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502-07216-075

El Dorado is a planet with a problem:
the men are infertile—and the ladies
are getting out of hand

A Science-Fiction Novel

by A. Bertram Chandler

to prime the pump

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL



TO PRIME THE PUMP

A. Bertram Chandler

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A Baen EBook

Baen Publishing Enterprises
P.O. Box 1403
Riverdale, NY 10471
www.baen.com

ISBN-10: 0-2071-1607-5

ISBN-13: 978-0-2071-1607-0

First printing, June 2007

THE GIRL LAY SPREAD-EAGLED ON THE ALTAR . . .

"The white goat!" they shouted . . . "The goat without horns . . ."

Two men set the animal down on the girl's naked body, its back to her breasts and belly, its head between her legs. The drums throbbed softly, insistently. The priest's knife swept down; the animal's cries ceased in mid-bleat, although its now released limbs kicked spasmodically. The girl, free herself from restraining hands, held the dying body to her.

Chapter 1

Grimes—Lieutenant John Grimes, Federation Survey Service, to give him his full name and title—had the watch. Slowly, careful not to break the contact of the magnetized soles of his shoes with the deck, he shuffled backwards and forwards in the narrow confines of the control room. Captain Daintree, commanding officer of the cruiser *Aries*, was a martinet, and one of the many things that he would not tolerate was a watchkeeper spending his spell of duty lounging in an acceleration chair, not even in (as now) Free Fall conditions. Not that Grimes really minded. He was a young and vigorous man and still not used to the enforced inactivity that is an inescapable part of spacefaring. The regulation pacing was exercise of a sort, was better than nothing.

He was a stocky young man, this Grimes, and the stiff material of his uniform shirt did little to hide the muscular development of his body. His face was too craggy for conventional handsomeness, but women, he already had learned, considered him good-looking enough. On the rare occasions that he thought about it he admitted that he was not dissatisfied with his overall appearance, even his protuberant ears had their uses, having more than once served as convenient handles by which his face could be pulled down to a waiting and expectant female face below. To complete the inventory, his close-cropped hair was darkly brown and his eyes, startlingly pale in his space-tanned face, were gray at times a very bleak gray.

So this was Lieutenant John Grimes, presently officer-of-the-watch of the Survey Service cruiser *Aries*, slowly shuffling back and forth between the consoles, the banked instruments, alert for any information that might suddenly be displayed on dials or screens. He was not expecting any; the ship was in deep space, falling free through the warped continuum induced by her Mannschenn Drive through regions well clear of the heavily frequented trade routes. There was only one human colony Grimes knew, in this sector of the Galaxy, the world that had been named, not very originally but aptly, *El Dorado*; and two ships a standard year served the needs of that fabulous planet.

El Dorado . . .

Idly—but a watch officer has to think about something—Grimes wondered what it was really like there. There were stories, of course, but they were no more than rumors, exaggerated rumors, like the one about the El Doradans. Not. The El Doradans did not encourage visitors, and the two ships that handled their small trade—precious ores outwards, luxury goods inwards—were owned and manned by themselves, not that the vessels, space-borne miracles of automation, required more than two men, captain and engineer apiece.

Grimes looked out through the viewports, roughly to where El Dorado should be. He did not see it, of course, nor did he expect to do so. He saw only warped Space, suns near and far that had been twisted to the semblance of pulsating, multicolored spirals, blackness between the suns that had been contorted into its own vast convolutions, sensed (but with what sense?) rather than seen. It was, as always, a fascinating spectacle; it was, as always, a frightening one. It was not good to look at it for too long.

Grimes turned his attention to the orderly universe in miniature displayed in the chart tank.

"Mr. Grimes!"

"Sir!" The Lieutenant started. He hadn't heard the old bastard come into the control room. He looked up to the tall, spare figure of Captain Daintree, to the cold blue eyes under the mane of white hair. "Sir?"

"Warn the engine room that we shall be requiring Inertial Drive shortly. And then, I believe that you're qualified in navigation, you may work out the trajectory for El Dorado."

Chapter 2

Lieutenant Commander Cooper, the Navigating Officer of *Aries*, was in a bad mood, a sullen expression on his plump, swarthy face, his reedy voice petulant. "Damn it all," he was saying. "Damn it all, what am *I* supposed to be here for? An emergency alteration of trajectory comes up and am I called for? Oh, no, that'd be far too simple. So young Grimes has to fumble his way through the sun that *I* should be doing, and the first that *I* know is when somebody condescends to sound the acceleration alarm . . ."

"Was there anything wrong with my trajectory, *sir*?" asked Grimes coldly.

"No, Mr. Grimes. Nothing at all wrong, although *I* was brought up to adhere to the principle that interstellar dust clouds should be avoided . . ."

"With the Mannschenn Drive in operation there's no risk."

"Isn't there? A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, Mr. Grimes. Inside some of these dark nebulae the Continuum is dangerously warped."

"But CCD736 can hardly be classed as a nebula . . ."

"Even so, the first principle of all navigation should be caution, and it's high time that you learned that."

Doctor Passifern, the Senior Medical Officer, broke in. "Come off it, Pilot. Young Grimes is learning, and this idea of the Old Man's that every officer in the ship should be able to take over from the specialists is a very sound one . . ."

"Ha! It might be an idea if some of us were encouraged to take over *your* job, Doc!"

A flush darkened Passifern's already ruddy face. He growled, "That's not the same and you know it."

"Isn't it? Oh, I know that ever since the dawn of history you pill peddlers have made a sacred mystery of your technology . . ."

Grimes got to his feet, said, "What about some more coffee?" He collected the three mugs from the table, walked to the espresso machine that stood in a corner of the comfortable wardroom. He found it rather embarrassing when his seniors quarreled—the long-standing feud between the Navigator and the Doctor was more than good-natured bickering—and thought that a pause for refreshment would bring the opportunity for a change of subject. As he filled the mugs he remarked brightly, "At least this acceleration allows us to enjoy our drinks. I hate having to sip out of a bulb."

"Do you?" asked Cooper nastily. "I'd have thought that one of your tender years would enjoy regression to the well-remembered and well-beloved feeding bottle."

Grimes ignored this. He set the mugs down on the low table, then dropped ungracefully into his easy chair. He said to Passifern, "But what *is* the hurry, Doc? I know that I'm only the small boy around here and that I'm not supposed to be told anything, but would you be breaking any vows of secrecy if you told us the nature of the emergency on El Dorado?"

"I don't know myself, Grimes. All I know is that there shouldn't be one. Those filthy rich El Doradans have the finest practitioners and specialists in the known Universe in residence; and they, by this time, must be almost as filthy rich as their patients! All *I* know is that *they* knew that we were in the vicinity of their planet, and requested a second opinion on something or other . . ."

"And our Lord and Master," contributed Cooper, "decided that it was a good excuse to give the Inertial Drive a gallop. He doesn't like Free Fall." He obliged with a surprisingly good imitation of Captain Daintree's deep voice: "Too much Free Fall makes officers soft."

"He could be right," said Passifern.

