

The Tin Fishes

Commodore John Grimes was proceeding homeward from Tharn the long way around—by way of Groller, Stree and Mellise, by the route that he, in the old Faraway Quest, had opened and charted so many years ago.

On all the worlds he was still remembered. On Tharn the spaceport was named after him. In Breardon, the planetary capital of Groller, a huge statue of him stood in Council Square. Grimes had stared up at the heroic monument with some distaste. Surely his ears didn't stand out that much, and surely his habitual expression was not quite so frog-like. He made allowances for the fact that the Grollens, although humanoid, are a batrachian people, but he still inspected himself for a long time in a full-length mirror on his return to the ship in which he was a passenger.

And then Rim Kestrel, in which Grimes had taken passage from Tharn, came to Mellise.

Mellise was a watery world, fully four-fifths of its surface being covered by the warm, mainly shallow seas. The nearest approach to a continent was a long, straggling chain of islands almost coincident with the equator. On one of the larger ones was the spaceport. There was no city, only a village in which the human spaceport personnel and the Rim Confederacy's ambassador and his staff lived. The Mellisans themselves were an amphibious race; like the Earthly cetacea they returned to the sea after having reached quite a high stage of evolution ashore. They could, if they had to, live and work on dry land, but they preferred the water. They dwelt in submarine villages where they were safe from the violent revolving storms that at times ravaged the surface. They tended their underwater farms, raising giant mollusks, great bivalves that yielded lustrous pearls, the main item of export. Their imports were the manufactured goods needed by an aquatic culture: nets, cordage, harpoon guns and the like. They could make these for themselves but, with the establishment of regular trade between themselves and the Confederacy, they preferred not to. Why should an essentially water-dwelling being work with fire and metals when pearl farming was so much more comfortable and pleasant?

Grimes rode down to the surface in Rim Kestrel's control room. Captain Paulus, the ship's master, was nervous, obviously did not like having his superior there to watch his ship-handling. But he was competent enough, although painfully cautious. Not for him the almost meteoric descent favored by other masters. His Inertial Drive delivered a thrust that nearly countered the planet's gravitational pull. The Kestrel drifted surfaceward like a huge balloon with barely negative buoyancy. But Paulus reacted fast enough when a jet stream took hold of the ship, canceling its effect by just the right application of lateral drive; reacted fast again when the vessel was shaken by clear air turbulence, pulling her out of the danger area with no delay. Nonetheless, Grimes was making mental notes. The efficiency of the spaceport's meteorological observatory left much to be desired; Paulus should have been warned by radio of the disturbances through which he had passed. (But he, Grimes, had made his first landing here before there was a spaceport, let alone spaceport facilities. He had brought the Quest down through the beginnings of a hurricane.)

The Commodore looked at the vision screen that showed, highly magnified, what lay aft and below. There were the islands, each one raggedly circular, each one ringed by a golden beach that was ringed, in its turn, by white surf. There was the cloudy green of shallow water, the clear blue of the deeper seas. Inland was the predominant purple of the vegetation.

Yes, it was a pleasant world, Mellise. Even here, out on the Rim, it could have been developed to a holiday planet, rivaling if not surpassing Caribbea. If the Mellisans had been obliged to deal with the Interstellar Federation rather than with the Rim Worlds Confederacy, this probably would have been the case. Grimes, whose first years in space had been as an officer in the Federation's Survey Service, knew all too well that the major Terran galactic power was far more concerned with the rights of other intelligent races in theory than in practice—unless there was some political advantage to be gained by posing as liberator, conservator or whatever.

He could see the white spaceport buildings now, gleaming in the light of the afternoon sun, startlingly distinct against their backdrop of purple foliage. He could see the pearly gray of the apron, and on it the black geometrical shadows cast by cranes and conveyor belts and gantries. He could even see the tiny, blinking stars that were the three beacons, the markers of the triangle in the center of which Rim Kestrel was to land. He wished that Paulus would get on with it. At this rate it would be after sunset by the time the ship was down.

After sunset it was, and the night had fallen with the dramatic suddenness to be expected in the low latitudes of any planet. Overhead the sky was clear and almost empty, save for the opalescent arc that was the upper limb of the Galactic Lens, low on the western horizon. Paulus had ordered all ports throughout the ship opened, and through them flowed the warm breeze, the scents of growing and flowering things that would have been cloyingly sweet had it not been for the harsh tang of salt water. There was the distant murmur of surf and, even more distant, a grumble of thunder.

"Thank you, Captain Paulus," said Grimes formally. "A very nice set-down."

And so it had been. Merchant captains, after all, are not paid to put their ships in hazard.

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Port formalities were few. The Mellisans cared little about such matters as health, customs and immigration regulations. The port captain, a Rim Worlder, took care of all such details for them; and insofar as vessels owned by the Confederacy were concerned there was not even the imposition of port dues. After all, the levying of such charges would have been merely robbing Peter to pay Paul. The rare outside ships—the occasional Interstellar Transport Commission Epsilon Class tramp, the infrequent Empire of Waverley freighter, the once-in-a-blue-moon Shakespearian Sector trader—were, presumably, another matter. They would at least pay port dues.

Grimes sat with Captain Paulus and Stacey, the port captain, in Paulus' day cabin. Cold drinks were on the table before them. The Commodore was

smoking his foul pipe, Paulus was nervously lighting one cigarette after another, and Captain Stacey had between his fleshy lips a peculiarly gnarled cigar of local manufacture. It looked as though it had been rolled from dry seaweed, and smelt like it. ("An acquired taste," Stacey had told them. "Like to try one?" They had refused.)

"Only a small shipment of pearls this time," Stacey said. "The pearl fishers—or farmers—are having their troubles."

"Disease again?" asked Paulus.

"No. Not this time. Seems to be a sort of predatory starfish. Could be a mutation. Whether it is or not, it's a vicious bastard."

"I thought, Captain Stacey," said Grimes, "that the people here were quite capable of dealing with any of the dangerous life forms in their seas."

"Not this new starfish," Stacey told him. "It's a killer." He sipped his drink. "The natives knew that you were coming here almost as soon I did, Commodore. Telepathy? Could be. But, sir, you are almost a local deity. Old Wunnaara—he's the boss in these parts—said to me only this morning, 'Grimes Wannarbo'—and a Wannarbo is roughly halfway between a high chief and the Almighty—'will us help. . . .' Really touched by his faith, I was."

"I'm not a marine biologist," said Grimes. "But couldn't you, with your local knowledge, do something, Captain Stacey?"

"I'm not a marine biologist either, Commodore. It takes all my time to run the port."

And I recommended you for this appointment, thought Grimes, looking at the fat man. I thought that this would be an ideal job for anybody as notoriously lazy as yourself. I thought that you couldn't do any harm here, and that you'd get on well with the Mellisans. But you can't do any good either.

"They must produce pearls," stated Paulus, "if they're to pay for their imports. They've nothing else we want."

Nothing else that we want. . . thought Grimes. But the Rim Confederacy is not alone in the galaxy. He said, "Surely, Captain Stacey, you've found out what sort of weapons would be most effective against these things. They could be manufactured back on Lorn or Faraway, and shipped out here. And what about protective netting for the oyster beds?"

