. They huddled together for warmth and talked more for the sake of breaking the deathly silence than for anything of importance to say. They looked down at the cloudscape over which they were drifting, at the fantastic, insubstantial snowy peaks, at the shadowy chasms. They strained their eyes as they tried to catch a glimpse of the surface of the world through the rifts, but the glare of the sunlight reflected from the clouds was too dazzling. But, as Trafford pointed out, even prominent landmarks would have meant nothing to them.

They slept fitfully, now and again awakening with a jerk from nightmares of falling. They talked, and they slept, and slowly the derelict airship lost altitude, so slowly that they did not realize it until the first clammy tendrils of mist were reaching up and around them.

They dropped through featureless gray, faster now as the condensation of water on cordage and fabric added weight to the balloon. Trafford thought that he could detect an upward motion of damp air past his face, decided that this relative motion was becoming more pronounced with every passing minute.

He said, "We're coming down, Irene. We shall have to get out of this cat's cradle in a hurry when we ground. One spark, and we've had it."

She told him, "Don't worry. I still have my knife."

Abruptly, they broke through the overcast.

At first it seemed that there was another cloud layer below them, but it was not. It was a snow-covered plain, almost featureless, broken at infrequent intervals by clumps of dark trees, by the rigidly straight double line of a railroad track.

The Empress said, "It doesn't look at all cheerful. We can gain altitude again by hacking away some of the surplus cordage. . . ."

"No," decided Trafford. "Here's as good a place to land as any. We can wait for a train to come along, or walk along the tracks."

They fell slowly. Impatiently, the Empress jabbed the point of her knife through the balloon fabric. With a gusty sigh the gas escaped and the rate of descent was accelerated. Again Irene used her knife, this time to slash the netting holding herself and Trafford against the skin of the balloon. They hung by their hands until the ground was only a few feet distant, then let go, tumbling into a deep snowdrift. Released from their weight, the almost deflated gas bag soared back to the clouds.

The Commander fought his way clear of the powdery snow, then got his hands around Irene's wrists to pull her clear. When they were standing on the solid ground at the edge of the drift, leaning on each other for support, he looked up. He saw that they were surrounded by soldiers—big men in long overcoats, with odd conical caps and bayoneted rifles.

To have tried to run would have been futile.

Trafford looked at the man with the heavy, glittering epaulets on the shoulders of his coat, shrugged and grinned, saying with what little humor he could muster in the circumstances, "Take me to your leader."

"Da," answered the officer gruffly.

XX

THERE HAD BEEN a journey. Trafford knew that much, although his memories of what had happened after the landing were hazy. They had ridden on a hard, wooden seat in a rattling, drafty compartment of a railway train, a string of wooden carriages drawn by a clumsy locomotive from the tall stack of which belched thick smoke and showers of sparks. They had been unable to move, and the soldiers crowding around them prevented them from talking by the threat of the long, dull-gleaming bayonets.

It had been a hideously uncomfortable journey, and now he was seated on an overstuffed chair in an overheated room, looking at the man who was sitting on the other side of the table, the man who was looking at him with equal intensity. *This*, thought Trafford, *must be Kars Karkovitch, the Red Jeddak himself. . . .*

The Jeddak was wearing a beautifully tailored olive-drab uniform, with a blaze of orders and decorations on the left breast, with wide, stiff shoulder-boards, gold braid on scarlet. Above the tall collar was a hard face, with high cheekbones and prominent jaw, with no superfluous flesh, with bleak, gray eyes that had a Mongolian slant to them, with a closely shaven head. Trafford thought wily that this man's appearance contrasted strongly with that of the

luxuriantly bearded worthies whose portraits were hung on the crimson wall. Then his attention strayed from the living face and the portrayed faces to the wide window, to the expanse of glass through which he could see driving snow, and through the snow the hazy, gray outlines of onion spires. He could not be sure, but he fancied that he could hear the howling of wolves.

"Perhaps," said the Jeddak, indicating what was laid out on the table, "you will join me in a light repast, Commander Bond. I must apologize for the lack of champagne—but, after all, you should not expect such bourgeois luxuries in a People's Republic. . . ."

Trafford looked at the refreshments—the bowl of black caviar, with chopped hard-boiled eggs and onion and lemon wedges, standing in its larger bowl of crushed ice, the plate of thinly sliced dark brown bread, the bottle of vodka in its ice bucket. It was all very familiar, and he knew why. He said stiffly, "My name is not Bond."

"My apologies, Commander Trafford." The Jeddak smiled without mirth, revealing stainless-steel dentures. "A slip of the tongue." He filled two tiny glasses from the vodka bottle.

"But will you join me in a toast? Shall we drink to a mutually profitable relationship?"

"Shall we drink?" countered Trafford. He tossed the vodka down in the approved manner, felt a warm glow spreading through his body. He buttered a slice of the black bread, spread it thickly with caviar. After the first bite he decided that he strongly approved of the mythical James Bond's tastes in food and drink.

The Jeddak refilled the glasses. "No doubt you have wondered, Commander, how you and your companion were able to survive. You would not have survived, of course, had our final gas barrage consisted of chlorine-filled shells. But my agents in the Emerald City had brought me word concerning you, and so I gave orders that you were to be taken alive. And so, after that utterly futile charge had petered out, an anesthetic vapor was used. . . ." He raised his glass to Trafford, drained it swiftly. Trafford followed suit. "I did not anticipate, of course, that you and the woman would be so resourceful as to seize one of my airships." He added with a cold viciousness, "The Captain and his crew were lucky that they did not survive."

