

Chance Encounter

WE PAID OFF ON Faraway, having brought the old *Epsilon Pavonis* all the way across the Galaxy to hand her over to her new owners, Rim Runners Incorporated. The Commission's branch manager booked us in at the Rimrock House, one of the better hotels in Faraway City. All that we had to do was to wait for the arrival of *Delta Bootis*, in which vessel we were to be shipped back to Earth. The services to and from the Rim Worlds are far from frequent and none of the big passenger liners ever call there; they are not planets that one would ever recommend for a vacation. There's that dreariness, that ever-present sense that one is hanging by one's eyebrows over the very edge of the ultimate cold and dark. The cities on none of the Rim Worlds are cities, real cities, but only overgrown—and not so very overgrown at that—provincial towns. The people are a subdued mob who take their pleasures sadly and their sorrows even more sadly. Somebody once said that the average Rim World city is like a graveyard with lights. He wasn't so far wrong.

Delta Bootis was a long time coming. She was delayed on Waverley by a strike, and then she had to put in to Nova Caledon for repairs to her Mannschenn Drive unit. Some of us didn't worry overmuch—after all, we were being paid, and well paid, for doing nothing, and the branch manager was footing our weekly bill without a murmur. Some of us worried a lot, even so. In the main, with one exception, it was the married men who were doing the worrying.

The one exception was Peter Morris, our P.R.O.—Psionic Radio Officer to you—our bright young man from the Rhine Institute, our tame telepath. Yet he was single, and so far as any of us knew, had no girl waiting for him on any of the colonized worlds or on Earth. But if there had been a first prize for misery he would have won it.

I liked Peter. During the run out we had formed a friendship that was rather unusual between a telepath and a normal human being—or, as the average graduate of the Institute would put it, between a normal human being and a psionic deficient. I liked Peter, I suppose, because he was so obviously the odd man out and I have a strong tendency towards being odd man out myself. So it was that during our sojourn on Faraway we developed the routine of leaving the others to prop up the bar of the Rimrock House while we, glad to get away from the reiteration of the bawdy jokes and boring personal anecdotes, wandered away from the hotel and through the city, finding some small pleasant drinking place where we could sip our beer in relative peace and quiet.

We were in such a place that morning, and the drinks that we had imbibed had done nothing at all to cheer Peter up. He was so gloomy that even I, who am far from being a cheerful type myself, remarked upon it.

"You don't know what it's like, Ken," he told me. "As a psionic deficient you'll never know. It's the aura of... of.... Well, there's fear, and there's loneliness, and a sort of aching emptiness, and together they make up the *feel* of these Rim Worlds. A telepath is always lonely until, if he's very lucky, he finds the right woman. But it's so much worse here."

"There's Epstein, the P.R.O. at the port," I said. "And there's Mrs. Epstein. Why don't you see more of them?"

"That," he declared, "would make it worse. When two telepathy marry they're a closed circuit to an extent that no p.d. couple can ever be...." He drank some more beer. "Finding the right woman," he went on, "is damned hard for us. I don't know what it is, but the average Esper female is usually frightfully unattractive, both mentally and physically. They seem to run to puddingy faces and puddingy minds.... You know, Ken, I needn't have come on this trip. There are still so few of us that we can afford to turn down assignments. I came for one reason only—just hoping that by making a voyage all the way across the Galaxy I'd find somebody."

"You still might on the way back," I told him.

"I still might not," he replied.

I looked at him with a rather irritated pity. I could sense, after a fashion, what he was driving at. He

was so much the typical introvert—dark of hair and face, long and lean—and his telepathic talent could do nothing but add to the miseries that come with introversion.

"You'd better have something stronger," I told him. I caught the bartender's eye. "Two double whiskies, please."

"Make that three," said a too hearty voice. I looked around, saw that Tarrant, our Second Mate, had just come in.

"Got tired of the same old stories at last?" I asked unkindly.