~~Cooper ignored this. "What puzzles me," he said, "is why these outstanding practitioners and specialists should call in a humble ship's quack . . ."~~

"As a major vessel of the Survey Service," Passifern told him coldly, "we carry a highly qualified and expert team of physicians, surgeons and technicians. And our hospital and research facilities would be the envy of many a planet. Furthermore, we have the benefit of experience denied to any planet-bound doctor . . ."

"And wouldn't *you* just love to be planetbound on a world like El Dorado?" asked Cooper.

Before the Doctor could make an angry reply, Grimes turned to the Navigator. "And what *is* El Dorado like, sir? I was going to look it up, but the Old Man's taken the Pilot Book covering it out of the control room."

"Doing his homework," said Cooper. "Luckily it's not everybody who has to rush to the books when the necessity for an unscheduled landing crops up. We specialists, unlike the jacks-of-all-trades, tend to be reasonably expert in our own fields." He took a noisy gulp of coffee. "All right. El Dorado. An essentially Earth-type planet in orbit about a Sol-type primary. A very ordinary sort of world, you might say. But it's not. And it wasn't."

It was Passifern who broke the silence. "What's so different about it?"

"Don't you know, Doc? You were hankering for its fleshpots only a minute ago. I suppose you have some sort of idea of what it's like now, but not how it got that way. Well, to begin with, it was an extraordinary world. It was one of those planets upon which life—life-as-we-know-it or any other kind of life—had never taken hold. There it was, for millions upon millions of years, just a sterile ball of rock and mud and water.

"And then it was purchased from the Federation by the so-called El Dorado Corporation.

"Even you, young Grimes, must know something of history. Even you must know how, on worlds after world, the trend has been towards socialism. Some societies have gone the whole hog, preaching and practicing the Gospel According to St. Marx. Some have contented themselves with State control of the means of production and supply, with ruinous taxation of the very well-to-do thrown in. They have been levelling up processes and levelling down processes, and these have hurt the aristocracies at birth and breeding as much as they have hurt the aristocracies of Big Business and industry.

"And so the Corporation was formed. Somehow its members managed to get most of their wealth out of their home worlds, and much of it was used for the terraforming of El Dorado. Terraforming is Landscape gardening would be a better phrase. Yes, that world's no more, and no less, than a huge beautiful park, with KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs posted insofar as the common herd is concerned."

"What about servants? Technicians?" asked Grimes.

"The answer to that problem, my boy, was automation, automation and still more automation. Automation to an extent that would not have been practical on a world where the economics of it had to be considered. And on the rare occasions that the machines do need attention there are a few El Doradans to whom mechanics, electronics and the like are amusing and quite fascinating hobbies. And there will be others, of course, who enjoy playing around at gardening, or even farming."

"A world, in fact, that's just a rich man's toy," said Grimes.

"And don't forget the rich bitches," Cooper told him.

"I don't think I'd like it," went on Grimes.

"And I don't think that the El Doradans would like you," Cooper remarked. "Or any of us. As far as they're concerned, we're just snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks."

"Still," said Passifern smugly, "they requested *my* services."

"God knows why," sneered Cooper.

There was silence while the Doctor tried to think of a scathing rejoinder. It was broken by Grimes. "Ah, here's Mr. Bose. Perhaps he can tell us."

"Our commissioned teacup reader," grunted the Navigator sardonically. "Singing and dancing."

Mr. Bose, the cruiser's Psionic Radio Officer, did not look the sort of man who would ever be heard or seen indulging in such activities. He was short and fat, and the expression of his shiny chocolate-colored face was one of unrelieved gloom. On the occasions when a shipmate would tempt him, for the love of all the odd gods of the Galaxy, to cheer up, he would reply portentously, "But I know too much." What he knew of what went on in the minds of his shipmates he would never divulge; insofar as they were concerned, he always observed and respected the oath of secrecy taken by all graduates of the Rhine Institute. Now and again, however, he seemed to consider outsiders far from a game and would pass on to his fellow officers what he had learned by telepathic eavesdropping.

"What cooks on El Dorado, Bosey Boy?" demanded Cooper.

"What cooks, Commander, sir? The flesh of animals. They are a godless people and partake of unclean foods."

"The same as we do, in this ship. But you know what I mean."

Surprisingly, the telepath laughed, a high-pitched giggle. "Yes, I know what you mean, Commander, sir."

"Of course you do, you damned snooper. But what cooks?"

"I . . . I cannot understand. I have tried to . . . to tune in on the thoughts of all the people. From their Psionic Radio officers I have learned nothing, nothing at all. They are experts, highly trained with their minds impenetrably screened. But the dreams, the secret thoughts of the ordinary people are vague, confused. There is unease and there is fear, but it is not the fear of an immediate danger. But there is a very real fear . . ."

"Probably just an increasing incidence of tinea," laughed Cooper. "Right up your alley, Doc."

Passifern was not amused.

Chapter 3

Aries was in orbit about El Dorado. It was very quiet in the control room where Captain Daintree and his officers looked out, through the wide viewports, to the green, blue and golden, cloud-girdled planet that the ship was circling. The absence of the familiar, shipboard noises—the thin, high keening of the Mannschenn Drive, the odd, irregular throbbing of the inertial drive—engendered a feeling of tension, a taut expectancy. And this was more than just a routine planetfall. El Dorado was a new world to all of *Aries*' people. True, they had landed on new worlds before, worlds upon which they had been the first humans to set foot; but this fabled planet was—different. Grimes thought of the Moslem paradise with its timeless *houris* and grinned wryly. Such beauties would never confer their favours on him—how had Cooper put it?—on a snotty-nosed ragamuffin from the wrong side of the tracks.

"And what do you find so amusing, Mr. Grimes?" asked Daintree coldly. "Perhaps you will share the joke with us."

"I . . . I was thinking, sir." Grimes felt his prominent ears redden.

"You aren't paid to think," came the age-old, automatic reply, the illogical rejoinder that had persisted through millennia. Grimes was tempted to point out that officers *are* paid to think, but he thought better of it.

Commander Griffin, the Executive Officer, broke the silence. "The pinnace is all cleared away, sir, for the advance party."

"The *pinnace*, Commander? By whose orders?"

"I . . . I thought, sir . . ."

Another one! Grimes chuckled inwardly, permitted himself a slight grin as he looked at the embarrassed Griffin. Griffin looked back at him in a way that boded ill for the Lieutenant.

Daintree said, "I admit, Commander, that you are permitted to think. Even so, you should think of some more purpose. How long is it since the rocket re-entry boat was exercised? Did you not consider that this would be an ideal opportunity to give the craft a test and training flight?"

"Why, yes, sir. It would be an ideal opportunity."

"Then have it cleared away, Commander. At once. Oh, which of your young gentlemen are you thinking of sending?"

"Doctor Passifern has arranged for Surgeon Lieutenant Kravisky to go with the advance party, sir."

"Never mind that. Who will be the pilot?"

"Er . . . Mr. Grimes, sir."

"Mr. Grimes." The captain switched his attention from the Commander to the Lieutenant. "Mr. Grimes, what experience have you had in the handling of rocket-powered craft?"

"At the Academy, sir. And during my first training cruise."