A sudden shock of fear—but not for himself—struck Trafford. "Where is Irene?" he demanded. "Where is the Empress?"

"At the moment, quite comfortably housed in the Lubi-anka. No harm has come to her. *"Yet."*

"If you value your own hide, Jeddak, you'd better see to it that no harm does come to her."

"Brave words, Commander. Brave words. But if it suited my purpose—and it may well do so—I would have her flayed alive before your eyes. And what could *you* do about it?"

Trafford forced himself to speak calmly. "Nothing," he admitted. "But I'd get you. Somehow I'd get you."

Kars Karkovitch laughed with real mirth. "You, an unarmed man, alone in a fortress city full of your enemies."

"And if / don't get you, sooner or later the Empress's navy will find this little world of yours, and her warships will hlast this planet into a cloud of incandescent vapor."

"I'd laugh at that threat, too," said the Jeddak, "were it not for the stories I have heard about your hand weapons. Not that I think that the blonde trollop's navy—if she has one—will ever find us . . ." He refilled the glasses. "Talking of hand weapons reminds me of the real purpose of this meeting. It was not to indulge in a morbid discussion of death and torture and revenge; it was to persuade you to assist us in our struggle against the fascist-imperialists."

"And what makes you think that I should be of assistance?"

"Your know-how, Commander Trafford. That heat-ray pistol of yours, and those very ingenious repeating pistols.

Our scientists and technicians are already trying to duplicate them, but there are so many points regarding which they are entirely in the dark. And, apart from the hand weapons, there is so much other information that you will be able to give us."

"You must have a low opinion of me, Kars Karkovitch."

"Why do you say that, Commander?"

"Your assumption that I shall change sides."

"But there is only one side to his historic struggle—the side that stands for and fights for freedom and justice and progress." He frowned at Trafford's sceptical expression, then went on, "No doubt you were misled by the spurious glamour of the decadent bourgeoisie of the Emerald City—but did you see what is behind that glamour, what makes that glamour possible? Did you see the peasants, and the factory workers, and the miners, toiling their sixteen hours a day to keep their worthless masters in luxury? You did not. If you had, you would throw in your lot with the People's Army of Liberation with no reservations whatsoever."

Trafford tried to recall the triumphant entry into the Emerald City. There had been workers and peasants aplenty in the welcoming crowds, of that he was sure. And they had looked neither poorly clad nor poorly fed nor overworked. What the Jeddak was telling him might be the

truth, but it had the ring of propaganda, of stale propaganda at that. No doubt the People's Republic was more efficiently organized and managed than the Land of Oz—but Trafford had lived long enough to become highly suspicious of efficiency for its own sake.

He said, "I'm not in the habit of switching allegiances."

"Come, come, Commander. Even you must realize that this is no time for bourgeois morality."

"Even I realize that morality is not devalued by having meaningless adjectives tacked onto it."

"We have . . . certain techniques, Commander."

"And so, Jeddak, do we. Overpersuasion of an Intelligence Service officer results only in the sudden and quite painless death of that officer."

"Indeed? Now, that is a technique that we should like to learn from you. Unluckily, if it is as effective as you claim, there is no method of persuading you to reveal it." He smiled frostily. "We seem to have reached an *impasse* already, Commander."

Trafford disposed of another slice of black bread liberally heaped with caviar, helped himself to more vodka. "Yes," he admitted.

"But there are means . . . And is it not said that the end justifies the means? Yes, there are means. . . "Such as?"

"You, you assure me, cannot be tortured beyond a certain limit, or pain threshold, or whatever the technical jargon is.

But, to return to a point that I raised before, what if you were privileged to be the spectator of the extremely slow and painful demise of your companion?" "No!" cried Trafford involuntarily.

"No?" The Jeddak laughed softly. "Can it be that I am witnessing a genuine display of that bourgeois emotion called 'love'?"

"I'm not at all in love with her," lied Trafford. "On the contrary. I rather dislike her, in fact."

"So much so that you would enjoy watching her quite superb body reduced to an ugly mass of bleeding flesh and broken bones?" Again that soft, cold laugh. "I can read faces, Commander Trafford. It's a useful ability, and it's helped put me where I am today. You're maintaining your lack of expression very well, very well indeed—but there are those small, betraying flickers. All right. I'll play it your way. You don't like her, you say, and yet you don't want her tortured. Why not?"

"I'm a civilized man," said Trafford.

"What « civilization?" The Jeddak looked at Trafford across the table, over his steepled fingers. "What *is* civilization? Perhaps I can help you to clarify your

statement. As a civilized man you would be quite incapable of putting a match to the pile of faggots upon which a woman was to be burned alive. But, as a civilized man, you would be quite capable of pressing the button that would fire a weapon that, by its discharge, would bum a few thousand women alive. . . . No, Commander, that explanation of yours won't hold water at all."

"I feel a certain loyalty, a certain responsibility . .

"Now we are getting at least an approximation to the truth. You feel loyalty and responsibility. So, it may interest you to know, does she. While you are guzzling vodka and wolfing caviar, she is the prey to acute anxiety, torturing herself by wondering what is happening to you, painting lurid mind pictures that are not true. *Yet*.

"But you admit that you, as she, feel loyalty and responsibility. I venture to suggest that you will feel even more responsible when you watch her become victim to the ingenuities of my torturers. . . ."