"No," he said. "But somebody had to go to find you two, and I was the most junior officer present, so...."

"Who wants us?" I demanded. "And why?"

"The Old Man wants you." He lifted his glass. "Here's to crime."

"What does he want us for?"

"I don't know. All that I know is this. Some meteor-pitted old bastard calling himself Captain Grimes came barging into the pub and demanded an audience with our lord and master. They retired to confer privily. Shortly thereafter the call for all hands to battle stations went out."

"Grimes ...," I said slowly. "The name rings a bell. I seem to remember that when we handed the old *Eppy Swan* over somebody mentioned that Captain Grimes, the Chief Superintendent for Rim Runners, was away on Thule."

"Could be," admitted Tarrant. "He has the look of a chairborne spaceman. In which case we'll have another drink. It's bad enough having to run to the beck and call of our own supers without having to keep those belonging to a tuppenny ha'penny concern like Rim Runners happy."

We had another drink, and another. After the third whisky Peter's gloom seemed to be evaporating slightly, so he ordered a fourth one. The Second Mate and I each ordered another round, after which we thought that we had better discover what was cooking. We walked rather unsteadily into the untidy street, hailed a ground cab and were driven back to the Rimrock House.

We found them all waiting for us in the lounge—the Old Man and the rest of the officers, the chunky little man whose appearance justified Tarrant's description of him as a "meteor-pitted old bastard."

"Sir," said the Old Man stiffly, "here are my Third Officer, Mr. Wilberforce, and my Psionic Radio Officer, Mr. Morris. I have no doubt that they will show as little enthusiasm for your project as any of my other officers. Yours is essentially a Rim World undertaking, and should be carried out by Rim World personnel."

"They can decide, sir," said Captain Grimes. "You have told me that these officers have no close ties on Earth or elsewhere; it is possible that they may find the proposition attractive. And, as I have already told you, we guarantee repatriation."

"What is it all about, anyhow?" asked Tarrant.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said Grimes, "and I'll tell you." While we were finding chairs he filled and lit a foul pipe. "I'll have to recapitulate for your benefit; I hope that the rest of you don't object."

"Well, as you are no doubt aware, we of the Rim Worlds consider ourselves the orphans of the Galaxy. You know why these planets were colonized in the first instance—the Central Government of those days feared an alien invasion sweeping in from outside the Galaxy. The general idea was to set up a huge ring of garrisoned planets, a fortified perimeter. That idea has died over the years and, as a result, only a very small arc of the Rim has been explored, even."

"We of the Rim Worlds wish to survive as a separate, independent entity. Starved as we are of trade and shipping, we have little chance of surviving at all. So it has been decided that we take our own steps, in our own way, to achieve this end."

"You've heard, of course, of the odd pieces of wreckage that come drifting in, from time to time, from *somewhere*. It was such flotsam that first gave the Central Government the idea that there might be an invasion from some other galaxy. Now, we don't think that those odd bits and pieces ever did come from outside. We think that there are inhabited planets all around the Rim, and that advantageous trade would be possible with them."

"For years we've been trying to persuade the brass hats of the Survey Service to carry out a systematic exploration, but the answer's always the same. They haven't the ships, or they haven't the men, or they haven't the money. So, at last, we have decided to carry out our own exploration. Your old ship, *Epsilon Pavonis*, is being fitted out for the job. She's being renamed, by the way—*Faraway Quest*.

"And what," asked Tarrant, "has this to do with us?"

Captain Grimes hesitated, seemed almost embarrassed. "Frankly," he said, "the trouble is this. We don't seem to breed spacemen, real spacemen, on the Rim Worlds. Puddle jumpers, that's all they are. They'll venture as far as Ultimo, or Thule, or the Shakespearean Sector, but they just aren't keen to fare any further afield....

"There's too much fear on these worlds," said Peter Morris suddenly. "That's the trouble. Fear of the cold and the dark and the emptiness.... "

Grimes looked at him. "Of course," he said, "you're the telepath.... If—"

"Yes, I'm the telepath. But you don't need to be any kind of an Esper to sense the fear."