"And never since. You're like all the rest of the officers aboard this ship, far too used to riding around in comfort with an inertial drive unit tucked away under your backside. Very well, this will be an ideal opportunity for you to gain some experience of *real* spacefaring."

"Yes, sir. See to the boat, sir?"

"Not yet. Commander Griffin is quite capable of that." He walked to the chart desk, beckoning Grimes to follow him. The Navigator had already spread a chart on the flat surface, securing it with spring clips. "This," said Daintree, "was transmitted to us by whatever or whoever passes for Port Control on El Dorado. Mercator's Projection. Here is the spaceport"—his thin, bony fingers jabbed

downwards—"by this lake . . ."

"~~Will the spaceport be suitable for the landing of the rocket boat, sir?~~" asked Grimes. "After all, if it was designed only to handle inertial drive vessels . . ."

"I've already thought of that point, Mr. Grimes. But our rocket boat is designed to land on water if needs be."

"But . . . but will they be ready for us, sir?"

"This vessel has established electronic radio communication with El Dorado, Mr. Grimes. I shall tell them to be ready for you. After all, we are visiting their planet at their request."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good, then. You may study the chart until it is time for you to take the boat away."

"Yes, sir."

Grimes looked down at the new, as yet unmarked plan of the spaceport and its environs. He would far sooner have spent the time studying the Manual of Spacemanship, with special attention to that section devoted to the handling of rocket-powered re-entry vehicles. But, after all, he was qualified as an atmosphere pilot and had, for some time, been drawing the extra pay to which his certificate entitled him.

As he studied the chart he overheard Captain Daintree talking over the transceiver to somebody, presumably Port Control, on the planet below. "Yes, you heard me correctly. I am sending the advance party down in one of my rocket boats." Came the reply, "But, Captain, our spaceport is not suitable for the reception of such a craft." The voice was as arrogant as Daintree's own but in a different way. It was the arrogance that comes with money (too much money), with inherited titles, with a bloodline traced back to some uncouth robber baron who happened to be a more efficient thief and murderer than his rivals.

"I am sending away my rocket boat." One almost expected the acidity of ozone to accompany that quarterdeck snap and crackle.

"I am sorry, Captain—" Port Control didn't sound very sorry—"but that is impossible."

"Do you want our help, or don't you?"

There was a brief silence, then a reluctant "Yes."

"Your spaceport is on the northern shore of Lake Bluewater, isn't it?"

"You have the chart that we transmitted to you, Captain."

"My rocket boat can be put down on water."

"You don't understand, Captain. Lake Bluewater is a very popular resort."

"Isn't that just too bad? Get your kids with their pails and spades and plastic animals off the beaches and out of the water."

Again the silence and then in a voice that shed none of its cold venom over the thousands of miles, "Very well, Captain. But please understand that we shall not be responsible for any accidents to your boat and your personnel."

"And I," said Daintree harshly, "refuse to accept responsibility for any picnic or paddling parties who happen to get in the way. The officer in charge of the re-entry vehicle will be using the same frequency as we are using now. He will keep you and me informed of his movements. Over."

"Roger," came the supercilious reply. "Roger. Over and standing by."

"Rocket boat cleared away and ready, sir," said Commander Griffin, who had returned to the control room.

"Very good, Commander. Man and launch. Mr. Grimes, you should have memorized that chart before now, and, in any case, there will be another copy in the boat."

"Yes, sir." Grimes followed the Commander from the control room.

—Surgeon Lieutenant Kravisky, his slender body already pressure-suited, his thin, dark face behind the open face plate of his helmet wearing an anxious expression, was already waiting by the blister. In each hand he carried a briefcase: one containing ship's papers and the other his uniform. Disgustedly, Grimes stripped to his briefs. If he'd been allowed to take the pinnace instead of this relic from the bad old days, there would have been no need to dress up like a refugee from historical space opera. A rating helped him into his suit, another man neatly folded his shorts and shirt and stowed them, together with his shoes and stockings, into a small case. Being on the Advance Party had its advantages after all, Grimes decided. At least he would be spared the discomfort of full dress— frock coat, cocked hat and sword—which would be rig of the day when the big ship came in.

"Are you sure that you can drive this thing, John?" asked Kravisky.

"I don't know. I've never tried before." Then, before Commander Griffin could issue a scathing reprimand, he added. "Not this particular one, I mean. But I am qualified."

"That will do, Mr. Grimes," said Griffin. "You know the drill, I hope. After you're down, present yourself to Port Control and make the necessary arrangements for the reception of *Aries*. Don't forget that you represent the ship. Comport yourself accordingly. And try to refrain from misguided attempts at humor."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"Then board the boat. Procedure as per Regulations. Bo's'n!"

"Sir!" snapped the petty officer.

"Carry on!"

"Ay, ay, sir."

The inner door to the blister opened, revealing a small airlock. Grimes entered it first, followed by Kravisky, snapping shut his faceplate as he did so. He heard the sighing of the pumps as the air was exhausted from the chamber, watched the needle of the pressure dial drop to Zero. The red light came on. The outer door opened.

Beyond it was the graceless form of the rocket boat, a stubby, flattened dart with a venturi and control surfaces; and visible beyond it was black, star-flecked sky and a great, glowing arc that was the limb of El Dorado. Grimes shuffled toward it on his magnetized soles, saw that the cabin door was already open, pulled himself into the vehicle. Then, while Kravisky was stowing the cases in a locker abaft the seats, he pushed the button that shut the door and another that pressurized the compartment. He looked at the dials and meters on the console, saw that the firing chamber had been warmed up and that all was ready for the launch. He strapped himself into his seat and waited until the Surgeon Lieutenant had done likewise. He opened the faceplate of his helmet. The air was breathable enough but carried a stale, canned flavor.

"All systems *Go!*" he said, feeling that the archaic spacemanese matched the archaic means of transportation.

"What was that?" snapped Griffin's voice from the speaker. Then, tiredly, "Oh, all right, Mr. Grimes. Five second count-down. Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *fire!*"

Smoothly and efficiently the launching catapult threw the rocket boat away and clear from the cruiser. Not very smoothly, but efficiently enough, Grimes actuated the reaction drive, felt the giant hand of acceleration push him back into the padding of his seat.

"Mr. Grimes!" This time it was Captain Daintree's voice that came from the speaker. "Mr. Grimes, you should have been able to fall free all the way to the exosphere. You have no fuel to waste on astrobatatics."

"Bloody back-seat drivers!" muttered Grimes, but he held his hand over the microphone as he d

Chapter 4

Nonetheless he was having his fun, was young Mr. Grimes.

Once he had the feel of his unhandy craft, once he stopped resenting having to worry about such matters as skin temperature, angle of attack, drag, and the rest of the aeronautical esoterica, he began to enjoy himself, to thrill to the sensation of speed as the first wisps of high altitude cirrus whipped by. This was better, after all, than making a slow, dignified descent in the pinnacle, with its inertial drive, or in one of the other rocket boats—old-fashioned but not so downright archaic as this re-entry vehicle—in which he had now and again ridden, that cautiously shinnied down, stern first, through the incandescent columns of their exhaust gases. He felt confident enough to withdraw his attention from his instruments, to risk a sidewise glance at his companion.