Trafford stared sickly at the Jeddak, could read no mercy in that hard face, no decency. He knew that the man's threats would be made good—but knew, too, that he himself could never reveal the secrets of his own technological culture to this tyrant. But what was the alternative? Could he maintain his silence in the face of torture—not of himself, but of Irene?

He did not know. There was only one way to find out, and that was by actual experience.

But why should he be obliged to find out at all?

For the first time he remembered his ship, and the companions that he and the Empress had left standing by the ship. Surely by this time they must be feeling some concern about the safety of the Empress and himself. Surely, at any moment now, *Vindictive* would be hovering over this northern city, her down-stabbing rocket exhausts striking terror into the hearts of its people. (And what was that sneer of the Jeddak's about the false reluctance of the civilized man to incinerate his fellow humans?)

So, thought Trafford, all that he had to do was to play for time.

"You know," remarked the Jeddak, "I'm something of a telepath. Or it could be, my dear Commander, that you and I are essentially of the same breed. It could be that I know what you're thinking because I should be thinking along similar lines in your circumstances. You're considering ways and means of putting off the evil hour, aren't you? You're hoping that if you can fight a long enough delaying action your singularly inefficient friends from the Emerald City will come charging to the rescue. Frankly, I can't see them doing anything of the kind. Even if they were capable of making the effort, they wouldn't make it for the sake of a

couple of outsiders like the blonde popsy and yourself. . . . But I can see that you still hope that if you gain enough time something, just conceivably, might turn up." He refilled the glasses, held his aloft in an ironical toast before draining it.

"And just how can you gain this precious time? By giving my scientists false leads, of course, by getting them started on quite unproductive lines of research. But that will do your girlfriend no good at all, Commander Trafford. Every time that my brain trust is led up the garden path, she'll lose something. A finger, say, and then another finger, and so on. And when all the fingers of that hand are gone we amputate at the wrist. Without an anesthetic, of course. And then at the elbow. And so on. Do you get the general idea?"

"I do," admitted Trafford. *But*, he thought, ***even a few hours should be enough. The others must be wondering about us by this time.*** He extended his hand to the vodka bottle. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not, Commander. Isn't there a saying, ***In vino Veritas?***"

"There is. But I need a drink and I'll take the risk. Your very good health, Jeddak."

"And yours, Commander." Then he said, with a grim smile, "Just how much alcohol do you need to loosen your

tongue? I can send for a couple or three more bottles. . . ."

"Doesn't worry me," bragged Trafford. "I've drunk Admirals under the table in my time."

This last was not true, although he had spoken the truth when he had said that he was not worried. He knew from past experience that the main effect of an excess of liquor upon himself was to make him extremely drowsy. Not for him the hymn-singing stage, not for him the blurting out to anybody who would care to listen to the story of his life and hard times. He hoped that the Jeddak's vodka would prove no exception to the rule.

"We can use you, Commander." Kars Karkovitch's own voice was just a little slurred. "We can use you. There aren't any vacancies for Vice-Jeddaks at the moment, but I could soon create one." He belched gently. "In the obvious way."

"And when my own usefulness is at an end?" Trafford refilled the glasses.

"It needn't come to an end. You play ball with me, and I play ball with you. And even Jeddaks don't live forever, you know. Somebody will have to follow me—and I'd sooner that it were somebody like you than the bright young men whose only real talent is the ability to toe the Party line. You can make something of this world, Trafford. You've the know-how. You're a tough technician—and my own people

are either technicians *or* toughs, never the two combined." He refilled the glasses.

Why not play along? Trafford asked himself. He would not be the first spaceman to set himself up as King. But there was still that nagging sense of responsibility.

"What do you say, Vice-Jeddak Trafford?" Kars Karkovitch refilled the glasses. "Shall we drink to it?"

"Shall we just drink?" countered the Commander, and chuckled inanely at his own feeble, repetitious humor. Then he was suddenly conscious of the heat in the room, felt the perspiration trickling down his skin under his uniform. He felt an urge to hurl the bottle through the window, to break the glass so that the cold outside air could stream in. But instead of doing so he slopped more vodka into his own litde tumbler, more into the Jeddak's.

"What do you say, Vice-Jeddak Trafford?" persisted his host—or his jailor.

"AD this talking is thirsty work . . ." mumbled the Commander.

He found it hard to raise his glass to his mouth, and at least two thirds of the contents dribbled down his chin. The man sitting across the table from him looked more like a reflection in a distorting mirror than a flesh-and-blood being. The bearded faces of the portraits on the wall leered down at him. The heavy, crimson velvet hangings stirred

uneasily as though there were something lurking behind them, something that was trying to gather the energy to break through into the room. The Jeddak's voice—and Trafford could no longer make out what he was saying—was coming from very far away. And then it seemed that the window was broken and that the snow was driving in—thick snow, soft snow, snow as warm and muffling as cotton wool.

Trafford drifted into unconsciousness, welcoming the deep wave of sleep that washed over him.

He was dimly aware that somebody was slapping his face, that somebody was saying sharply, "Wake up, Commander! Wake up I Damn you, wake up!"

He mumbled, "Go t'hell, Jeddak. Lemme sleep. . . ."

"Wake up, Trafford! Wake up!"

XXI

"WAKE UP, Trafford!"

No, thought the Commander stubbornly. *No*.

"Wake up, damn you!" Then, "Please, *please* wake up!"