"Useless, Commodore," Stacy told him. "The starfish just tear to shreds even the heaviest nets, made from wire rope. As for weapons—poison has always been effective in the past, but not any longer."

"We have to do something to help these people," Grimes said definitely. "And, frankly, not altogether from altruistic motives. As you should know, both Waverly and the Shakespearian Sector are anxious to expand their spheres of influence. If they can help Mellise and we can't . . ." The unspoken words "you'll be out of a soft job" hung in the air between them.

"They seem to rely upon you to help them, sir," Stacey grumbled.

"And perhaps I can," Grimes told him. "Perhaps I can."

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Perhaps he could—but, as he had said, he was not a marine biologist. Even so, he knew of the parallel evolution of life forms on all Earth-type planets. And in the course of his career he had tangled with unfriendly and hungry beasts on more than a century of worlds; he was still around and the hostile animals were not. Variations on familiar patterns or utterly alien, all had fallen victim to human cunning and human weaponry—and human savagery. Man, after all, was still the most dangerous animal.

He said good night to Stacey and Paulus, told them that he was going outside the ship to stretch his legs. He made his way down to the after air lock, then down the ramp to the smooth, clean concrete of the apron. He walked away from the direction of the administration buildings and the human village, found a path that must lead down to the sea. On either side of it the feathery fronds of the trees rustled in the warm breeze. Overhead, Mellise's single moon, a ruddy globe with an almost unmarked surface, rode high in the sky.

Grimes came to the beach, to the pale, gently shelving stretch of coarse sand beyond which the surf was greenly luminescent. He kicked off his sandals and, carrying them, walked slowly down to the edge of the water. He missed Sonya.

He saw that a black, humanoid shape, outlined by the phosphorescence, was waddling ashore, splashing through the shallows. From its dark head two eyes that reflected the light of the moon stared at Grimes. The teeth glinted whitely in the long muzzle as it spoke. "Meelongee, Grimes Wannarbo." Its voice was like that of a Siamese cat.

"Meelongee," replied Grimes. He remembered that this was the word of greeting.

"You have come back." The English was oddly accented but perfectly understandable. "Yes. I have come back." "You . . . help?"

"I shall try."

The native was close to Grimes now, and the Commodore could smell the not unpleasant fishy odor of him. He could see, too, that he was old; in the moonlight the white hairs about the muzzle and the white patches of fur on the chest were plainly visible.

"You me remember?" There was a short, barking laugh. "No? I was cub when first you come to Mellise, Grimes Wannarbo. Now I am chief. My name—Wunnaara. And you, too, are chief—not of one skyship, but of many. I am chief—but known little. You are chief—but know much."

"The Rim Kestrel lifts tomorrow," said Grimes.

"But you will stay, Wannarbo? You will stay?"

Grimes made his decision. If there was anything that he could do he would be furthering the interests of the Confederacy as well as helping the natives of Mellise. Stacey, it was obvious, would not lift one fat finger. The ambassador, like the port captain, was a no-hoper who had been sent to a planet upon which no emergencies were ever likely to arise. Grimes had not yet met him, but he knew him by repute.

"I will stay," he told the Chief.

"Then I tell my people. There is much to make ready." Wunnaara slipped back into the water, far more silently than he had emerged from it, and was gone.

The Commodore resumed his walk along the beach.

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He came to a shallow bay, a crescent-like indentation in the shoreline. There was somebody out there in the water swimming—and by the flash of long, pale arms Grimes knew that it was not a native. Too, there was a pile of clothing on the sand. Grimes quickly stripped. It was a long time since he had enjoyed a swim in the sea. He divested himself of his clothing without embarrassment. Even though he was no longer a young man his body was still compact, well-muscled, had not begun to run to belly. He waded out into the warm salt water.

Suddenly he was confronted by the other swimmer. Only her head and smooth, bare shoulders were visible above the surface. Her eyes and her wide mouth were very dark against the creamy pallor of her face.

"Can't you read?" she was asking indignantly. "Didn't you see the notices? This beach is reserved for ladies only."

Her accent was not a Rim Worlds' one; it was more Pan-Terran than anything. That would account for her indignation; only on parts of the home planet did the absurd nudity taboo still persist. But this was not the home planet.

Grimes said mildly, "I'm sorry. I didn't know." He turned to leave the water.

She said, "Don't run away. We can talk, at this depth, modestly enough."

"I suppose we can."

"You're from the ship, aren't you? But of course, you must be . . . let me see, now . . . I've a good ear for accents, and you haven't quite lost the good old Terran twangs—Commodore Grimes, would it be?"

"Guilty," admitted Grimes. He was amused to note either that the tide was going out fast or that this companion had moved closer inshore. Her full breasts were fully exposed now, and there was more than a hint of the pale glimmer of the rest of her below the surface.

She said, "It's rather a pity that you're leaving tomorrow."

"I'm not leaving."

"You're not?" she asked sharply.

"No. I promised Chief Wunnaara that I'd stay to look into this plague of starfish."

"You promised Wunnaara . . ." Her voice was scornful. "But he's only a native, and has to be kept in his place. That's why I insisted on having this beach made private. I hated to think that those . . . things were spying on me, leering at me while I was swimming."

"And what about me, leering and spying?" Grimes asked sarcastically.

"But you're a Terran—"

"Ex-Terran, young lady. Very ex."

"—and we Terrans should stick together," she completed with a dazzling smile.

"I'm a Rim Worlder," Grimes told her severely. "And so must you be, if you're employed at the spaceport, no matter where you were born." He asked abruptly, "And what do you do, by the way?"

"I'm in the met. office," she said. "Then I shall see you tomorrow," stated Grimes.

"Good!" Her smile flashed on again.

"I shall be calling in to register a strong complaint," the Commodore went on.

He attempted to step past the girl, intending to swim out to the first line of breakers. Somehow she got in his way, and somehow both of them lost their balance and went down, floundering and splashing. Grimes got to his feet first, pulled the young woman to hers. He was suddenly conscious, as she fell against him, of the firmness and the softness of the body against his own. It was all very nice—and all a little too obvious. But he was tempted, and tempted strongly. Then, but with seeming reluctance, she broke away from him and splashed shoreward, her slim, rounded figure luminous in the moonlight.

Her voice floated back to him, "I still hope that it's a pleasant meeting tomorrow, Commodore!"

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It was not as unpleasant as it could have been. The girl, Lynn Davis, was second in charge of the spaceport's meteorological office. By daylight, and clothed, she was still attractive. Her hair was a dark, dull-gleaming blonde and her eyes were so deep a blue as to be almost black. Her face was thin and intelligent, with both mouth and nose a little too pronounced for conventional prettiness. There was a resemblance to Sonya, his wife, that strongly attracted Grimes; more than a physical likeness, it was a matter of essential quality. This, at once, put Grimes on his guard. Sonya had held the rank of commander in the Federation's Survey Service, and in the Intelligence branch at that. But now Federation and Rim World Confederacy

worked together, shared all information, kept no secrets from each other. Even so. . . .