Grimes was happy but Kravisky was not. The Surgeon Lieutenant's face had paled to a peculiar pale green. He seemed to be swallowing something. *Physician, heal thyself*, thought Grimes sardonically. "I . . . I wish you'd look where you're going," mumbled the young doctor.

"Beautiful view, isn't it?" Grimes glanced through the ports, then at his console. There was nothing to worry about. He had a hemisphere to play around in. By the time he was down, the terminator would be just short of Lake Bluewater. It would be a daylight landing, to save these very casual locals in Port Control the trouble of setting out a flare path. There would be the radio beacon home upon and at least twenty miles of smooth water for his runway. It was—he searched his memory for the expression used by long ago and faraway pilots of the Royal Air Force; historical especially the history of the ships of Earth's seas and air oceans, was his favorite reading—it was a piece of cake.

"Isn't it . . . isn't it hot in here?" Why couldn't Kravisky relax?

"Not especially. After all, we're sitting in a hot-monococque."

"What's that?" Then, with a feeble attempt at humor, "The remedy sounds worse than the disease . . ."

"Just an airborne thermos flask."

"Oh."

"Like a park, isn't it?" said Grimes. "Even from up here, like a park. Green. No industrial haze. No smog . . ."

"Too . . . tame," said Kravisky, taking a reluctant interest.

"No, I don't think so. They have mountains, and high ones, too. They have seas that must be rough sometimes, even with weather control. If they want to risk life and limb, there'll be plenty of mountaineering and sailing . . ."

"And other sports . . ."

"Yeah." The radio compass seemed to be functioning properly, as were air speed indicator and radio altimeter. The note of the distant beacon was a steady hum. No doubt the El Doradans possessed far more advanced systems than were used by their own aircraft, but the reentry vehicle was not equipped to make use of them. "Yeah," said Grimes again. "Such as?"

"I'm a reservist, you know. But I'm also a ship's doctor in civil life. My last voyage before I was called up for my drill was in the Commission's *Alpha Cepheus* . . . A cruise to Caribbea. Passengers stinking with money and far too much time on their hands . . ."

"What's that to do with sports?"

"You'd be surprised. Or would you?"

No, thought Grimes, he wouldn't. His first Deep Space voyage had been as a passenger, and Jane Pentecost, the vessel's purser, had been very attractive. ~~Where was she now? he wondered. Still in the Commission's ships, or back home, on the Rim?~~

Damn Jane Pentecost and damn the Rim Worlds. But this planet was nothing like Lorn, Faraway, Ultimo or Thule. He had never been to any of those dreary colonies (and never would go there, he told himself) but he had heard enough about them. Too much.

The air was denser now, and the control column that Grimes had been holding rather negligently was developing a life of its own. Abruptly the steady note of the beacon changed to morse A—dot dash, dot dash. Grimes tried to get the re-entry vehicle back on course, overcompensated. It was N now—dash dot, dash dot. The Lieutenant was sweating inside his suit when he had the boat under control again. Flying these antique crates was far too much like work. But he could afford another glance at the scenery.

There were wide fields, some green and some golden-glowing in the light of the afternoon sun, and in these latter worked great, glittering machines, obviously automatic harvesters. There were dense clumps of darker green—the forests which, on this world, had been grown for aesthetic reasons, not as a source of cellulose for industry. But the El Doradans, on the income from their mines alone, could well afford to import anything they needed. Or wanted. And only the odd gods of the Galaxy knew how many billions they had stashed away in the Federation Central Bank on Earth, to say nothing of other banks on other planets.

There were the wide fields and the forests, and towering up at the rim of the world the jagged blue mountains, the dazzlingly white-capped peaks. Rather too dazzling, but that was the glare of the late-afternoon sun, broad on the starboard bow of the rocket boat. Grimes adjusted the viewport polarizer. He could see houses now, large dwellings, even from this altitude, each miles distant from its nearest neighbor, each blending rather than contrasting with the landscape. He could see houses and beyond the huge, gleaming, azure oval that was Lake Bluewater, there were the tall towers of Spaceport Control and the intense, winking red light that was the beacon. Beyond the port again, but distant, shimmered the lofty spires of the city.

All very nice, but what's the air speed? Too high, too bloody high. Cut the rocket drive? Yes. Drag'll slow her down nicely, and there're always the parachute brakes and, in an emergency, the retro-rockets. Still on the beam, according to the beacon. In any case, I can see it plainly enough. Just keep it dead ahead . . .

Getting bumpy now, and mushy . . . What else, in such an abortion of an aircraft? But not to worry. Coming in bloody nicely, though I say it as shouldn't.

Looks like pine trees just inland from the beach. Cleared them all right. Must say that those supercilious drongoes in Port Control might have made some sort of stab at talking me in. All they said, "You may land." Didn't quite say, "Use the servants' entrance . . ."

Parachute brakes? No. Make a big bloody splash in their bloody lake and play hell with the bloody goldfish . . .

Kravisky shouted, screamed almost, and then Grimes, whose attention had been divided between the beacon and the altimeter, saw, cutting across the rocket boat's course, a small surface craft, scarlet hull skittering over the water in its own, self-generated, double plume of snowy spray. But it would pass clear.

But that slim, golden figure, gracefully poised on a single water ski, would not.

With a curse Grimes released the parachute brakes and, at the same time, yanked back on his control column. He knew that the parachutes would not take hold in time, that before the rocket boat stalled it would crash into the woman. Yet—he was thinking fast, desperately fast—he dared not use

either his main rocket drive to lift the boat up and clear, or his retro-rockets. Better for her, whoever she was, to run the risk of being crushed than to face the certainty of being incinerated.

Then there were birds (birds?), great birds that flew headlong at the control cabin, birds whose suicidal impact was enough to slow the boat sufficiently, barely sufficiently, to tip her so that forward motion was transformed to upward motion. The drogues took hold of the water, and that was that. She fell, soggily, ungracefully, blunt stern first, and as she did so Grimes stared stupidly at a broken wing, a broken *metal* wing that had been skewered by the forward antenna.

Chapter 5

Neither Grimes nor Kravisky was hurt—seat padding and safety belts protected them from serious damage—but they were badly shaken. Grimes wondered, as the re-entry craft plunged below the churning surface of the lake, how deep it would sink before it rose again. And then he realized that it would not rise again, ever, or would not do so without the aid of salvage equipment. Aft there was an ominous gurgling that told its own story. Aft? That noise was now in the cabin itself. He looked down. The water was already about his ankles.

"Button up!" he snapped to the Surgeon Lieutenant.

"But what . . . ?" the words trailed off into silence.

"The ejection gear. I hope it works under water."

"But . . ." Kravisky, his faceplate still open, made as though to unsnap his seat belt. "The papers. Our uniforms. I must get them out of the locker . . ."