"All right then," said Grimes. "My own boys are just plain scared to venture so much as a single light-year beyond the trade routes. But I've got a Master for *Faraway Quest*—myself. I've a Purser, and Chief and Second Mannschenn Drive Engineers, and one Rocket Engineer. I've a Chief Officer and a Surgeon-cum-Biochemist, and an Electronic Radio Officer. All of us are from the Center, none of us was born out here, on the Rim. But this is a survey job, and I shall need a well-manned ship.

"I can promise any of you who volunteer double your current rates of pay. I can promise you repatriation when the job is over, to any part of the Galaxy."

"Most of us," said our Captain, "have homes and families waiting for us. We've been out for too long now."

"You're sure that there are inhabited worlds out along the Rim?" asked Peter. "What of their people?"

"Purple octopi for all I know," replied Grimes.

"But there's a chance, just a chance, that they might be humanoid, or even human?" insisted the Psionic Radio Officer.

"Yes, there's a chance. Given a near infinitude of habitable worlds and an infinitude of time for evolution to take its course, then anything is possible."

"The purple octopi are more probable," I said.

"Perhaps," almost whispered Peter. "Perhaps But I have limited, very limited, premonitory powers, and I have a definite feeling that"

"That what?" I asked.

"Oh, never mind." To Grimes he said, "I take it that you can use a P.R.O., Captain?"

"That I can," declared Grimes heartily.

I sighed. "Your offer about double the pay," I said. "I'm Third Officer in the Commission's fleet, as you know. If I come with you as Second, do I get twice the Commission's rate for that rank?"

"You do."

"Count me in," I said.

"You must be mad," said Tarrant. "Both of you—but Wilberforce is less mad than Morris. After all, he's doing it for money. What are *you* doing it for, Crystal Gazer?"

"Mind your own business!" he snapped.

Some hours later, when we were out at the spaceport looking over the structural alterations that were being made to *Faraway Quest*, I asked him the same question.

He flushed. "What do people do things for, Peter?"

"Money," I replied. "Or power. Or"

"Precisely," he said, before I could finish. "It's only a hunch, but I have a strong feeling that this is the chance, the only chance, to find *her*."

I remember that I said, "I hope you're right."

Delta Bootis dropped down at last to Port Faraway, and all of our shipmates, openly jubilant,

boarded her. We saw them off, Peter and I. We had our last drinks with them in the little smoking room and then, feeling rather lost and lonely (at least, I did), scrambled out of the airlock and down the ramp as the last warning bell started to sound. We stood with the other spectators at a safe distance from the blast-off area, watched her lift on her column of pale fire, watched her vanish into the clear, twilight sky. With her departure I realized the irrevocability of my action in volunteering for this crazy survey voyage. There was no backing out now.

We walked to the corner of the field where work was still progressing on *Faraway Quest*. Outwardly she was little changed, except for the addition of two extra boat blisters. Internally she was being almost rebuilt. Cargo space was being converted into living accommodation. In spite of the shortage of trained space-faring personnel, Grimes had found volunteers from other quarters. Two professors of physics from Thule City were signing on as assistant engineers, and there were three astronomers from Ultimo as well as a couple of biologists. Grimes—who, we had learned, had served in the Survey Service as a young man—had persuaded the local police force to lend him three officers and fifty men, who were being trained as Space Marines. It began to look as though *Faraway Quest* would be run on something approaching Survey Service lines.

We looked at her, standing tall and slim in the light of the glaring floods.

I said, "I was a little scared when I watched *Delta Bootis* blast off, Peter, but now I'm feeling a little happier."

"I am too," he told me. "That ... that hunch of mine is stronger than ever. I'll be glad when this old girl is ready to push off."