Lynn Davis had all the answers ready. Rim Kestrel had been given no information on jet streams and clear air turbulence because there had been a breakdown of radar and other instruments. This, Grimes was made to feel, was his fault; the Rim Runners' Stores Department should have been more prompt in dealing with requisitions for spare parts. "And after all, Commodore," she told him sweetly, "you made the first landing here without any aid at all from the surface, didn't you?"

Grimes asked to see the instrument room. He thought that this request disconcerted her—but this was understandable enough. Any officer, in any service, likes to do things his own way and is apt to resent a superior's intrusion into his own little kingdom, especially when the superior is in a fault-finding mood. But she got up from behind her very tidy desk, led the Commodore out of the office and up a short flight of stairs.

At first glance the compartment looked normal enough; its counterpart could have been found at almost any human-operated spaceport throughout the galaxy. The deviations from the norm were also normal. On many worlds with a lack of recreational facilities the instrument room, with its laboratory and workshop equipment to one side of it, is an ideal place for hobbyists to work. The practice is officially frowned upon, but persists.

There was a tank there, a small aquarium, brilliantly lit. Grimes walked over to it. The only animal denizens were a dozen or so small starfish, brightly colored, spiny little beasts, unusually active. These, unlike their kind on the majority of worlds, seemed to prefer swimming to crawling as a means of locomotion, although they possessed, on the undersides of their limbs, the standard equipment of myriads of suckers.

"And who belongs to these?" asked Grimes.

"Me," she replied.

"Is marine biology your hobby?"

"I'm afraid not, Commodore. I just keep these because they're ornamental. They add something to the decor."

"Yes," he agreed. "Starfish." He walked to a bench where there was an intricacy of gleaming wire. "And what the hell's this?"

"A mobile," she told him. "Jeff Petersen, the met. officer, has artistic ambitions."

"And where is Mr. Peterson?"

"He's away. The crowd setting up the weather control station on Mount Llayilla asked Captain Stacey for the loan of him."

"Hmm. Well, I can't help feeling, Miss Davis, that if you and Mr. Peterson devoted more time to your work and less time to your hobbies you'd give incoming ships far better service."

She flared. "We never play around with our hobbies in our employer's time. And there's so little social life here that we must have something to occupy us when we're off duty."

"I'm not denying that, Miss Davis."

She switched on that smile again. "Why don't you call me Lynn, Commodore? Everybody else does."

He found himself smiling in reply. "Why not, Lynn?"

"Isn't that better? And, talking of social life, I'd like it very much if you came to my place some evening for dinner." She grinned rather than smiled this time. "I'm a much better cook than Mrs. Stacey."

That wouldn't be hard, thought Grimes. The Port Captain's wife, as he had learned that morning at breakfast, couldn't even fry an egg properly.

"Try to keep an evening open for me," she said.

"I'll try," he promised. He looked at his watch. "But I must go. I have an appointment with the Ambassador."

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The Confederacy's Ambassador was a thin, languid and foppish man. In spite of the disparity in physical appearance he was cut from the same cloth as Captain Stacey. He was one of the barely competent, not quite bad enough to be fired but too lazy and too disinterested to be trusted with any major appointment. He drawled, "I can't order you not to stay, old man, any more than I can order you to stay. Let's face it—you pile on a few more G's (as you spacefaring types put it) than I do. But I still think that you're wasting your time. The natives'll have to pull their socks up, that's all. And tighten their belts for the time being—not that they have any belts to tighten. Ha, ha! You may have been first on this world, Commodore, but you haven't lived with these people as I have. They're a lazy, shiftless bunch. They won't stir a finger to help themselves as long as the Confederacy's handy to do it for them."

"And if the Confederacy won't," said Grimes flatly, "there's the Empire of Waverley. Or the Shakespearians. Or the Federation. Even the Shaara might find this planet interesting."

"Those communistic bumblebees? It might do the Mellisans a world of good if they did take over." He raised a slim, graceful wrist and looked at his watch. "Old Wunnaara's due about now. I don't encourage him—it takes days to get the fishy stink out of the Embassy—but he insisted."

"You could," pointed out Grimes, "have a room specially fitted for the reception of local dignitaries, something that duplicates, as far as possible, the conditions that they're used to."

"You don't understand, old man. It's taken me years, literally, to get this shack fitted and decorated the way that it should be. The battles I've had to fight with Appropriations! It's all a matter of keeping up a front, old man, showing the flag and all that. . . ."

A smartly uniformed Marine entered the elegant, too elegant salon.

"Chief Wunnaara, your Excellency."

"Show him in, Sergeant. Show him in. And attend to the air-conditioning, will you?"

Wunnaara was dressed for the occasion. His ungainly (on dry land) body was clad in a suit of what looked like coarse sacking, and riding high on a complicated harness-like framework was a tank, the contents of which sloshed as he walked. From this tank depended narrow tubes, connected to his clothing at various points. They dripped—both upon the cloth and upon the Ambassador's carpet. A goggled mask, water-filled, covered his eyes and the upper part of his face. The smell of fish was very evident.

"Your Excellency," he mewed. "Meelongee, Grimes Wannarbo, meelongee."

"Greetings," replied the Ambassador, and, "Meelongee," replied Grimes.

"Your Excellency, Grimes Wannarbo has agreed to help. He come with me now, I show him trouble."

"Do you want to go through with this, old man?" the Ambassador asked Grimes. "Really?"

"Of course. Would you know of any scuba outfits on this island? I've already asked Captain Stacey, and he says that the only ones here are privately owned."

"That is correct, Commodore. I could ask the sergeant to lend you his."

"Not necessary, Grimes Wannarbo," interjected the chief. "Already waiting on beach we have ship, what you call submarine."

"Good," said Grimes.

"You'd trust yourself to that contraption?" demanded the Ambassador in a horror-stricken voice. "It'll be one of the things that they use to take stores and equipment down to their farms."

"They work, don't they?"

"Yes, old man. But . . ."

"But I'd have thought, on a world like this, that the Ambassador would have his own, private submarine."

"I'm a diplomat, old man, not a sailor."

Grimes shrugged. He said formally. "With your permission, your Excellency, I shall accompany Chief Wunnaara."

"Permission granted, old man. Don't get your feet wet."

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The submarine had been pulled up on the beach, onto a ramp that had

been constructed there for that purpose, that ran from the water to a low warehouse. Apart from its wheeled undercarriage it was a conventional enough looking craft, torpedo-shaped, with a conning tower amidships and rudder and screw propeller aft, with hydroplanes forward and amidships. A wooden ladder had been placed on the ramp to give access to the conning tower. Wunnaara gestured to Grimes to board first. The Commodore clambered up the ladder with a certain lack of agility; the spacing of the rungs was adapted to the Mellisan, not the human, frame. He had the same trouble with the metal steps leading into the submarine's interior.

When he was down in what was obviously the craft's control room he looked about him curiously. It was easy enough to get a general idea of what did what to which; the Mellisans, with no written language of their own, had adopted Terran English to their requirements. There were depth gauges, steering, hydroplane and engine controls, a magnetic compass. Inside an aluminum rather than a steel hull it should, thought Grimes, function quite satisfactorily. What had him puzzled was a bundle of taut bladders, evidently taken from some sea plant. Beside them, in a rack on the bulkhead, was a sharp knife. And he did not quite approve of the flowerpot that was hanging to one side of the steering gear, in which was growing a vividly blue, fernlike plant. He recalled the conversation that he had had with Lynn Davis on the subject of hobbies.