"Like hell you will. *Button up!*"

Sullenly, Kravisky checked that his belt was still tight, then sealed his helmet. Grimes followed suit. His hand hesitated over the big, red button on the control panel, then slammed down decisively. Even through the thick, resilient padding of his seat he felt the violent kick of the catapulting explosion. He cringed, expecting the skull-crushing impact of his head with the roof of the cabin, the last thing that he would ever feel. But it did not come, although he was faintly aware of the lightest taps on his shoulder. And then he and the Surgeon Lieutenant, still strapped in their buoyant chairs, were shooting upwards, the sundered shell of the control cabin falling away beneath and below them, soaring to the surface in the midst of a huge bubble of air and other gases. Somehow he found time to look about him. The water was very blue and very clear. And there was a great, goggle-eyed fish staring at them from outside the bubble. It did not look especially carnivorous. Grimes hoped that wasn't.

The two chairs broke surface simultaneously, bobbing and gyrating. Slowly, their motion ceased. They floated in the middle of a widening circle of discolored water, a spiralling swirl of iridescent slicks. And there were more than a few dead fish. Grimes could not repress a chuckle when he saw that they were golden carp. About five hundred yards away, its engine stopped, lay the scarlet power boat. But there was something in the water between it and the astronauts, something that was approaching at a speed that, to the spacemen should have been painfully slow and yet, in this environment, was amazingly fast.

There was a sleek head in a golden helmet—no, decided Grimes, it was hair, not an artificial covering—and there was two slim, golden-brown arms that alternately flashed up and swept down and back. And there was the rest of her, slim and golden-brown all over. Somehow it was suddenly important to Grimes that he see her face. He hoped that it would match what he could already see.

As she neared the floating chairs she reverted to a breaststroke and then, finally, came to standstill, hanging there, a yard or so distant, just treading water. The spacemen could not help staring at her body through the shimmering transparency, her naked body. It was beautiful. With a sudden start of embarrassment Grimes forced his gaze to slide upwards to her face. It was thin, the cheekbones pronounced, the planes of the cheeks flat. Her mouth was a wide, scarlet slash, parted to reveal perfect white teeth. The eyes were an intense blue, an angry blue. She was saying something and it was obvious that she was not whispering.

Grimes put up his hand, opened the faceplate of his helmet.

". . . offworld yahoos!" he heard. "My two favorite watchbirds destroyed, thanks to yo

unspaceman-like antics!" Her voice was not loud but it carried well. It could best be described as a icy soprano.

"Madam," Grimes said coldly. It didn't sound quite right but it would have to do. "Madam, venture to suggest that the loss of my own boat is of rather greater consequence than the destruction of your . . . pets." (Pets? Watchbirds? That obviously metallic wing skewered on the antenna?) He went on, "Our Captain expressly requested that this lake be cleared as a landing area."

"Your *Captain*?" She made it sound as though the commanding officer of a Zodiac Class cruiser ranked with but below the butler.

"Look here, young woman . . ."

"What did you call me?"

"If you aren't a young woman," contributed Kravisky, "you look remarkably like one."

In her fury the girl forgot to tread water. She went down, came up spluttering. Only one word was intelligible and that was "Insolence!" She reached out a long, slender arm, caught hold of a projection at the edge of Grimes' chair. She floated there, maintaining her distance, glaring up at him.

"Now, young lady . . ."

She was mollified but only slightly. "Don't call me that, either," she snapped.

"Then what . . . ?"

"I am the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg. You may call me 'Your Highness'."

"Very well, Your Highness," said Grimes stiffly. "It may interest Your Highness to know that I intend to register a strong complaint with Spaceport Control. Your Highness's lack of ordinary commonsense put Your Highness's life as well as ours in hazard and resulted in the probable total loss of a piece of valuable Survey Service equipment."

"Commonsense?" she sneered. "And what about your own lack of that quality, to say nothing of your appalling spacemanship? You saw me. You must have seen me. And yet *you*, you . . . offworlder, assumed that *you* had the right to disturb my afternoon's recreation!" She made an explosive, spitting noise.

"Let us be reasonable, Your Highness," persisted Grimes. It cost nothing to play along. "No doubt there was some misunderstanding . . ."

"Misunderstanding?" Her fine eyebrows arched in incredulity. "Misunderstanding? I'll say there was. You come blundering in here like . . . like . . ."

"Like snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks?" asked Grimes sardonically.

Surprisingly, she laughed, tinkling merriment that was not altogether malicious. "How well you put it, my man."

Now was the time to take advantage of her change of mood. "Do you think, Your Highness, that you could call to your friend in the boat so that he can pick us up?"

She laughed again. "My friend in the boat? But I am by myself." She turned her head toward the bright scarlet craft. She called softly, "Ilse! To me, Ilse!"

There was a sudden turbulence at the thing's stern. It turned until it was stem on to the astronaut and the princess. It came in slowly and steadily, turned again until it was broadside on to the girl. It brought itself to a smooth halt by an exact application of stern power. A short ladder with handrails extruded itself with a muted click. The Princess Marlene let go of Grimes' chair; two graceful strokes took her to her mechanical servitor. As she climbed on board Grimes saw that she was one of those rare women whose nudity is even more beautiful out of the water than in it; the surprisingly full breasts, deprived of their fluid support, did not sag, and there were no minor blemishes to have been veiled by ripples. He felt a stab of disappointment as she reached down for a robe of spotless white towelling and threw it about her. Still watching her, he made to unsnap his seat belt.

"Not so fast, my man!" she called coldly. "Not so fast. You are not riding in with me. But I shall tow you in." Expertly, she threw the end of a nylon line to Grimes. Not so expertly he caught it in his gloved hand.

"Thank you, Your Highness," he said as nastily as he dared.

* * *

The Port Control building, into which the girl finally led them, was deserted. She did not seem surprised. "After all," she condescended to explain, "Henri set up the beacon for you and gave you preliminary instructions. He assumed, wrongly, as it turned out, that you were good enough spacemen to find your way in by yourselves. After all, he has better things to do than to sit in this office all day."

"Such as?" asked Grimes. He added hastily, "Your Highness."

"Polo, of course."

"But, damn it all, we have to see *somebody*. We have to arrange for the landing and reception of the ship. We lost our uniforms when the boat went down, so we'd like a change of clothing. Spacesuits aren't very comfortable wear. Your Highness."

"Then take them off. I don't mind."

You wouldn't, thought Grimes. The aristocrat naked before the serfs, the serfs naked before the aristocrat, what does it matter to the aristocrat? He said, "The sun is down and it's getting chilly."

"Then keep them on."

"Please, Your Highness . . ." Grimes hated having to beg. He would far sooner have shaken some sense into this infuriating minx. But he was in enough trouble already. He was not looking forward to explaining to Captain Daintree the loss of the re-entry vehicle. "Please, Your Highness, can't you help us?"

"Oh, all right. Although why you outworlders have to be so *helpless* is beyond me. Aren't you used to servants on your planets? I suppose not." She walked gracefully, her golden sandals faintly tapping on the polished floor, to what seemed to be, and was, a telephone booth. But there were neither dials nor buttons. She ordered, in her high, clear voice, "Get me the Comte de Messigny."