"I don't trust hunches," I told him. "I never have, and never will. In any case, this female telepath with the beautiful mind you're hunting for may turn out to be nothing but a purple octopus."

He laughed. "You've got purple octopi on the brain. To hear you talk, one would think that the Galaxy was inhabited by the brutes.... "

"Perhaps it is," I said. "Or all the parts that we haven't explored yet."

"*She* exists," he told me seriously. "I know. I've dreamed about her now for several nights running."

"Have you?" I asked. Other people's dreams are, as a rule, dreadfully boring, but when the other person is a telepath with premonitory powers one is inclined to take some interest in them. "What did you dream?"

"Each time it was the same," he said. "I was in a ship's boat, by myself, waiting for her to come to me. I knew what she was like, even though I'd never actually met her. She wasn't quite human. She was a little too tall, a little too slim, and her golden hair had a greenish glint to it. Her small ears were pointed at the tips. As I say, I knew all this while I sat there waiting. And she was in my mind, as I was in hers, and she was saying, over and over, *I'm coming to you, my darling*. And I was sitting there in the pilot's chair, waiting to close the outer airlock door as soon as she was in.... "

"And then?"

"It's hard to describe. I've had women in real life as well as in dreams, but never before have I experienced that feeling of utter and absolute oneness.... "

"You're really convinced, aren't you?" I said. "Are you sure that it's not autohypnosis, that you haven't built up from the initial hunch, erecting a framework of wish-fulfillment fantasy?"

"I'd like to point out, Ken," he said stiffly, "that you're a qualified astronaut, not any sort of psychologist. I'd like to point out, too, that the Rhine Institute gives all its graduates a very comprehensive course in psychology. We have to know what makes our minds tick—after all, they are our working tools."

"Sorry," I said. "The main thing is that you feel reasonably sure that we shall stumble across some intelligent, humanoid race out there."

"Not reasonably sure," he murmured. "Just certain."

"Have you told Grimes all this?"

"Not all, but enough."

"What did he say?"

"That I was in charge of communications, not prognostications, and that my most important job was to see to it that my amplifier was healthy and functioning properly."

We all had to stand out on the field in a cold drizzle while the Presidents of Faraway, Ultimo and Thule made their farewell speeches. We were drawn up in a rather ragged line behind Captain Grimes, dapper in uniform, very much the space captain. The ex-policemen, the Marines, were a little to one side, and made up for what we lacked in the way of smartness. At last the speechmaking was over. Led by Grimes we marched up the ramp to the airlock, went at once to our blasting-off stations. In the control room Grimes sat chunkily in his acceleration chair with Lawlor, his Chief Officer, to one side of him. My own chair was behind theirs, and at my side was Gavin, one of the astronomers from Ultimo, who was on the ship's books as Third Officer.

Reports started coming in. "Interplanetary Drive Room—manned and ready!" "Interstellar Drive Room—manned and ready!" "Hydroponics—all secured!" "Steward's store—all secured!"

"Mr. Wilberforce," ordered Grimes, "request permission to proceed."

I spoke into the microphone of the already switched-on transceiver. "Faraway *Quest* to Control Tower, *Faraway Quest* to Control Tower. Have we your permission to proceed?"

"Control Tower to *Faraway Quest*. Permission granted. Good luck to all of you!"

Gavin was counting aloud, the words carried through the ship by the intercom. "Ten ... Nine ... Eight ... Seven ... " I saw Grimes's stubby hand poised over the master firing key. "Six ... Five ... Four ... " I looked out of the nearest viewport, to the dismal, mist-shrouded landscape. Faraway was a good world to get away from, to anywhere—or even nowhere. "Three ... Two ... One ... *Fire!*"

We lifted slowly, the ground falling away beneath us, dropping into obscurity beneath the veil of drifting rain. We drove up through the low clouds, up and into the steely glare of Faraway's sun. The last of the atmosphere slipped, keening shrilly, down our shell plating and then we were out and clear, with the gleaming lens of the Galaxy to one side of us and, on the other, the aching emptiness of the Outside.