Apart from these rather peculiar fittings the little ship was almost as she had been when built to Mellisan specifications at the Seacraft Yard on Thule: the original electric motors, a big bank of heavy-duty power cells, a capacious cargo hold (now empty) and no accommodation whatsoever. He had noticed, on his way down through the conning tower, that the compartment, with its big lookout ports, could still be used as an air lock.

Wunnaara joined him, accompanied by another native dressed as he was. The younger Mellisan went straight to the wheel, from which all the other controls were easily accessible. Wunnaara asked Grimes to return with him to the conning tower. The upper hatch, he saw, was shut now, but there was an unrestricted view all around from the big ports. And although the lower hatch remained open there was ample room, on the annular platform, to walk around it. Wunnaara yelled some order down through the opening. Slowly at first, then faster, the submarine started to move, sliding astern down the ramp on her wheels. She slipped into the water with hardly any disturbance, and when she was afloat at least half of her hull was above the surface. Electric motors hummed and she backed away from the beach, her head swinging to starboard as she did so. She came around well and easily, and when she was broadside on to the shore, starting to roll uncomfortably in the swell, the coxswain put the engines ahead and the wheel hard over to complete the swing. Then, after surprisingly little fuss and bother, she was headed seaward, pitching easily, her straight wake pearly white on the blue water under the noonday sun.

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A red marker buoy indicated the location of the pearl beds. Quietly, without any fuss, the ship submerged, dropping down below the surface as her ballast tanks were filled. Grimes went back to the control room; always keenly interested in ships—the ships of the sea as well as the ships of

space—he wanted to see how this submersible was handled. He was alarmed when, as he completed his cautious descent down the ladder, the coxswain snatched that nasty looking knife from the rack on the bulkhead. But the Mellisan ignored him, slashed swiftly and expertly at one of the seaweed bladders. It deflated with a loud hiss. Behind Grimes, Wunnaara hooted with laughter. When he had the Commodore's attention he pointed to the absurd potted plant hanging almost over the compass. Its fronds had turned scarlet, but were already slowly changing back to blue. Grimes chuckled as he realized what was being done. This was air regeneration at its most primitive, but still effective. These submarines, when built, had been fitted with excellent air regeneration plants but, no doubt, the Mellisans preferred their own. The oxygen released from the bladder brought with it a strong smell of wet seaweed which, to them, would be preferable to the odorless gas produced by the original apparatus.

Grimes watched the coxswain until Wunnaara called him back to the conning tower. He was impressed by the Mellisan's competence. He was doing things that in a human operated submarine would have required at least four men. Could it be, he wondered, that a real sea man must, of necessity, be also a first-class seaman? He toyed, half humorously, with the idea of recruiting a force of Mellisan mercenaries, to be hired out to those few nations—on those few worlds where there was still a multiplicity of nations—which still relied upon sea power for the maintenance of their sovereignty.

Back in the conning tower he forgot his not-quite-serious money-making schemes. The submarine—as he already knew from his inspection of the depth gauges—was not running deep, but neither was she far from the sandy bottom. Ahead, astern and on either side were the pearl beds, the orderly rows of the giant bivalves. Among them worked Mellisans—who, like similar beings on other planets, including Earth, were able to stay under water for a very long time on one lungful of air. Some of them, explained Wunnaara, were planting the irritant in the mantle of the shellfish. Others were harvesting the pearls from mollusks that had been treated months previously. These were taken to the underwater depot for cleaning and sorting and, eventually, would be loaded into the submarine for carriage to the spaceport. But, said the Chief, this would be a poor harvest. . . .

From his vantage point he conned the ship, yelping orders down to the coxswain. Finally they were drifting over a long row of opened bivalves. Considerable force had been employed in this opening, the not typical Mellisan care. They could extract the pearl without inflicting permanent injury upon the creature inside the paired shells; in many cases here the upper valve had been completely shattered. In most cases no more than a few shreds of tattered flesh remained. And in all cases what had been a pearl was now only a scattering of opalescent dust.

Now the submarine was approaching the high wire net fence that had been erected to protect the pearl farm. It looked stout enough to stop a ship of this class—but something had come through it. Something had uprooted metal posts embedded in concrete; something had snapped wire rope like so much sewing thread. It was not something that Grimes was at all keen to meet, not even in the comparative safety of this well-designed and -built submersible.

"You see?" mewed the Chief. "You see, Grimes Wannarbo?"

"Yes. I see."

"Then what do, Grimes Wannarbo? What do?" Under stress, the old Mellisan's English tended to deteriorate.

"I . . . I don't know. I shall have to see some of the starfish. Have you any in captivity, or any dead ones?"

"No. No can catch. No can kill."

There was a steady thumping sound, transmitted through the water, amplified by the hull plating.

"Alarm!" Wunnaara cried. "Alarm! Alarm!" He shouted something in his own language to the coxswain. The submarine changed course, her motors screaming shrilly as speed was increased to full—or a little over. She skimmed over the flat sandy bottom, raising a great cloud of disturbed particles astern of her.

Ahead there was a commotion of some kind—a flurry of dark, almost human figures, an occasional explosion of silvery air bubbles, a flashing of metallic-seeming tentacles, a spreading stain in the water that looked like a frightened horse as she came full astern—and then she hung there, almost motionless, on the outskirts.

There were half a dozen of the . . . things, the starfish, and a dozen Mellisans. Through the now murky water could be seen the wreckage of practically an entire row of the bivalves—shattered shells, crushed pearls, torn, darkly oozing flesh. The odd thing about it all was the gentleness of the marauders. They seemed to be trying to escape—and they were succeeding—but at the same time were avoiding the infliction of serious injury upon the guardians of the beds.

And they were such flimsy things. Or they looked flimsy, as though they had been woven from fragile metallic lace. They looked flimsy, but they were not. One of them was trapped in a net of heavy wire handled by three Mellisans. Momentarily it was bunched up, and then it . . . expanded, and the wires snapped in a dozen places. One of them received a direct hit from a harpoon—and the weapon, its point blunted and broken, fell harmlessly to the bottom.

They were free and clear now, all of them, looking more like gigantic silvery snowflakes than living beings. They were free and clear, swimming toward the breached barrier, their quintuple, feathery arms flailing the water. They were free and clear, and although the Mellisans gave chase there was nothing that anybody could do about them.

"You see?" said the Chief.

"I see," said Grimes.

He saw, too, what he would have to do. He would make his own report, of course, to Rim Runners' head office, recommending that something be done on a government level to maintain the flow of commerce between Mellise

and the Confederacy. And he would have to try to persuade that pitiful nong of an ambassador to recommend to his bosses that a team qualified to handle the problem—say marine biologists and professional fishermen from Thule—be sent at once to Mellise. But it would not be at once, of course. Nobody knew better than Grimes how slowly the tide runs through official channels.

But. . . .