There was a brief delay, and then the screen on the rear wall of the booth swirled into glowing three dimensional life. The man looking out from it was tall, clad in white helmet, shirt, riding breeches, and highly polished black boots. He lifted a slim, brown hand to the peak of his headgear in salute. A dazzling grin split the darkly tanned face under the pencil line of the mustache.

"Marlene!"

"Henri. Sorry to trouble you, but I've two lost sheep of spacemen here. They came blundering down in some sort of fire-breathing monstrosity—a dynosoar, would it be?—and cracked up in the lake . . ."

"I did warn you, Marlene."

"There was no risk to me, Henri, although it did cost me my two best watchbirds. But the offworlders, I suppose you'd better do something about them . . ."

"I suppose so. Put them on, please, Marlene."

"Stand where I was standing," the girl said to Grimes. Then, in a voice utterly devoid of interest, "Good evening to you." Then she was gone.

Grimes was conscious of being examined by the unwinking, dark eyes of the man in the screen who, at last, demanded, "Well?"

"Lieutenant Grimes," he replied, adding "sir" to be on the safe side. "Of *Aries*, and this is Surgeon Lieutenant Kravisky. We are the advance landing party . . ."

"You've landed, haven't you?"

"Sir . . ." It hurt to bow and scrape to these civilians, with their absurd, unearned titles. "Sir, v

wish to report our arrival. We wish to report, too, that we are in a condition of some distress. Our r
entry vehicle was wrecked and we were badly shaken up. We are unable to establish radio contact with
Aries so that we may tell our Captain what has happened. Our uniforms were lost in the wreck. We
request clothing and food and accommodations." *And a good, stiff drink*, he thought.

"I shall inform your Captain that you are here," said de Messigny. "Meanwhile, the automat
servitors in the hostel have been instructed to obey all reasonable orders. You will find that provision
have been made for your reception and comfort on the floor above the one where you are present
situated."

"Thank you, sir. But when shall we make arrangements for the berthing and reception of *Aries*?"

"Tomorrow, Lieutenant. I shall see you some time tomorrow. Good evening to you."

The screen went blank.

Grimes looked at Kravisky, and Kravisky looked at Grimes. Then they looked around the hug
gleaming hall, beautifully proportioned, opulent in its fittings and furnishings; but, like this enti
planet, cold, cold.

Chapter 6

If there were elevators to the upper floors they must be, thought Grimes, very well concealed. Tiredly, acutely conscious of the discomfort of his clammy spacesuit, he trudged toward the ornamental spiral staircase that rose gracefully from the center of the iridescent, patterned floor. The Surgeon Lieutenant followed him, muttering something that sounded like, and probably was, "Inhospitable bastards!"

But the staircase was more than it seemed. As Grimes put his weight on the first of the treads there was a subdued humming of machinery, almost inaudible, and he felt himself being lifted. The thing was, in fact, an escalator. For a few seconds Grimes' exhausted brain tried to grapple with the engineering problems involved in the construction of a moving stairway of this design, then gave up. It worked, didn't it? So what?

At the level of the next floor the treads flattened to a track, slid him gently on to the brightly colored mosaic of the landing. He waited there until he was joined by Kravisky. There was a sudden silence as the murmur of machinery ceased. The two men looked around. They were standing in a relatively small hallway, partly occupied by another staircase ascending to yet another level. The walls, covered with what looked like a silken fabric, were featureless. Suddenly a disembodied voice, cultured yet characterless, almost sexless yet male rather than female, spoke. "This way, please."

A sliding door had opened. Beyond it was a room, plainly furnished but comfortable enough, with two beds, chairs and a table. Apart from its size it could have been a ship's cabin. "Toilet facilities are on your right as you enter," the voice said. "Please leave soiled clothing in the receptacle provided."

"Perhaps a drink first . . ." suggested Kravisky.

"Toilet facilities are on your right as you enter. Please leave soiled clothing in the receptacle provided."

"I never did like arguing with robots," said Grimes. He walked slowly through the open doorway, then through the other door into the bathroom. As he turned, he saw that the main door had slid shut behind Kravisky. There did not seem to be any way of opening it from the inside, but, come to that, neither had there been any way of opening it from the outside. This should have seemed important, but right now the only matter of moment was shucking his stinking suit, clambering out of his sweat-soaked underwear. He pulled off his gloves, then clumsily fumbled with the fastenings of his armour. The protective clothing, fabric and metal with plastic and metal attachments, fell to the floor with an audible clank and rattle. He stepped out of the boots, peeled off his underpants. Kravisky, he saw, was managing quite well and would require no assistance. He started toward one of the two shower stalls.

"Please leave soiled clothing in the receptacle provided," said the annoying voice.

Yes, there was a receptacle, but it had not been designed to accommodate such bulky accoutrements as spacesuits. The underpants went through the hinged flap easily enough, but it was obvious that a full suit of space armour would be beyond its capabilities. In any case, such items and equipment were supposed to be surrendered only to the ship's Armourer for servicing.

"Please leave . . ."

"It won't go in," stated Grimes.

"Please . . ." There was a pause, and then a new voice issued from the concealed speaker. It was still a mechanical one but somehow possessed a definite personality. "Please dispose of your small articles of clothing and leave your suits on the floor. They will be collected for dehydration and deodorization later."

By whom? wondered Grimes. *Or by what?* But he could, at least, enjoy his shower now without

being badgered. Naked, he stepped into the stall. Before he could raise a hand the curtain slid across the opening, before he could look for controls a fine spray of warm, soapy water came at him from all directions. This was succeeded, after a few minutes, by water with no added detergent and, finally, by a steady blast of hot air. When he was dry, the curtain slid back and, greatly refreshed, he walked out into the main bathroom. He noticed at once that the spacesuits were gone. He shrugged; after all, he had already lost a reentry vehicle. He noticed, too, that two plain, blue robes were hanging inside the door and under each of them, on the floor, was a pair of slippers. He pulled one of the garments on to his muscular body, slid his feet into the soft leather footwear. They fitted as though they had been made for him. He went through into the bed-sitting room, waited for Kravisky. The subtly annoying voice asked, "Would you care for a drink before dinner?"

"Yes," answered Grimes. "We would. Two pink gins, please. Large. With ice."

A faint clicking noise drew his attention. He saw that an aperture had appeared in the center of the polished table top, realized that the stout pillar that was the only support of the piece of furniture must be a supply chute. There was another click and the panel was back in place, and on it were two misted goblets.

"Gin!" complained Kravisky. "Are you mad, John? We could have that aboard the ship. Now's our chance to live it up." He added, "I would have ordered Manzanilla."

"Sorry, Doc. I was forgetting that you have personal experience of how the filthy rich live. You can order dinner."

He dropped into one of the chairs at the table, picked up and sipped his drink with appreciation. After all, it wasn't bad gin.

* * *

"Please order your meal," said the voice.

Grimes looked at the Surgeon Lieutenant over what remained of his second gin—obviously there were to be allowed no more—and said, "Go ahead, Doc."

Kravisky licked his full lips a little too obviously. "Well . . ." he murmured. "Well . . ." He stared at the ceiling. "Of course, John, I'm a rather old-fashioned type. To my mind there's nothing like good Terran food, properly cooked, and Terran wines. On a Terraformed planet such as this it must be available."