For long minutes we accelerated, the pseudo-gravity forcing us deeply into the padding of our chairs. At last Grimes cut the drive and, almost immediately, the thunder of the rockets was replaced by the high, thin whine of the ever-precussing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn unit. The Galactic Lens twisted itself into an impossible convolution.

The emptiness Outside still looked the same.

That emptiness was with us all through the voyage.

Star after star we circled; some had planetary families, some had not. At first we made landings on all likely-looking worlds, then, after a long succession of planets that boasted nothing higher in the evolutionary scale than the equivalent to the giant reptiles of Earth's past, we contented ourselves by making orbital surveys only. Peter succeeded in talking Grimes into entrusting him with the task of deciding whether or not any planet possessed intelligent life—and, of course, cities and the like could be spotted from space.

So we drove on, and on, settling down to a regular routine of Interstellar Drive, Interplanetary Drive, Closed Orbit, Interplanetary Drive, Interstellar Drive, Interplanetary Drive.... Everybody was becoming short-tempered. Grimes was almost ready to admit that the odd pieces of flotsam falling now and then to the Rim Worlds must have come from Outside and not from somewhere else along the Rim. Had our purpose been exploration as a prelude to colonization, we should have felt a lot more useful—but the Rim Worlds have barely enough population to maintain their own economies.

Only Peter Morris maintained a certain calm cheerfulness. His faith in his hunch was strong. He told me so, more than once. I wanted to believe him but couldn't.

Then, one boring watch, I was showing Liddell, one of the astronomers, how to play three-dimensional noughts and crosses in the Tri-Di chart. He was catching on well and I was finding it increasingly hard to beat him when suddenly the buzzer of the intercom sounded. I answered it. It was Peter, speaking from his Psionic Communications Room.

"Ken!" he almost shouted. "Life! Intelligent life!"

"Where?" I demanded.

"I don't know. I'm trying to get a rough bearing. It's in towards the Lens from us, that much I can tell you. But the bearing doesn't seem to be changing." "No parallax?" asked Liddell. "Could it be, do you think, a ship?"

"It just could be," I said doubtfully.

"Ken, I think it's a ship!" came Peter's voice. "I think that they, like ourselves, have Psionic Radio.... Their operator's vaguely aware of me, but he's not sure.... No—it's not *he*. . It's a woman; I'm pretty certain of that.... But it's a ship all right. Roughly parallel course, but converging ... "

"Better tell old Grimy," I suggested, hastily clearing the noughts-and-crosses lattice from the Tri-Di chart. To Liddell I said, "I'm afraid Peter's imagining things. Not about the ship—she's probably a stray Survey vessel—but about the female operator. When psionic radio first started we used to carry them, but the average woman telepath is so unintelligent that they were all emptied out as soon as there were enough men for the job."

"It could be an alien ship," said Liddell.

"It could be, but it's not," I said. "Unless, of course, it belongs to one of the alien races with whom we've already made contact. It could be a Shaara vessel—that would account for Peter's female telepath. The Shaara are social insects, and all the work is done by the females."

Captain Grimes came into the control room. He looked almost happy. "Contact at last," he said.

"Suppose they are aliens," said the astronomer, "and suppose they open fire on us.... What then?"

"By the time people get around to building interstellar ships," said Grimes, "they've lost the habit of wanting to fight strangers."

"Sometimes," I said.

"Switch on the Matter Proximity Indicator," he said. I did so, peered into the globe that was its screen. "There's something ... ," I said. "Red 085, ZD 093.... "

"A little astern," murmured the Old Man. "Range?"

I manipulated the controls carefully. "Twenty thousand—and closing. Relative bearing not altering."

"Liddell," said the Captain. "You're an astronomer, a mathematician. What are the odds against this? With all the immensity of Space around us we have two ships approaching on collision orbits. The other ship is using a similar drive to ours—she must be. If her rate of temporal precession were more than one microsecond different from ours she would not register on our screens, and there'd be no risk of collision. What are the odds?"