What could he, Grimes do? Personally, with his own two hands, with his own brain?

There had been something oddly familiar about the appearance of those giant *Astersidea*, about their actions. There had been something that evoked memories of the distant past, and something much more recent. What was it? Lynn Davis' gaudy pets in the brightly lit aquarium? They swam, of course, and these giant mutants (if mutants they were) were swimmers, but there the similarity ceased.

"What do, Grimes Wannarbo?" Wunnaara was insistent. "What do?"

"I . . . I don't know," replied the Commodore. "But I'll do something," he promised.

But what?

* * *

That night, back in his room in the port captain's residence, he did his homework. He had managed to persuade Captain Stacey to let him have the files on all Rim Runners' personnel employed on Mellise, and also had borrowed from the Ambassador's library all six volumes of Trantor's very comprehensive *Mellisan Marine Life*. (Trantor should have been here now, but Trantor was dead, drowned two years ago in a quite stupid and unnecessary accident in the Ultimate Sea, on Ultimo, a body of water little larger than a lake.) Grimes skimmed through Trantor's work first, paying particular attention to the excellent illustrations. Nothing, nothing at all, resembled the creatures that he had seen, although most of the smaller starfish, like the ones he had seen in Lynn Davis' tank, subsisted by making forcible entry into the homes of unfortunate bivalves.

Then he turned to the files.

About half the spaceport employees were true Rim Worlders—born out on the Rim. The other half—like Grimes himself—were not, although all of them were naturalized citizens. Judging from the educational qualifications and service records of all of them, none of them would be capable of inducing a mutation. Grimes had hoped to turn up a biological engineer, but he was disappointed. And biological engineering is not the sort of thing that anybody takes up as a hobby; in addition to the years of study and training there is the quite expensive license to practice to obtain, and the qualifications for that are moral rather than academic or practical. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a permanent fixture in Man's mythology.

Feeling like a Peeping Tom, another permanent fixture, he leafed through

Lynn Davis' service record. She was Terran-born, of course. Her real education had been at M.I.T., where she had graduated as a Bachelor of General Physics. After that she seemed to have specialized in meteorology. There had been a spell with Weather Control, North American Continent, and another spell with Weather Prediction, satellite-based. After that she had entered the service of Trans-Galactic Clippers as Spaceport Meteorological Officer. She had seen duty on Austral, Waverly, and Caribbea, all of them planets upon which T-G maintained its own spaceports. From Waverly she had gone to Caribbea—and on Caribbea she had blotted her copybook.

So, thought Grimes, she's a compulsive gambler. She doesn't look like one. But they never do. It was on Caribbea that she had become a regular habitu  of the New Port of Spain Casino. She had, of course, worked out a system to beat the wheel—but the system hadn't worked out for her. There had been the unhappy business of the cracking of the T-G cashier's safe, allegedly thiefproof, but (luckily) very few thieves held a degree in Physics. There had been the new banknotes, the serial numbers of which were on record, that had turned up in the safe of the casino's cashier.

After that—the Rim Worlds.

A pity, said Grimes to himself. A pity. But it could have been worse. If she'd gone to Elsinore, in the Shakespearian Sector, where they're notorious for their gambling, she'd really be in a mess by now.

He turned up the file on Peterson. The absentee meteorologist was another ex-Terran, and also had been employed with Trans-Galactic Clippers. Grimes noted with interest that Petersen had spent a few weeks on El Dorado, popularly known as "the planet of the filthy rich." (Grimes had been there himself as a young man, as a junior officer in the Federation's Survey Service.) It seemed that a T-G ship had called there on a millionaires' cruise, and T-G had insisted on sending its own spaceport personnel there in advance.

Women, not money, had been Petersen's trouble. Twice he had been named as correspondent in an unsavory divorce case. If the ladies had not been the wives of prominent T-G executives it wouldn't have mattered so much—but they had been.

There could be a connection, thought Grimes. There could be. Both of them from Earth, both of them T-G. . . . He shrugged away the idea. After all, it had been said that if you threw a brick at random aboard any Rim Runners' ship, the odds are that you will hit an ex-officer of the Interstellar Transport Federation's vessels.

So it went on—case histories, one after the other, that made depressing reading and, insofar as the quite serious crisis on Mellise was concerned, a shortage of both motive and opportunity. But money could be a motive. Suppose, tomorrow, a foreign ship dropped in, and suppose that somebody aboard her said to old Wunnaara, "We'll fix your starfish for you—in return for full trading rights. . . ."

And whatever else I am, thought Grimes tiredly, I'm not a starfish fixer.

He poured himself a stiff drink and went to bed.

* * *

She said, "I hear that you've been looking through the personnel files, John. That wasn't very gentlemanly of you."

"How did you hear?" asked Grimes. "My doing so was supposed to be as secret as the files themselves."

"There aren't any secrets on this bloody planet, in this tiny community." Her face, as she stared at him over her candlelit dining table, was hard and hostile, canceling out the effects of an excellent meal. "And did you find what you were looking for?"

"No."

"What were you looking for?"

"Somebody who's capable of doing a spot of biological engineering."

"Did you find anybody?"

"No, Lynn."

"What about the spaceport quack?"

"Frankly," said Grimes, "I wouldn't go to him with a slight head cold."

"Frankly, my dear, neither would I." She laughed, and her manner softened. "So you're still no closer to solving the Mystery of the Mutated Starfish."

"No."

"Then I'll solve it for you. There was a bad solar flare about a year ago, and our atmospheric radiation count went up no end in consequence. There's the answer. But I'm glad that you stayed on Mellise, John. You've no idea how hungry a girl gets for intelligent company."

"I'm glad that I stayed, Lynn. For personal reasons. But I really wish that I could help old Wunnaara. . . ."

She said, "I don't like His Too Precious Excellency any more than you do, John, but I often feel that he's on the right tack as far as the natives are concerned. Let them help themselves."

He said, "I discovered this world. I feel, somehow, that it's my direct responsibility."

She replied a little bitterly, "I wish that you'd start shedding some of your feelings of responsibility, Commodore. Don't worry so much. Start having a good time, while you can."

And I could, too, he thought. With a quite beautiful, available woman. But. . . .

She said, "It's a wild night. Hurricane Lynn—I named it after me. You aren't

walking back to old Stacey's place in this, surely?"

He said, "It's time I was going."

"You'll be drenched," she told him.

"All right. Then go. You can let yourself out."

For a tall girl she flounced well on her way from the little dining room to her bedroom.

Grimes sighed, cursing his retentive memory, his detailed recollection of the reports from all the planets with which Rim Runners traded. But he had to be sure, and he did not wish to make any inquiries regarding this matter on Mellise. He let himself out of the little dome-shaped cottage, was at once furiously assailed by the wind. Hurricane Lynn had not yet built up to its full intensity, but it was bad enough. There were great sheets of driving rain, and with them an explosion of spray whipped from the surface of the sea.

Luckily the spaceport was downwind from the village. Grimes ran most of the way. He didn't want to, but it was easier to scud before the gale than to attempt to maintain a sedate pace. He let himself into the port captain's large house. The Staceys were abed—he had told them that he would be late—but Captain Stacey called out from his bedroom, "Is that you, Commodore?"