"Such as?" asked Grimes, knowing, from his own experience, that the foods indigenous to the overcrowded and urbanized home planet were among the most expensive in the Man-colonized Galaxy.

"Please order your meal," said the voice.

"Now . . . Let me see . . . Caviar, I think. Beluga, of course. With *very* thin toast. And unsalted butter. And to follow? I think, John, that after the caviar we can skip a fish course, although Dover sole or blue trout would be good . . . Yes, blue trout. And then? Pheasant under glass, perhaps, with new potatoes and *petit pois*. Then Crepes Suzette. Then fruit—peaches and strawberries should do. Coffee, of course, with Napoleon brandy. And something *good* in the way of an Havana cigar apiece . . ."

"Rather shaky there, aren't you?" commented Grimes.

"In the cruise ships the tucker was for free but the cigars weren't, and even duty free they were rather expensive. But I haven't finished yet. To drink *with* the meal . . . With the caviar, make it vodka. Wolfschmidt. Well chilled. And then a magnum of Pommery . . ."

"I hope that they don't send the bill to Captain Daintree," said Grimes.

The center panel of the table sank from sight. After a very brief delay it rose again. On it were two full plates, two glasses, a carafe of red wine, cutlery and disposable napkins.

"What . . . what's *this*?" almost shouted Kravisky, picking up his fork and prodding the meat on his plate with it. "Steak!" he complained.

"We were instructed to obey all *reasonable* orders," said the mechanical voice coldly.

"But . . ."

"We were instructed to obey all reasonable orders."

"Looks like it's all we're getting," said Grimes philosophically. "Better start getting used to life in the servants' hall, Doc." He pulled his plate to him, cut off and sampled a piece of the meat. "And after all, this is not at all bad."

It was, in fact, far better than anything from *Aries*' tissue culture vats and, furthermore, had not been ruined in the cooking by the cruiser's galley staff. Grimes, chewing stolidly, admitted that he was enjoying it more than he would have done the fancy meal that the Doctor had ordered.

Even so, their contemptuous treatment by the robot servitors, and by the robots' masters, rankled

Chapter 7

The two men slept well in their comfortable beds, the quite sound brandy that had been served with their after-dinner coffee cancelling out the effects of nervous and physical overexhaustion and the strangeness of an environment from which all the noises, of human and mechanical origin, that are so much the manifestation of the life of a ship were missing. It seemed to Grimes that he had been asleep only for minutes when an annoyingly cheerful voice was chanting, "Rise and shine! Rise and shine!" Nonetheless, he was alert at once, opening his eyes to see that the soft, concealed lighting had come back on. He looked at his wrist watch, which he had set to the Zone Time of the spaceport, adjusting it at the same time to the mean rotation of Eldorado before leaving the cruiser. 0700 hours. It was high time that he was up and doing something about everything.

He slid out of the bed. Kravisky, in his own couch, was still huddled under the covers, moaning unhappily, the voice, louder now, was still chanting, "Rise and shine!"

There was a silver tea service on the table. Grimes went to it, poured himself a cup of tea, added milk and plenty of sugar. He sipped it appreciatively. He called to the Surgeon Lieutenant, "Show your leg, you lazy bastard. Come and have your tea while it's hot."

The doctor's rumpled head emerged from under the sheet. "I *never* have tea first thing in the morning," he complained. "I always have coffee."

"You should have made your wishes known before you retired last night," said the robot voice reprovingly. *At least*, thought Grimes, *this was a change from that irritating sing-song.*

"Oh, all right. *All* right." Kravisky got out of bed, pulled his robe about his thin body, joined Grimes at the table. He slopped tea from the pot into the thin, porcelain cup, slopping much of it into the saucer. He grimaced at the first mouthful. Then he asked, "What now, John?"

"Get ourselves cleaned up. The fleet's in port, or soon will be, and not a whore in the house to be washed."

"How can you be so bloody cheerful?"

"I always wake up this way."

Grimes set down his empty cup, went through to the bathroom. On the shelf under the mirror were two new toothbrushes, toothpaste, a tube of depilatory cream. *Service*, he thought. *But, so far without a smile.* By the time that he was in the shower the Surgeon Lieutenant was commencing his own ablutions, was still showering when Grimes walked back into the bedroom. The beds, he saw, had been remade. He had heard nothing, decided that they must have been removed and replaced in the same way that the table service operated. On each tautly spread coverlet was fresh clothing—underwear, a shirt, a pair of shorts, sandals. Very gay the apparel looked against the dark, matte blue of the bedspreads—the shirts an almost fluorescent orange, the shorts a rich emerald green.

He said aloud, "Uniform would have been better."

The disembodied voice replied, "We have not the facilities."

"You won't have to explain to the Old Man why you aren't wearing the rig of the day," remarked Grimes.

There was silence. Haughty? Hurt? But it was better than some mechanical wisecrack.

"Breakfast," said Kravisky, who had come in from the bathroom.

It was standing there on the table—a coffeepot and cups, cream, sugar, two halves of grapefruit, toast, butter, honey and two covered plates. The Surgeon Lieutenant lifted one of the covers. "The spaceman's delight," he complained. "Ham and eggs."

"What's wrong with that? "

"Nothing. But I would have preferred kidneys and bacon."

"We are not telepathic," said the smug voice.

Breakfast over, the two men dressed. They looked at each other dubiously. "And do we have to face the Old Man like this?" asked Kravisky. "You should have let me save our uniforms, John."

"There wasn't time, Doc. It was all we could do to save ourselves."

"Look. The door's opening."

"Take the escalator to the next upper floor," ordered the robot voice. "You will find the Princes von Stolzberg and the Comte de Messigny awaiting you."

"And wipe the egg off your face," said Grimes to Kravisky.

* * *

There was an office on the next floor that, judging by the equipment along two of its walls, was also the spaceport control tower. In one of the big screens swam the image of *Aries*, a silvery, vane spindle gleaming against the interstellar dark. It was the sight of his ship that first caught Grimes' attention but did not hold it for long. Inevitably his regard shifted to the woman who stood to one side of the screen, the tall woman with her hair braided into a golden coronet, sparkling with jewels, clad in a flowing white tunic of some diaphanous material that barely concealed the lines of her body. He smiled at her but her blue eyes, as she looked back at him, were cold. To her right was the tall man whom they had talked the previous evening. He was in uniform, black and gold, with four gold bands on the cuffs of his superbly tailored tunic, a stylized, winged rocket gleaming on the left breast. Seemingly appared he was obviously a spaceman, although, as Grimes well knew, it takes far more than gold braid and brass buttons to make an astronaut.

"Henri," said the girl quietly, "these are the two . . . gentlemen from the *Aries*. Mr. Grimes, this is Captain de Messigny."