"Astronomical," replied Liddell drily. "But I'll tell you this, although you must, by this time, have come to the same conclusion. There's a Law of Nature that you'll not find in any of the books, but that is valid just the same. If a coincidence can happen, it will."

"I'll buy that," said Grimes.

Peter's voice came from the squawk box. "I've established contact. She's an alien ship, all right. She belongs to some people called the Lowanni. She's a trading vessel, analogous to one of our Beta Class ships. Her captain wishes to know if he may close us to make contact."

"Tell him yes!" almost shouted Grimes. "Mr. Willoughby—sound the General Alarm. I want all hands at stations. Damn it, this is just what we've been hunting for! Neighbors along the Rim ... "

I sounded the Alarm. The ship hummed like a disturbed beehive as one and all hastened to their stations. The reports began coming in: "Rocket Drive manned and ready ... Electronic Radio Office manned and ready ... Surgeon and Biochemist standing by for further instructions ... " The Chief and Third Officers, together with the other astronomer, pulled themselves into the already crowded control room.

It seemed only a matter of minutes—although it was longer—before the alien ship was within telescopic range. Just a little silvery dot of light she was at first, hard to pick up against the gleaming convoluted distortion of the Galactic Lens. And then, slowly, she took shape. There was little about her appearance that was unusual—but any spaceship designed for landings and blastings-off through an atmosphere must, of necessity, look very like any other spaceship.

Meanwhile, our Electronic and Psionic Radio departments were working together. I still don't know

how Peter Morris and his opposite number in the alien ship managed to sort out details of frequency and all the rest of it, but they did. It may be, of course, that mathematics is the universal language — even so, it must have been quite a job for the two telepaths to transmit and receive the electronic technicalities.

They came into the control room then—Peter Morris and Sparks. Sparks busied himself with the big intership transceiver, twisting dials and muttering. Peter whispered occasional instructions.

The screen came to life. It showed the interior of a control room very like our own. It showed a group of people very like ourselves. They were in the main slimmer, and their features were more delicate, and their ears had pointed tips, but they were human rather than merely humanoid.

One of them—his black-clad shoulders were heavily encrusted with gold—said something in a pleasant tenor voice. The girl standing beside him seemed to be repeating what he was saying; her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

"Captain Sanara says, 'Welcome to the Dain Worlds,' " said Peter.

"Tell him, 'Thank you,' " said Grimes.

I saw the girl in the alien ship speak to the Captain. She must, I thought, be their P.R.O. I remembered, suddenly, what Peter had told me of those dreams of his before we left Faraway. *She was a little too tall, and a little too slim, and her golden hair had a greenish glint to it. Her small ears were pointed at the tips.* ... And she has a wide generous mouth, I thought, and in spite of the severity of her uniform she's all woman.... I looked at Peter. He was staring into the screen like a starving man gazing into a restaurant window.

Shortly thereafter it became necessary for the two ships to cut their interstellar drives—alterations of course are impossible while the Drive is in operation, and an alteration of course there had to be to avert collision. During the operation the image on the screen blurred and wavered and, at times, vanished as the two rates of temporal precession lost their synchronization. Peter, I could see, was on tenterhooks while this was taking place. He had found, thanks to an utterly impossible coincidence, his woman; now he dreaded losing her.

He need not have worried. Grimes was an outstanding astronaut, and in all probability the alien Captain was in the same class. The other ship flickered back into view just as the Galactic Lens reappeared in all its glory. Our directional gyroscopes whined briefly, our rockets coughed once. Through the port I saw a short burst of pale fire at the stern of the alien—then we were falling through space on parallel courses with velocities matching to within one millimeter a second.