It was not, he dimly realized, the Jeddak's voice. It was the voice of a woman. He opened his eyes with an effort. He saw a face hanging over his own, a head encased in a transparent helmet. It was the Lady Susanna.

He mumbled, "So you got here. . . ."

"Of course we got here. As soon as we saw you all collapse we realized that it was some sort of poison gas."

"But that was outside Fort Zindemeuf. Why the hell didn't you use the ship's weapons against the Jeddak's forces?"

"What are you raving about?" She got her hands under his armpits, dragged him to his feet. "Fort Zindemeuf? That's out of P. C. Wren's Foreign Legion stories. And the only Jeddaks I know of are those in Burroughs' Martian novels . . ." She managed a grin, albeit a shaky one. "You must have been enjoying dreams in Glorious Technicolor, Commander!"

Trafford shook his head fuzzily. He stared stupidly at the battered, unspaceworthy *Vindictive* resting, tilted at a drunken angle, in the middle of the black, charred circle she had blasted for herself on the lichenous plain. Then he looked down at the inert bodies of the others—at the Empress, at Dr. Pettigrew, at Bronheim, at Metzenth—sprawled out on the pulpy growth. The spacesuited Tallentire was trying to revive his fellow Commanders and had managed to shake the telepath into some semblance of life. Then he looked again at Susanna, saw that the face behind the helmet transparency was still tense with worry.

He muttered, "A dream . . ."

"Never mind the dream!" In spite of the muffling effects of the helmet diaphragm her voice was sharp. "Never mind your silly dream. We must get back to the ship."

"Not so fast." Trafford was feeling better now, was feeling, even though weak and shaken, singularly clearheaded. He was quite capable of adding two and two to make a plausible four. He stared down at his feet, saw the trampled, crushed leaves and stems of the succulent plant. "I think I see what happened. . . .

"It was this plant. As long as we were walking over the charred patch we were safe enough. It was when we were trampling on the undamaged growth that we released the gas . . ."

"Just what I've been saying."

"Let me finish. As you were saying, it's a poison gas of sorts. An anesthetic gas. Any animal stumbling onto this plain is rendered unconscious, and finally dies, and its decomposing body drains into the ground as fertilizer, and is overgrown by the plants. But there must be some inducement, some lure . . . Yes, I begin to see the mechanics of it. The vapor that's released is more than just an anesthetic. It's similar in its effects to the hallucinogenic drugs used by psychiatrists—lysergic acid and the like. There are dreams. In the case of a simple, uncomplicated

lower animal they'll be very pleasant dreams—no more, probably, than the satisfying of the simple lusts and hungers." He smiled wearily.

"In our case, the dreams were rather more complicated. And, to add to the complications, wish-fulfillment has a way of bouncing back on one . . ." He looked down at the sleeping Empress. "You know, I think she shared my dream. There were one or two things in it that couldn't have been dredged up out of my subconscious alone."

"What did you dream?" asked the girl.

"It's a long story. I may tell you later. I think I shall be happier when I have a steel deck under my feet rather than these bladders of dream juice. Give Tallentire a hand to wake the others, will you?"

She said, "Hadn't I better go back to the ship for suits for you all?"

"Yes," agreed Trafford—and then he grinned again. "No, it won't be necessary. I'm still having trouble separating dream from reality, and in the dream I expended the charge of my laser pistol." He drew the weapon, pointed it at the ground. A barely visible beam of concentrated light flickered from the muzzle. The fleshy growths in the line of fire flamed briefly, crumbled to black ash from which drifted an eddy of smoke and steam. "Heat

destroys whatever organic chemical it is that vaporizes under pressure; it was only when we left the burned patch that we were overcome. All I have to do is to use a fairly wide beam-setting to blast a path back."

"That will take less time," she agreed, and then knelt beside Dr. Pettigrew and began to shake him back to wakefulness.

Trafford stood looking down at Irene. She was still sleeping. She was as beautiful as she had been in his dream—but, the Commander knew, utterly inaccessible. *It was a good dream—good in parts, anyhow—while it lasted*, he thought bitterly. *But it was only a dream.* And then, mutinously, *To hell with it. We acted out practically every adult fairy story that was ever penned—so why not a children's one? I'm no prince, I know, but she'd pass for the Sleeping Beauty. . . .*

Gently he lowered himself to the ground beside her. Gently he put his arms about her, gently he touched her Hips with his own. The reaction was instantaneous. She stiffened, threw him from her.

So that's that, thought Trafford, mentally shrugging—then heard her say, "Take your filthy paws off me, you Slavonic dike!"

Her eyes were open then, and she was staring at him. "Benjamin! You're alive! You're safe! She didn't torture

you!" And then she was smothering him with kisses.

He managed—but with reluctance—to disengage himself. "Irene! Ma'am! *Your Imperial Highness!* Wake up! It was a dream. It was only a dream."

She held him at arm's length, looking at him. "So it was," she admitted slowly. "So it was. But you are real, and you're safe...."

"And you," he said. Then his curiosity got the better of him. "But just who is—or was—the 'Slavonic dike'?"

She grinned embarrassedly. "Kara Karkovna, of course. The Red Jeddak. She threatened to have you tortured to death unless I helped her in her war against the Emerald City." She blushed. "And then she resorted to other tactics. She made a quite unequivocal pass at me."

"Perhaps *somebody* did," muttered Trafford. "But it wasn't her. And, in any case, the Red Jeddak was a man. Kars Kark-ovitch. He tried to soften *me* up by plying me with vodka."