"Who else, Captain? I shall be going out again shortly."

"What the hell for?" testily.

"I have to send a message. An important one."

"Telephone it through to the Carlotti Communications Office from here."

"I want to make sure it goes."

Grimes faintly overheard something about distrustful old bastards as he went to his own room, but ignored it.

There was a very cunning secret compartment built into his suitcase. The Commodore opened it, took from it a slim book. Then, with scratch pad and stylus, he worked rapidly and efficiently, finishing up with eleven gibberish groups. He put the book back in its hiding place, pocketed the pad. Then he had to face the stormy night again.

The duty operator in the Carlotti Office was awake, but only just. Had it not been for the growing uproar of the hurricane, penetrating even the insulated walls, he would not have been. He reluctantly put down his luridly covered book and, recognizing Grimes, said, "Sir?"

"I want this to go at once. To my office at Port Forlorn. Urgent." He managed a grin. "That's the worst of space travel. It's so hard to keep track of dates. But my secretary will be able to lay on flowers for the occasion."

The operator grinned back. Judging by the way that he was making a play

for that snooty Lynn Davis the Commodore must be a gay old dog, he figured. He said, a little enviously, "Your message will be winging its way over the light-years in a jiffy, sir." He handed the Commodore a signals pad.

Grimes put down the address, transcribed the groups from his own pad, filled in his name and the other details in the space provided. He said, "Let me know how much it is. It's private."

The young man winked. "Rim Runners'll never know, sir."

"Still, I prefer to pay," said Grimes.

He watched the miniature Carlotti Beacon—it was like a Mobius Strip distorted to a long oval—turn on its mounting in the big star tank until it was pointing directly at the spark that represented the Lorn sun. He hoped that the big beacon on the roof of the building was turning, too. But it had to be. If it stopped, jammed, the little indicator would seize up in sympathy. In any case, it was shielded from the weather by its own dome.

The operator's key rattled rapidly in staccato Morse, still the best method of transmitting messages over vast distances. From the wall speaker blurted the dots and dashes of acknowledgment. Then the message itself was sent, and acknowledged.

"Thank you," said Grimes. "If there's a reply phone it through to me, please. I shall be at Captain Stacey's house."

"Very good, sir."

Grimes was relaxing under a hot shower when he heard the telephone buzz. Wrapping a towel around himself, he hurried out of the bathroom, colliding with Captain Stacey.

"It's probably for me," he said.

"It would be," growled Stacey.

It was. It was in reply to Grimes's signal which, when decoded, had read, Urgently require information on solar flares Mellise sun last year local. It said, after Grimes had used his little book, No repeat no solar flares Mellise sun past ten years.

Somebody's lying, thought Grimes, and I don't think it's my secretary.

* * *

Hurricane Lynn, while it lasted, put a stop to any further investigations by Grimes. Apart from anything else, the sea people were keeping to their underwater houses, each of which was well stocked with air bladders and the carbon dioxide absorbing plants. He managed, however, to get back on friendly terms with Lynn Davis—or she with him; he was never quite sure which was the case. He found her increasingly attractive; she possessed a maturity that was lacking in all the other young women in the tiny human community. He liked her, but he suspected her—but of what? It was rather more than a hunch: there had been, for example, that deliberate lie about

the solar flares. Grimes, who was an omnivorous reader, was well aware that fictional detectives frequently solved their cases by sleeping with the suspects. He wasn't quite ready to go that far; he had always considered such a *modus operandi* distinctly ungentlemanly.

Then Hurricane Lynn blew itself out and normally fine weather returned to the equatorial belt. Flying was once again possible, and Petersen came back to the spaceport from Mount Llayilla. Grimes didn't like him. He was a tall, athletic young man, deeply tanned, with sun-bleached hair and startlingly pale blue eyes. His features were too regular, and his mouth too sensual. The filed stories of his past amatory indiscretions made sense. And he was jealously possessive insofar as Lynn Davis was concerned. She's nice, Commodore, was the unspoken message that Grimes received, loud and clear. She's mine. Keep your dirty paws off her.

Grimes didn't like it, and neither did the girl. But the Commodore, now that the storm was over, was busy again. At least once daily he argued with the Ambassador, trying to persuade that gentleman to request the services of a team of marine biologists and professional fishermen. He composed and sent his own report to Rim Runners' head office. And, whenever conditions were suitable, he was out to the pearl beds with Wunnaara, at first in the little submarine and then in a skin diving outfit that the spaceport's repair staff had improvised for him. It was a bastard sort of rig, to quote the chief mechanic, but it worked. There was a spacesuit helmet with compressed air tanks, suitably modified. There was a pair of flippers cut from a sheet of thick, tough plastic. There was a spear gun and a supply of especially made harpoons, each of which had an explosive warhead, fused for impact. As long as these were not used at close range the person firing them should be reasonably safe.

Lynn Davis came into the maintenance workshop while Grimes was examining one of the projectiles.

"What's that, John?" she asked.

"Just a new kind of spear," he replied shortly.

"New—an' nasty," volunteered the chief mechanic, ignoring Grimes's glare. "Pack too much of a wallop for my taste. If you're too close to the target when one o' these goes off, you've had it."

"Explosive?" she asked.

"That's right."

She turned back to Grimes. "Are these safe, John?"

"Safe enough, as long as they're used carefully."

"But against starfish! Like using an elephant gun against a gnat!"

"There are starfish and starfish," he told her. "As everybody on this planet should know by this time."

"You think this will kill them?"

"It's worth giving it a go."

"Yes," she admitted. "I suppose so. . . ." Then, more briskly, "And when are you giving your secret weapon a trial?"

"There are a few modifications to be made," Grimes told her.

"They'll all be ready for you tomorrow morning," said the mechanic. "As promised."

She turned on her dazzling smile. "Then you'd better dine with me tonight, John. If you insist on playing with these dangerous toys there mightn't be another time." She laughed, but that odd, underlying note of seriousness persisted. She went on. "And Jeff will be out of our hair, I promise you that. There's a party on in the Carlotti Operations' Mess, and he never misses those."

"I've a pile of paper work, Lynn," Grimes told her.

"That can wait."

He made his decision. "All right, then. What time?"

"Whatever time suits you; 1800 hours, shall we say? For a few drinks first . . . ?" "Good. I'll be there."

* * *

He dressed carefully for the dinner party, paying even more attention to the contents of his pockets than to the clothes themselves. He had one of his hunches, and he knew he'd need the things that he was taking from the secret compartment of his suitcase. There was the Minetti automatic, with a spare clip, neither of which made more than a slight bulge in the inside breast pocket of his jacket. There was the pack of cigarillos. (Two of the slim, brown cylinders possessed very special properties, and were marked in such a way that only Grimes would be able to identify them.) Marriage to an Intelligence officer, he thought, has its points. Something is bound to rub off. There was the button on his suit that was a camera, and the other button that was a miniaturized recorder.

On the way from his room to the front door he passed through the lounge where Captain and Mrs. Stacey were watching a rather witless variety program on the screen of their playmaster. The Captain looked up and around, his fat, heavy face serious. He said, "I know that it's none of my business, Commodore, and that you're technically my superior, but we—Lucy and myself—think that you should be warned. Miss Davis is a dangerous woman. . . ."