Time went by. Through the telepaths the two Captains talked. We heard about the Dain Worlds, whose people were relative newcomers into deep space. We heard about their social and economic systems, their art, their industries. As we listened we marveled. These people, the Lowanni, were our twins. They thought as we did and acted as we did, and their history in most ways paralleled our own. I knew what Grimes was thinking. He had made up his mind that the Rim Worlds had far more in common with these aliens than with the crowded humanity at the Galactic Center. He was thinking of more than trade agreements, he was thinking in terms of pacts and treaties. Even so, trade was not to be sneezed at.

They talked, the two Captains. They discussed an interchange of gifts, of representative artifacts from both cultures. It was when they got to this stage of the proceedings that they struck a snag.

"There are," said our Doctor coldly, "such things as microorganisms. I would point out, Captain, that it would be suicidal folly to allow an alien to board this ship, even if he kept his spacesuit on. He might carry something that would wipe all of us out—and might carry something back with him that would destroy both himself and all his shipmates."

Peter broke in. "I've been talking with Erin," he said. "Erin?" asked the Old Man.

"That's her name, sir. She's the alien P.R.O. We've decided that the exchange of artifacts is necessary, and have been trying to work out a way in which it would be carried out without risk. At the same time, it means that both parties have a guinea pig....

"What do you mean, Mr. Morris?"

"Let me finish, sir. This ship, as you know, has only one airlock, but carries more boats than is necessary. *Listra*— the ship out there —has the normal complement of boats for a vessel of her class but has no less than four airlocks, two of which are rarely used. This is the way we've worked it out. One of our boats, and one of *Listra's* airlocks, can be used as isolation hospitals....

"I can handle a boat, sir, as you know, compulsory for every non-executive officer in the Commission's service to hold a lifeboatman's certificate. The idea is this. I take the boat out to midway between the two ships, carrying with me such goods as we are giving to the aliens. Erin comes out in her spacesuit, bringing with her what the aliens are giving to us. Then she returns to her ship, and I bring the boat back to this ship. She will remain in the airlock, as I shall remain in the boat, until such time as it is ruled that there is no danger of infection.... "

I looked at the screen. I saw that the slim, blonde girl was talking earnestly to Captain Sanara. I saw other officers joining in the discussion. I looked back from the screen to Captain Grimes. His dark, mottled face was heavy with misgivings. I heard him say, "This could be suicide, Mr. Morris."

"It could be, sir—but so could coming out on an expedition like this. And you know as well as I do that very few alien microorganisms have been found that are dangerous to man. All that it means, essentially, is that Erin and I will have to do our jobs in rather uncomfortable conditions from now on."

"Why you, and why Erin?"

"Because we're the telepaths. Suppose, for example, you send a tube of depilatory among the other goods to be exchanged. Erin's people might think that it's toothpaste, or mustard, or ... or anything at all but what it is. When we're together in the boat we can explain things, talk things over. We'll get more ground covered in half an hour together than we should in half a week, talking ship to ship.... "

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you?" grumbled Grimes. "But on a job of this sort it's foolish to discourage an enthusiastic volunteer.... Well, I suppose that the rest of you had better start collecting artifacts. Books, and tools, and instruments, samples of our food and drink.... "

"You mean it's all right, sir?" asked Peter, his face suddenly radiant.

"Mr. Morris, if this were a commercial vessel I'd never allow one of the officers to take such a risk. If you like you can tell that girl that I take a dim view of her Captain for allowing her to take the risk.... "

"She doesn't think of it that way."

"Doesn't she? Then she should."

"Can I get ready, sir?"

"You can. Don't forget to brush your hair and wash behind your ears—after all, you have acting temporary ambassadorial status."

"Thank you, sir."

Peter vanished from the control room as though he had added teleportation to his other talents. Grimes sighed and looked at the screen, looked at the radiant girl who was, obviously, thanking her Captain. He sighed again and demanded, of no one in particular, "Who said it?"

"Who said what?" asked the Chief Officer.

"Journeys end in lovers' meetings," said Grimes.