"No. She was a woman. A beautiful woman, by anyone's standards. But cold, vicious . . ."

"All right. In that respect our dreams didn't tally. But the rest of it—the Emerald City, and Fort Zinderneuf, and that crazy airship . . ."

"Yes, yes." Her face clouded, her voice seemed to be coming from very far away. "And it's my fault that Fort

Zinderneuf has fallen, and that the Red Jeddak's cavalry are looting and raping in the streets of the Emerald City. . . ."

"It was only a dream, Irene," he told her sharply.

"But what is dream, and what is reality? Did *your* Red Jeddak tempt you, Benjamin, as mine tempted me? Did he offer you power, unlimited power, with no Committee of old women of both sexes to exercise its veto? Did he argue cunningly and convincingly, as Kara Karkovna argued? Was he really you, a part of you, as Kara Karkovna was a part of me?"

"I... I don't know," said Trafford.

He realized that somebody—it was the Lady Susanna—was tugging his arm, was speaking urgently. "Commander! We must get back to the ship!"

"Why?" asked Trafford. "What's the rush?"

"Look!" she cried.

He lifted his eyes to the sky, to where the girl was pointing. He saw the silvery speck against the cloudless blue—the speck that, even as he watched, expanded to a gleaming spindle. He heard the deep drone of a distant Inertial Drive unit. He saw the air flicker as the laser beam struck home, the bolt of intense light that, in a scant second, reduced the crippled *Vindictive* to a puddle of molten, glowing metal.

Lower dropped the hostile ship, and lower.

"The *Wanderer*," said Commander Tallentire.

Trafford's hands fell to the butts of his holstered weapons. He let them rest there. There would be no sense in wasting ammunition, the charge of the power pack. The pistols might be of some use when, and if, a landing party emerged from the Imperial yacht—assuming, that is, that he would still be alive to use the pistols. But he lost hope of this when he saw the muzzle of what looked like a heavy cannon extruded from the sleek hull. There was a flash and a puff of smoke, a muffled explosion, and something was hurtling through the air towards the party. It seemed to be traveling with abnormal slowness—but, thought the Commander, he must still be feeling the aftereffects of the hallucinogenic vapor.

And then, suddenly, the spherical mass opened up, and the net of fine, tough strands of steel was over and around them, still with enough kinetic force to send them sprawling to the ground. Like something alive it twined itself about their arms and legs, holding them immobile. Trafford's guns were still in their holsters, and so were the weapons of the others. There was no hope of using the hand weapons to burn or blast a way out of the imprisoning metal mesh.

Trafford was able to turn his head just enough to watch the ship land.

He saw the airlock door in her side open, saw the extrusion of the metal tongue that was the ramp. He saw the little, strutting figure in Admiral's full-dress finery emerge—and felt a contemptuous amusement at Captain Mortimer Jones' self-promotion. He saw the tall woman who followed him, the regal woman (yet somehow cowed) who could have been Irene herself, who must be the Lady Eleanor, the Empress's stand-in. Then there were three men—ex-officers of *Starquest*—whose appearances were vaguely familiar, whom Trafford could not quite recognize.

The Empress was saying, with a certain wry humor, "Hoist with our own petard, Benjamin. That gun is my own invention—I used it when I had a craze for big game hunting, of the bring-'em-back-alive variety, on the more savage planets. . . ." She added, without false modesty, "I never dreamed that it would be used to catch game this big."

"But it's stalemate," whispered Trafford. "Or it soon will be. Our friends have made the same mistake as we did. They've come out of their ship without spacesuits, without so much as a breathing mask."

Mortimer Jones was within earshot now. He brought his hand to his cocked hat in a flamboyant salute. "Your Imperial Highness," he said, in his high, singing tenor. "Or should I say, Your ex-Imperial Highness? And whom have

you for courtiers? The good, gray Doctor Pettigrew, and the super-efficient Commander Trafford, and the sweet, two-faced bitch, the Lady Susanna. I'm afraid that I have never made the acquaintance of you other gentlemen, but it does not matter. Some day, when I have nothing better to do, I may browse through Naval Records just to satisfy my curiosity, just to find out which three Commanders went missing without trace at about this time."

He turned his full attention to Irene. "It is not chance that brought me here, *Ma'am*. Providence saw to it that I had on board *Wanderer* a Thalami tracking unit, requisitioned from one of their warships that was so unwise as to attack us. Even Commander Trafford will admit that in the field of electronics I am a near genius, and the improvements that

I have made to the tracker enabled me to follow your faint trail clear across the Galaxy.

"But I have found you, and that is all that matters. I have found you, and all that I have to do is to make sure that nobody else ever finds you.

"Your ex-Imperial Highness—may I introduce your . . . successor? No. Not your successor. From now on *she* will be the Empress Irene, and with her help I shall establish the rule of the one, true Church throughout the Galaxy."

"Eleanor!" said the Empress sharply.

The other woman, who had been standing just behind Mortimer Jones, snatched at the pistol—gold-inlaid butt protruding from a gold-encrusted holster—hanging from the man's belt. But she was not fast enough. One of the officers grabbed her wrist from behind, twisted her arm up cruelly behind her back. There was a brief scuffle and she fell to her knees, her face contorted with pain.

"You must learn, my dear," said Mortimer Jones, turning to face her, "that *I* am the master. You must . . . learn . . ."