De Messigny extended his hand without enthusiasm. Grimes shook it. It was like handling a dead fish. Kravisky shook it. The Comte said in a bored voice, "Of course, I am, as it were, only the Acting Harbourmaster. As the senior Master of our own small merchant fleet I was requested to make the arrangements for the landing of your ship." He waved a hand and a hitherto dull screen lit up displaying what was obviously a plan of the spaceport. "But what is there to arrange? As you see, we can accommodate a squadron. Our own vessels are in their underground hangars, so the apron is absolutely clear. All that your Captain has to do is to set down *Aries* anywhere within the landing area."

"If he's as good a ship-handler as certain of his officers . . ." sneered the girl.

"Now, Marlene, that was quite uncalled for. You did make a small contribution to their crack-up, you know." He waved his hand again, and a triangle of bright red flashing lights appeared on the plan. "Still, I have actuated the beacons. They will serve as a guide."

"Has Captain Daintree been informed, sir?" asked Grimes.

"Of course."

"Has he been informed of the . . . er . . . circumstances of our landing?"

De Messigny smiled. "Not yet, Lieutenant. I told him last night that you were unable to get in direct radio contact with your ship, but no more than that. It will be better if you make your own report on the loss of the re-entry vehicle."

"Yes . . ." agreed Grimes unhappily.

"Very well, then." The tall man made casual gestures with his right hand. Some sort of visual code? wondered Grimes. Or did the controls of this fantastic communications equipment possess built-in psionic capabilities? Anyhow, de Messigny waved his hand and another screen came alive.

depicted the familiar interior of the control room of *Aries* and, in the foreground, the face of the Senior Communications Officer. His eyes lit up with recognition; it was obvious that he could see as well as be seen.

"Captain Daintree," snapped de Messigny. It was more of an order than a request.

"Yes, sir. In a moment."

And then the Old Man was glaring out of the screen. "Mr. Grimes! Mr. Kravisky! Why are you not in uniform?"

"We . . . we lost our uniforms, sir."

"You *lost* your uniforms?" Daintree's voice dropped to a menacing growl. "I am well aware, Mr. Grimes, that things seem to happen to you that happen to no other officer in the ship but, even so . . . Perhaps you will be so good as to explain how you mislaid the not inexpensive clothing with which the Survey Service, in a moment of misguided altruism, saw fit to cover your repulsive nakedness."

"We . . . we lost the re-entry vehicle, sir."

There was a long silence, during which Grimes waited for his commanding officer to reach a critical mass. But, surprisingly, when Daintree spoke, his voice was almost gentle.

"But you didn't lose yourselves. Oh, no. That would be too much to hope for. But I shall have to make some sort of report to my Lords Commissioners, Mr. Grimes, and you may care to assist me in this duty by explaining. If you can."

"Well, sir, we were coming in to a landing on the surface of Lake Bluewater. As instructed."

"Yes. Go on."

Grimes looked at the girl, thought that he was damned if he was going to hide behind a woman's skirts. She returned his gaze coldly. He shrugged, no more than a twitch of his broad shoulders. He faced the screen again, saying, "I made an error of judgment, sir."

"An expensive one, Mr. Grimes, both to the Service and to yourself."

And then the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg was standing beside the Lieutenant. "Captain Daintree," she said haughtily, "your officer was not responsible for the loss of your dynosoar. If anybody was, it was I."

Daintree's heavy eyebrows lifted. "*You*, Madam?"

"Yes. It was my hour for water-skiing on the lake, and I saw no reason to cancel my evening recreation because of the proposed landing. I did not think, of course, that any Captain in his right senses would send his advance party down to a planetary surface in such an archaic, unhandy contraption as a dynosoar. Your Mr. Grimes was obliged to take violent evasive action as soon as he saw me cutting across his path. Furthermore, my two watchbirds, seeing that I was in danger, attacked the re-entry vehicle which, in consequence, crashed."

"Oh. Captain de Messigny, is this lady's story true?"

"It is, Captain Daintree."

"Thank you. And may I make a humble request, Captain?"

"You may, Captain."

"Just refrain, if you can, from holding tennis tournaments on the landing field or from converting the apron into a rollerskating rink when I'm on *my* way down. Over," he concluded viciously, "and *out!*"

Chapter 8

They watched *Aries* come in—de Messigny, the Princess and, a little to one side, Grimes and Kravisky. Grimes had thought it strange that the spaceport control tower should be left unmanned at this juncture, but the two El Doradans, coldly and amusedly, had informed him that the electronic intelligences housed therein were quite capable of handling any normal landing without any human interference. Grimes did not like the way that the Comte slightly stressed the word "normal."

They stood there, the four of them, on the edge of the apron, well clear of the triangle of red lights. Above them, on gleaming wings, wheeled and hovered a quartet of flying things that looked like birds, that must be four of the watchbirds about which Grimes had already heard, which, in fact, he had already encountered. (*And, he thought glumly, there was still the enquiry into the loss of the re-entry vehicle to face.*)

The two El Doradans ignored their mechanical guardians. The Lieutenant could not, wondering what would happen should he make some inadvertent move that would be construed by the electronic brains as an act of hostility. He started to edge a little further away from Marlene von Stolzberg and de Messigny, then, with an audible grunt, stood his ground.

They saw the ship before they heard her—at first a glittering speck in the cloudless, morning sky and then, after only a few seconds, a gleaming spindle. She was well in sight when there drifted down to them the odd, irregular throbbing of an inertial drive unit in operation, no more than an uneasy mutter to begin with but swelling to an ominous, intermittent thunder, the voice of the power that had hurled men out among the stars.

But this was all wrong. On any civilized world, or on any civilized world other than this, there would have been an honor guard, ranks of soldiers, in ceremonial uniform, drawn to rigid attention. There would have been antique cannon with black powder charges to fire a salute to the Captain of the major Terran war vessel. There would have been flags and ceremonial. But here, here there was only one man—and his uniform, after all, was a mercantile one—and one woman. A self-styled Princess, perhaps, but even so . . . *And, thought Grimes, there's also Kravisky and myself, but dressed like beach boys.*

Lower dropped the ship, and lower, the noise of her Drive deafening now, every protrusion, every mast, turret and sponson that broke the smooth lines of her hull visible to the naked eye. From a starboard just abaft her sharp stem the ensign of the Survey Service—a golden S on a black field, with the green, blue and gold globe of Earth in the upper canton—was broken out, streamed vertically upward. Grimes did not have to turn to see that there was no bunting displayed from the masts of the spaceport administration buildings. Perhaps, he thought, there were in the Universe aristocrats sufficiently courteous to put out more flags to celebrate the arrival of snotty-nosed ragamuffins from the wrong side of the tracks, but the only aristocratic quality to be found in abundance on El Dorado was arrogance.

She was down at last, a shining, metallic tower poised between the buttresses of her tripedal landing gear. She was down and until the moment that Captain Daintree cut the Drive, an egg trapped between one of the huge pads and the concrete of the apron would have remained unbroken. And then the sudden silence as the machinery slowed to a halt was broken by the almost inaudible hissings and creakings as the ship's enormous mass adjusted itself to the gravitational field of the planet.

There were other soft noises behind the original reception party. Grimes turned. Three air cars of graceful, almost fragile design were coming in to a smooth landing, each attended by its pair of hovering watch-birds. From the first stepped a fat, bald, yellow-skinned man, his gross body draped

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