"Indeed, Captain?"

"Yes, indeed. She leads men on, and then that Jeff Petersen is apt to turn nasty."

"Oh?"

An ugly flush suffused Stacey's face. "Frankly, sir, I don't give a damn if you

are beaten up for playing around with a girl young enough to be your granddaughter. But because you're Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners there'd be a scandal, a very nasty scandal. And I don't want one in my spaceport."

"Very concisely put, Captain. But I can look after myself."

"I hope that you can, Commodore. Good night to you."

"Good night, Captain Stacey."

Grimes let himself out. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were beginning to fall into place; his suspicions were about to be confirmed. He smiled grimly as he walked along the narrow street toward the row of neat little bungalows where Lynn Davis lived. Night was falling fast, and already lights were coming on in the houses. From open windows drifted the sound of music. The scene was being set for a romantic—romantic?—assignation.

Lynn Davis met him at her door. She was dressed in something loose and, Grimes noted as she stood with the lamp behind her, almost transparent. She took his hand, led him into her living room, gently pushed him down into a deep chair. Close by it was a tray of drinks, and a dish upon which exotic delicacies were displayed. Real Terran olives—and a score of those would make a nasty hole in the weekly pay of an assistant met. officer. Sea dragon caviar from Atlantia . . . pickled rock frogs from Dunartil . . .

The playmaster was on, its volume turned well down. A woman was singing. It was an old song, dating back to the twentieth century, its lyrics modernized, its melody still sweet with lost archaic lilt.

Spaceman, the stars are calling,

Spaceman, you have to roam . . .

Spaceman, through light-years falling,

Turn back at last to home. . . .

"Sherry, John?" asked Lynn Davis. She was sitting on the arm of his chair. He could see the gleam of her smooth flesh through her sheer robe.

"Amontillado?"

He said. "You're doing me proud."

"It's not often I entertain such an important guest as you."

He sipped the wine from the fragile glass she had filled for him. She had measured her own drink from the same decanter. He did not think that there was anything wrong with it—any connoisseur would have told him, indignantly that there was nothing wrong with it—but at the first hint of muzziness he would smoke a cigarillo. . . .

She was leaning closer to him, almost against him. Her robe was falling open in front. She was wearing nothing underneath it. She said, "Aren't you hot? Why not take your jacket off?"

"Later, perhaps." He managed a quite creditable leer, "after all, we've all night."

"Why waste time?" Her mouth was slightly parted in frank invitation. What the hell? thought Grimes, and accepted. Her body was pliant in his arms, her lips on his warm and moist. But his mind, his cold, calculating mind, was still in full command of the situation. He heard the door open softly, heard feet sliding over the thick carpet. He pushed the girl away from him, from the corner of his eye saw her fall to the floor, a delectable sprawl of exposed, gleaming body and limbs.

"So," snarled Jeff Petersen. "So this is what you get up to, Mr. Commodore Dirty Old Man Grimes! What did you promise her, you swine? Promotion and a transfer to a better station?"

Petersen, Grimes noted, was not a slave to this instincts any more than he, Grimes, had been. Superficially his voice was that of the wronged, jealous lover, but there was an artificial quality in his rage.

Grimes said equably, "I can explain. . . ."

"Yes." Petersen was advancing slowly. "You can explain after I've torn off your right arm and beaten your brains out with it."

Suddenly the tiny pistol was in Grimes's right hand. It cracked once, and once only, a sound disproportionate to its dimensions. Petersen halted, staggered, staring stupidly. He swayed on his feet for long seconds and then crashed to the floor, overturning the low table, spilling wine over the sprawling body of the girl. She exploded up from the carpet like a tigress, all teeth and claws. Grimes was hampered by the chair in which he was confined but fought her off somehow. He did not want to use the gun again.

"You bastard!" She was sobbing. "You ruthless bastard! You killed him. And we were careful not to kill—not even the natives!"

"I didn't kill him," Grimes managed to say at last, after he had imprisoned her hands behind her back, after he had clasped her legs between his own. "I didn't kill him. This pistol is loaded with anesthetic needles. He'll be out for twelve hours—no more, no less."

"He's not . . . dead?"

"Do dead men snore?" asked Grimes practically.

"I . . . I suppose not." Her manner changed abruptly. "Well, he asked for it, John, and this time he got it. Poor Jeff." There was little sympathy in her voice. "So . . ."

"So what?"

"So we might as well be hung for sheep as lambs. We might as well have the game as well as the name."

He said admiringly, "You're a cold-blooded bitch, aren't you?"

"Just realistic." She bent her head forward, but it was not to bite. After the kiss Grimes released her. She pulled slowly away from him, walked undulatingly to the door of the bedroom, shedding the torn remnants of her robe as she went.

Grimes sighed, then got up and followed.

* * *

She said, "That was good. . . ."

"It was."

"Stay there, darling, and I'll make us some coffee. We don't want to waste time sleeping."

A sleep, thought Grimes, is just what I would like. The sleep of the just—the just after.

He sprawled at ease on the wide couch, watched her appreciatively as she left him, as she walked gracefully to the door. In the subdued light she was all rosy bronze. In any sort of light she was, as he knew, beautiful. He heard a slight clattering from the kitchenette, imposed upon the still stertorous snores of the hapless Jeff. After a while she came back with a tray on which were a pot and two cups. She poured. "Sugar, darling? Cream?" The steam from the coffee was deliciously fragrant. He reached out for his cup, accidentally? put his fingers on the handle of hers. She gently pushed his hand away. "Mine hasn't sugar," she told him.

"You're sweet enough as you are," he said, asking himself, How corny can you get?

So he took three sips of the coffee that was intended for him, and at once felt the onset of heavy drowsiness, even though there was no warning flavor. He mumbled, "Like a smoke. . . . Would you mind, Lynn? In my pocket . . . on chair . . ."

She reached out to his clothing, produced the packet of cigarillos and his lighter. She, he already knew, did not smoke herself, which was just as well. She handed him the packet. In his condition, in the dim lighting, he could hardly make out the distinguishing mark. He hoped that he had the right one. Here and now, the special effects of the other one would be more spectacular than useful.

She lit the cigarillo for him, smiling condescendingly down at him. He inhaled the smoke, retained it for long seconds before blowing it out. He took one more sip of coffee, than let a dribble of the hot fluid fall on to his naked chest. He was careful not to wince. He mumbled indistinctly, then fell back against the pillows. His right hand, with the little smoldering cylinder between his fingers, fell limply onto his belly. He could smell the acidity of burning body hair, felt the sharp beginnings of pain. With a great effort of will he remained in his relaxed posture.

He heard her mutter, "I should let the old bastard burn, but. . ." Her cool, slim fingers removed the miniature cigar from his hand. He felt very grateful

to her.

He heard her dressing, heard her walk rapidly from the bedroom. He heard, eventually, the front door open and shut. He gave her time to get clear of the house.