And then he, too, was sagging, crumpling to the ground, and the other men were staggering, striving to stay on their feet, until they, too, fell.

"Stalemate," said Trafford, with gloomy satisfaction.

XXII

IT WAS stalemate—but for how long?

Surely Mortimer Jones, after all his years of service in the Imperial Navy, would not have left his ship without at least a skeleton watch on board. How many was it that had boarded the *Wanderer* on Serengor? Trafford tried to remember. What was it that Admiral Buring had said? Then the words were clear in Trafford's memory. "But the fact remains that a woman, answering to your description, accompanied by five men heavily muffled in boat cloaks, boarded the yacht . . ." And now the woman and four men were sprawled unconscious only a few feet from the

captives. So there was still one man unaccounted for—unless he had become a casualty during one of Mortimer Jones' piracies. But that, thought Trafford, was too much to hope for. And what would this fifth man do? Would he be fool enough to come out of the ship without a spacesuit? And if he were so foolish, what good would that do the Empress and her companions?

The most important thing, decided Trafford, was to ignore the shipkeeper until he showed some signs of life, and to get out of the net. He struggled, exerting all his strength, but it was useless. The tightening of the strands across his limbs and body after he had stopped struggling told him that the others were still trying. Their efforts were only making things worse.

"Still, everybody!" barked Trafford. Then, in a softer voice, "Dr. Pettigrew, you've given us all routine checkups. When it comes to sheer, brute strength, who among us is the most powerful?"

"Her Imperial Highness, of course," said the Doctor, not without pride.

Trafford managed to turn his head—slowly, slowly—until he was looking into the Empress's face, only a few inches from his own. And he saw what he hoped to see, a single, pulpy, untrampled frond of the lichenous growth almost under her left cheek. If she could move her head at

all she could crush the plant. She could crush the plant and inhale the released vapor. But before he went any further he had to be sure—or as sure as anybody could be of anything on this crazy planet.

"Commander Metzenthel!"

"Yes, Commander?"

"As you may have already gathered, Her Imperial Highness and I shared a dream, a very vivid dream. I think that I contributed most of the detail. Could I do the same again?"

Metzenthel's voice was doubtful. "Perhaps, Commander. Of course, the experience of shared dreams is very rare, and normally occurs only when the people so sharing are very deeply in love. Of course, in this case, that's entirely out of the question."

"Why the hell should it be, Commander Metzenthel?" snapped the Empress. Then, "All right, Benjamin. What's on your mind?"

"Just this, Irene. There's an undamaged leaf, or whatever it is, of this blasted plant just under your cheek. If you can bear down hard, you'll crush it, release the hallucinogenic vapor. I want you to inhale it. And then, while you're under the influence, I'll try to influence your dream."

"What rubbish is this?" asked Pettigrew angrily.

"Pipe down, Doctor," ordered the Empress. "All right, Benjamin. I think I can guess what you're driving at. I'll give it a go."

Trafford, watching her intently, saw the cords in her neck stand out as she strained to bring her cheek into contact with the pulpy growth, as she rolled her face onto it. He saw her nostrils dilate as she inhaled deeply—and caught a whiff of the sweet-smelling vapor himself.

He began to talk.

"We got away, Irene. We got away in your own *Wanderer*. . . . But we were attacked by a Thalami squadron, and the Mannschenn Drive unit was damaged, its governor smashed. We were thrown back in Time. . . . We made a landing on Earth—on Earth as it was thousands of years ago. We were captured and enslaved. . . ."

Then he stopped talking. He could see that she was now unconscious—and could feel that strange meshing of minds that had resulted in their shared dream. He tried to visualize what it was that she must dream now—and as his own slight inhalation of the vapor took effect, the pictures crowded into his mind with increasing clarity. He saw the arena with its trampled, bloody sand, glaringly yellow under the glaringly blue sky. He saw the banked rows of stone seats and the crowds of spectators, he saw those other seats, draped with costly silks, on one of which lolled

the fat man in his toga of imperial purple, sipping from a golden goblet while two huge Negro slaves maintained a refreshing circulation of air around him with their ostrich feather fans.

There was a fight in progress in the arena.

There was the woman, naked save for kilt and helmet, armed with a small, round shield and a short bronze sword. There was the man, also kilted and helmeted, whose weapons were a net and a trident, the retiarius. He was small, but well muscled, and the skin of his body and face was dark. He gave ground before the confident attack of the swords-woman, Irene, but his features bore a sneering, insolent smile. He was Mortimer Jones.

Irene lunged—and her foot slipped on a patch of blood left from some previous encounter. She did not fall at once — but in the scant second needed for her to regain her balance the retiarius cast his net. The enmeshing strands tightened around her and were tugged viciously. Irene struggled, trying to use her sword to slash her way free, but she could not bring the weapon to bear. Again Mortimer Jones tugged the net, and Irene fell.

The retiarius was on her in a single bound, one foot kicking away her sword, the other landing heavily on her midriff. Trafford heard the air from her lungs expelled in

one explosive gasp—and heard, too, the roar of the massed spectators.

Mortimer Jones raised his trident—but, before he used it, turned to the Emperor, waiting for the Imperial approval, for the traditional thumbs-down sign. "Now," whispered Trafford. "*Now!*"

He saw the muscles swell under the smooth skin of her upper body and arms and shoulders. He saw the first of the strands part, heard the almost inaudible ***snap***. He saw the second strand part, and the third . . .