It was all so obvious, even to non-telepaths.

I was in the boat with Peter shortly before he blasted off. I said, "You seem pretty certain."

"Of course I'm certain. And she was lonely too, just as I have been. Among her people they have a similar set-up to ours, but in reverse. With them it's usually the male telepath who's an unattractive, mindless clod. This chance encounter means a lot to both of us."

"She's an oxygen breather?" I asked. "You're sure of that? I mean, if she comes in here and takes off her helmet and our atmosphere poisons her.... I don't want to be pessimistic, but I believe in facing facts."

"She's an oxygen breather," Peter assured me. "She eats food very much like ours. (I hope she likes chocolates—I've got some here.) She drinks alcoholic liquor in moderation. She smokes, even. She can try one of our cigarettes and I'll try one of hers....

"You've found out a lot in a short time, haven't you?"

"Of course I have. That's my job—and hers. But I'll have to ask you to leave me, Ken. I've got a date."

Are you sure you wouldn't like me to come along?"

"Not bloody likely!" he snapped.

"All right, then. And the best of luck."

"Thanks," he said.

I stood by the blister until I felt the shock of his blasting off, until the red READY light changed to green, showing that he was out and clear. I made my way back to Control. I joined the group at the port watching the little spacecraft coasting out and away from us, watched her take up a position roughly midway between the two ships.

We saw a circle of yellow light suddenly appear on *Listra's* sleek side. We saw, through telescopes and binoculars, the little figure that hung there for a while in black silhouette. We could make out the bulky bundle that she was carrying.

Flame jetted from her shoulder units, and she was falling out and away from her own ship. Slowly she approached the lifeboat. I looked away briefly, looked at the screen. The aliens, like ourselves, were crowded around viewports, were watching this first physical contact between our two races.

She was very close to Peter's boat now. I could imagine him waiting in the little cabin, as he had waited—how many times? — in his dream. I could appreciate, dimly, what he must be feeling. I had been in love myself and had waited for the loved one, and what I had felt must be no more than a pale shadow of what is felt by a telepath. There was, I confess, more than a little envy in my thoughts.

She was very close to the boat, and I saw that Peter had the outer door of the little airlock open.

For a long second she was silhouetted against the glow of the airlock light....

And then ...

And then I was blind, as the others were blind, with tears welling from my eyes, the skin of my face burning from its exposure to radiation. She had been there, just entering the boat, and then she and the boat had vanished in one dreadful flash.

Slowly sight returned, dim and painful. I was looking once again at the screen, and I could see that those in the other ship had been affected as we had. There was pain on their faces, and it was not only physical pain. I knew then—as they must have known as they looked at us—that this had been no act of treachery, that there had been no murderous bomb concealed among the package of bartered goods.

Slowly the alien Captain shrugged his shoulders. He made a gesture of rejection with his slim hands. One of his officers handed him something. It was a black glove. He put it on. Slowly he brought his hands together—the white-skinned one and the black-gloved one. He flung them apart explosively.

The screen went blank. We looked away from it through the port. The alien ship was gone.

"We should have guessed," Liddell was muttering. "We should have guessed. *They* did."

"But too late," said one of the others.

"What should we have guessed?" asked Grimes.

"Anti-matter," said Liddell. "We've known for centuries that it can exist. Matter identical with what we call normal matter, except that all electrical charges are reversed. We thought that we might find it in other galaxies if ever we had a ship capable of making the journey.... But perhaps the Dain Worlds aren't really part of this galaxy at all."

"And when it comes into contact with normal matter?" pressed Grimes.

"You saw, Captain. There can never, *never*, be any contact between the Lowanni and ourselves."

"And what happens," I asked, "when it's two living bodies of the two kinds of matter that make the contact?"

"You saw," said Liddell.

But I was not satisfied with the answer, and am still not satisfied. I remembered what Peter had told me about the conclusion of his dream, and have yet to decide if he was the unluckiest or the luckiest of men.