When he got down from the bed he expected to feel sick and dizzy, with drug and antidote still at war within his system. But he did not, although he was conscious of the minor burns. He dressed rapidly, checked his possessions. He was pleased to find that the Minetti was still in his pocket; probably whatever it was in the coffee was supposed to put him under for a longer period than the anesthetic needle-bullet that he had used on Jeff Petersen.

The street outside the house was deserted. Everybody was indoors, and everybody seemed to be having a party. He grinned. He had had one too. He walked briskly away from the spaceport, in the direction of the beach where he had first met Lynn Davis. The signs that had been affixed to the trunks of trees were a help. By what moonlight there was he could read, PRIVATE. LADIES ONLY. And how would she have managed, he wondered, if the other human ladies on Mellise had shared her views on outdoor nudity?

The beach was deserted. Backing the narrow strip of sand were the trees, and between their boles was undergrowth, affording effective cover. Grimes settled down to wait. He slipped the magazine from his automatic, exchanged it for the other one; the needle-bullets in this one were no more lethal than the first had been, but they differed from them in one or two respects. He took the remaining marked cigarillo from its packet, put it carefully into his breast pocket. This one had a friction fuse.

At last she came, walking barefooted over the sand, her shoes in her left hand, a heavy case in the other. She dropped the shoes, put the case down carefully. She opened it, then pulled out a silvery telescopic antenna to its full extent. She squatted down, making even this normally ungainly posture graceful, appeared to be adjusting controls of some sort. There was a high, barely audible whine.

Something was coming in from the sea. It was not a native. It came scuttling ashore like a huge crab—like a huge, five-legged crab. Then there was another, and another, and another, until two dozen of the beasts stood there waiting. For orders—or programming?

Grimes walked slowly and deliberately out from the shadows, his Minetti in his right hand. He said quietly, "I'm sorry, Lynn, but the game's up."

She whirled grotesquely like a Russian dancer.

"You!" she snarled, making it seem like a curse.

"Yes. Me. If you come quietly and make a full confession I'll see to it that things go easy for you."

"Like hell I will!"

She turned swiftly back to the transmitter, kicking up a flurry of sand. The

whining note abruptly changed to an irregular beat. And then the starfish were coming for him, slowly at first, but faster and faster. He swatted out instinctively at the leading one, felt the skin of his hand tear on metal spines. In his other hand was the gun. He fired—almost a full burst. The minute projectiles tore through the transmitter. Some of them, a few of them, were bound to sever connections, to shatter transistors. They did. There was a sputtering shower of blue sparks. The metal monsters froze into immobility.

But Lynn did not. She had her own gun out, a heavier weapon than Grimes's own. He felt the wind of her first bullet. And then, with one of the few remaining rounds in his magazine, he shot her.

* * *

He stood there, looking down at her. She was paralyzed, but her eyes could still move, and her lips, and her tongue. She was paralyzed—and when the drug took hold properly she would feel the compulsion to talk.

She asked bitterly, "How long will this last?"

"Days, unless I let you have the antidote."

She demanded, "How did you know?"

"I didn't know. I guessed, and I added two and two to make a quite convincing and logical four. Suppose I tell you—then you can fill in the details."

"That'll be the sunny Friday!"

"Will it?" Grimes squatted down beside her. "You had things easy here, didn't you? You and Jeff Petersen. Such a prize bunch of nongs and no-hopers, from the Ambassador and the port captain on down. I shouldn't have said that; I forgot that this is being recorded."

"Well, one thing that started to make me suspicious of you, especially, was that lie you told me about the solar flares. I checked up; there are very complete records of all phenomena in this sector of space in my office at Port Forlorn. Then there was the shortage of spares for your equipment—I remembered that the requisitions for electronic bits and pieces have been abnormally heavy ever since you and Mr. Petersen were appointed here. There was that ornamental tank of little starfish—and that so-called mobile almost alongside it. Petersen's hobby. The construction that, I realized later, looked very much like the tin starfish I saw raiding the pearl beds. There was the behavior of these same tin starfish: the way in which they attacked the bivalves with absolute viciousness but seemed very careful not to hurt the Mellisans."

"That tied in with the few weeks that Petersen spent on El Dorado."

"They have watchbirds there, Lynn, and similar semi-robots that function either on the ground or in the water. Animal brains in metal bodies. Absolute faithfulness and obedience to their human masters. As a skilled technician, Petersen would have been able to mingle, to a certain extent,

with the gifted amateurs who play around with that sort on El Dorado. He must have picked up some of their techniques, and passed them on to you. You two modified them, probably improved upon them. A starfish hasn't any brain to speak of, so probably you have the entire animal incorporated into your destructive servants. Probably, too, there's an electronic brain built in somewhere, that gets its orders by radio and that can be programmed.

"You were going to recall the local . . . flock, pack, school? What does it matter? . . . tonight, weren't you? For reprogramming. Some preset course of action that would enable them to deal with the threat of spears with explosive warheads. It wouldn't do to have tin tentacles littering the ocean floor, would it? When the Mellisans brought in the evidence even the Ambassador would have to do something about it.

"And, tonight being the night, I had to be got out of the way. Plan A failed, so you switched to Plan B. Correct?"

"Correct," she muttered.

"And for whom were you working?" he asked sharply and suddenly.

"T-G." The answer had slipped out before she could stop it.

"Trans-Galactic Clippers. . . . Why does T-G want Mellise?"

"A tourist resort." She was speaking rapidly now, in obvious catharsis. "We were to destroy the economy, the trade with the Confederacy. And then T-G would step in, and pay handsomely for rights and leases."

"And you and Mr. Petersen would be suitably rewarded. . . ." He paused. "Tell me, Lynn. . . did you enjoy tonight? Between the disposal of Jeff and the disposal of myself, I mean."

"Yes," she told him.

"I'm glad you said that. It makes what I'm going to do a lot easier. I was going to do it in any case; I always like to pay my bills." As he spoke, he pulled the cigarillo from his breast pocket, scratched the friction fuse with his thumbnail. The thing ignited at once, fizzed, ejected a bright blue pyrotechnic star. "I'm letting you go free," Grimes went on, "both of you. You will have to resign, of course, from the Rim Runners' service, but as T-G is your real employer that shouldn't mean any hardship. The records I have made"—he tapped the two buttons of his jacket—"stay with me. To be used, if required. Meanwhile my friends"—he turned to wave to Wunnaara and a dozen other natives who were wading up from the sea—"will dispose of the evidence. The story will be that they, without any outside aid, have succeeded in coping with the starfish plague. You will furnish them, of course, with transmitters like the one you used tonight so that your pets in other parts of the sea can be rounded up."

"Haven't much option, have I?" she asked.

"No."

"There's just one thing I'd like to say. That question you asked me, about my enjoying myself . . . I'm damned sorry this truth drug of yours made me

give the right answer."

"I'm not," said Grimes.

* * *

It was nice while it lasted, thought the Commodore, but I'm really not cut out for these James Bond capers, any more than I would be for the odd antics of any of the other peculiar heroes of twentieth century fiction. He filled and lit his pipe—he preferred it to the little cigars, even to those without the built-in devices—and looked out over the blue sea. The sun was warm on his naked body. He wished that Sonya were with him. But it wouldn't be long now.