And then, dimly, he realized that his own left hand was free, that he could just reach the butt of his laser pistol. Trying to dispel the dream from his mind, he pulled the weapon from its holster. He had trouble in focusing his eyes, in distinguishing the real net of wire strands from the visionary net of whatever fiber it was that the Romans used. But he managed to hold the projector steady while its almost invisible beam flickered out. Wire flared to white heat and vaporized. And then Trafford was free.

He ignored the others, knelt beside Irene who was still, with her superhuman strength, tearing her bonds from her. He tried to restrain her. He feared that she would harm herself. Already her hands were bleeding where the wire had cut them. Already her arms and shoulders were marked by angry red weals.

She snarled, "Take your filthy paws off me, you piratical swine!"

This time, hampered as she still was by the net, she could not throw him from her. He maintained his grip on her shoulders, shaking her to awaken her.

At last her eyes opened. She looked up at him with something less than enthusiasm. "Oh. It's *you* again. And where were you, may I ask, while I was being butchered to make a Roman holiday?"

"I was there," he assured her.

"Were you? Was that you in the Royal Box, making the thumbs-down sign?"

"It was not. And now, if youll excuse me, *ma'am*, I'll see about freeing the others."

He used his laser pistol expertly, slicing through the metal mesh in a matter of seconds. Dr. Pettigrew complained bitterly when droplets of molten metal stung his wrist, but that was the least of Trafford's worries. And then, when all the party was freed, he used a broad beam to clear a path to the ship, a path on the verge of which lay the unconscious bodies of Mortimer Jones and his people.

The Empress paused to look down at the dreaming mutineer turned pirate. She muttered, "I wish that I had that bronze sword you dreamed up for me, Benjamin. . . ."

It was Mezenthner who broke the tense silence. He said, "Ma'am, he is being punished. He is being punished with a severity beyond the capability of any court martial. . . ."

"I'll take your word for it," Trafford told him. "But let's not waste any more time. We want that ship."

They approached the airlock with caution, weapons drawn and ready. They were expecting, at any second, a ravaging blast from the yacht's main armament. But none came. Finally, when they had almost reached the ramp, a man walked slowly down it, his hands raised high above his head. He was wearing the uniform of a Paymaster Lieutenant. He talked as he approached them, and he was talking fast. He had tried to stop the atrocities on Serengor, he assured them. He had been virtually shanghaied aboard the Imperial yacht. He had taken no part in the piracies of Mortimer Jones. In fact, as the Empress told him coldly, he was just an innocent little damn lamb. And Trafford brushed him aside contemptuously and made his way up the bow to the airlock.

It was good to be aboard a ship again.

XXIII

THEY SAT in the control room of *Wanderer*—the Empress Irene, and Trafford, Metzenthner and Tallentire and Bronheim, the Lady Susanna and Dr. Pettigrew. Through the viewports they could see the plains of yellow-green

vegetation, the sprawled bodies of Mortimer Jones and his officers, of the Lady Eleanor. Closer at hand was the body of the Paymaster Lieutenant, who had been told by the Empress to go to render first aid to his companions.

"What do we do about them?" asked Trafford.

"We should bring them aboard," said Pettigrew. "They should be carried back to Earth to stand trial."

Metzenthner said softly, "They are already standing trial."

"How can they be? I agree that they all deserve the death penalty, and they must surely die if they are left here. But we have to consider legalities . . ."

"Come off it, Doc." The Empress's voice was deliberately coarse. "Don't try to tell us that you had dreams full of sweetness and light, while the rest of us frizzled in private little hells of our own devising."

"Well," murmured Pettigrew judiciously, "I admit . . ."

"What do you admit? That you dreamed of power, the same as I did? And that your dream turned sour on you?" She turned to the telepath. "Commander Metzenthner, I know that you Rhine Institute people are bound by all sorts of codes and oaths and whatever—but would you mind breaking your code just once? Can you put us in the picture, into Captain Mortimer Jones' picture?"

The Psionic Communications Officer said, "It's not a pretty one, ma'am."

"We can stand it."

"As you wish, then, ma'am." His voice took on an odd soothing quality. "If you will let your minds become receptive . .

Dim lights and swirling clouds of incense, and the voices of the chanting priests echoing back from the high, vaulted ceilings, almost invisible above the blue, eddying haze . . . Dim lights, and the pungent, swirling clouds of incense, and the charred form that still writhed feebly on the smoldering embers of the fire on top of the high, stone altar . . . Dim, flickering lights, and the sickly-sweet stench of burning flesh mingling with the sickly-sweet acridity of the incense . . .

And this grossly fat man in the soiled white robes standing before the Throne and making a sketchy bow that was almost a gesture of derision and crying, "Oh, Nucleón! Oh, Great God Nucleón! The people hunger, and the Seven Year Drought still afflicts our land! Oh, Nucleón, we have sung to you hymns of praise, and we have sacrificed unto you our fairest virgins. Oh, Nucleón, exercise your omnipotence and make the rain to fall!"

Dim lights and eddying clouds of incense—and then the vision of dark, swirling clouds over a dismal gray land, a

land of stunted trees, of towns and villages that were no more than huddles of delapidated huts, of fields that supported only a straggle of thin stubble. And the persistent voice of the High Priest, "Oh, Nucleón, make the rain to fall! Make the rain to fall!"

And the impatience with the man's importunities, and the cynical decision to give him the impertinently demanded rain, to sweep the dismal land clean with a destructive deluge . . .

But. . .

How to induce the molecules of water vapor to cohere, to condense into drops of water? The unspoken command—Rain.

The thought repeated— Rain! The psychic scream—RAIN!

And again the voice of that importunate priest—"Oh, great Nucleón, make the rain to fall!"

And another voice, bitter and cynical, "Peradventure he sleepeth."

Again the temple, again the dim lights and the swirling incense clouds. Again the fat priest, his heavy face creased in a scowl—and confronting him a tall, thin man, smuiling crookedly, saying, "Your god cannot help us."

And then, with brands snatched from the pyre on the altar, the surging mob of worshippers about the Throne—

*but no longer in worship. The sharp pain of thrusting fire, the dull, but no less intense pain of heavy blows . . . The straining of limbs against the hampering, jewel-encrusted **golden** chains that had been graciously accepted as offerings but which were, in actuality, fetters . . .*

Trafford opened his eyes with a jerk, looked around him at the pale, shaken faces of his shipmates. It was Pettigrew who broke the silence. "Straight out of Fraser . . ." he said. And then, "I am surprised that a spaceman's mind should be capable of such a vision."

"You needn't be, Doctor," Trafford told him. "Fraser's *The Golden Bough* is required reading for all Survey officers."

"There was more to it than religion," stated the Empress. "Much more. In the final analysis it all boiled down to that basic lust for power—and the extrapolated consequences."

"But aren't all priests actuated by this same lust for power?" queried Trafford.

"Don't go all philosophical on me, Benjamin." She sat there, a thoughtful, almost a brooding expression on her fine features. "Yes, this dream, or vision or whatever it is of

Mortimer Jones has helped me to make up my own mind. My own dream was warning enough, I suppose—but, even so, it was my intention to take Commander Trafford as

my consort. But it wouldn't have worked. It would have been no life for a man—the phony promotion to Admiral, and not a hope in hell of ever being in command of as much as an armed lighter.

"So I changed my mind."

"Thank you, ma'am, for even considering taking me as your consort," said Trafford stiffly.

She flashed him a smile. "I haven't finished yet, Benjamin.

"Then, when I realized at last the consequences of too much personal power, I asked myself, *Why the hell go on with it?* After all, this yacht is my own personal property. Apart from that, I'm not a poor woman. There's no reason why we shouldn't peddle this hunk of ironmongery to some government looking for a cruiser on the cheap, and blow the proceeds on a nice, space-worthy little tramp. . . ." Her smile was warmer now. "After all, I've never held higher rank myself than Mate, and I'd be quite willing to be Mate and Owner with Benjamin as Master. . . ."

"Your Imperial Highness!" ejaculated Pettigrew.

"I'm serious, Doc. As of now, I resign. Or abdicate. Call it what you like—but here's my notice, Doc."

"But, Irene . . ."

"I'm still the Empress, until you accept my resignation, and as long as I am you'll address me by my title." She was

still smiling, but more thoughtfully. "Commander Metzenth, could you eavesdrop on the Lady Eleanor?"

"It's against the Code, ma'am. . . ."

"You let us see what was in Mortimer Jones' mind. No, I don't want to see for myself what Eleanor is dreaming; after all, she's entitled to some privacy. But I should like your opinion."

"Very well, ma'am."

Meanwhile, Pettigrew had turned to Trafford. He said, "There's no reason why you shouldn't be Prince Consort, Commander. And it would seem that you have some influence on Her Imperial Highness's decisions. For the good of the Federation, of the Empire, I ask you to exercise it."

"It's up to you, Benjamin," the Empress told him, regarding him sardonically.

"And I know what will happen to me if I try to persuade you to keep on as Empress with myself as Prince Consort," he replied.

"How right you are, my dear. But please don't think that I'm trying to influence you."

Then Metzenth spoke in a subdued voice. "I looked into her mind. It wasn't pretty. But there is no bad in her. She has been foolish in the past, but much of the foolishness will have been bumed out of her. . . ."

"Do you think she will make a good Empress?"

"She has learned wisdom, ma'am."

"So." Irene got to her feet, walked to the viewport, gestured to the yellow-green plain outside, to the sleeping figures. "*There* is the Empress Irene, Doctor Pettigrew. She's all yours. You and your precious committee may find her a more amenable puppet than I ever was. *There* is the Empress Irene, Doctor, and *here* is plain Irene Smith, soon to become—if you'll have me, Benjamin—Irene Trafford.

"You have my permission, Doctor Pettigrew, to bring the Empress and those other people aboard my yacht—although you may leave Mortimer Jones to his self-imposed punishment if you so desire. And then, when the prisoners have been embarked—and, of course, the Empress—I shall be willing to transport you all to the nearest planet from which there is a regular passenger service to Earth.

"There will be a small charge, of course."

"But, Your Imperial Highness, you can't . .

"Can't I? I am the legal owner of this vessel. Captain Trafford is hereby appointed Master."

"But . . ."

"But I've made up my mind. I don't want to become a Power God, or Goddess, like Mortimer Jones, even a merely symbolic one. Eleanor, now that she's been purged of her foolishness, will make a very nice symbol for you.

"As for me . . ." She grinned at Trafford, and he grinned back. "Captain, as soon as the fare-paying passengers have been brought on board, will you lift ship and get us started on the first leg of the voyage home?"

"Wherever that might be," he said.

"Wherever that might be," she agreed. "As long as it's not that damned mausoleum of a palace."

Only Pettigrew looked shocked. The others all smiled in sympathy.