

The Last Dreamer

John Grimes was really homeward bound at last.

On both Tharn and Mellise he had been obliged to leave the ships in which he had taken passage when requested by the rulers of those planets to assist them in the solution of rather complicated problems. He had not minded at all; he had welcomed the prospect of action after too long a time as a desk-borne commodore. But now he was beginning to become a little impatient. Sonya, his wife, would be back soon from her galactic cruise and then the major city of Lorn would be—as far as Grimes was concerned—forlorn in name only. He was pleased that Rim Jaguar would be making a direct run from Mellise to Port Forlorn with no time-expanding calls en route. All being well, he would have a few days in which to put things in order prior to Sonya's homecoming.

It promised to be an uneventful voyage—and in deep space uneventful voyages are the rule rather than the exception. Rim Jaguar was one of the more modern units of Rim Runners' fleet, built for them to modified Epsilon Class design. She was well found, well manned and reasonably happy. Grimes was the only passenger, and as Rim Runners' Astronautical Superintendent he was given the run of the vessel. He did not abuse the privilege. He would never have dreamed of interfering, and he made suggestions only when asked to do so. Nonetheless he enjoyed the long hours that he spent in the control room, yarning with the officer of the watch, looking out through the wide viewports at the great, distant Galactic Lens, unperturbed by its weird, apparent distortion, the result of the warped space-time through which the ship was falling. He was Earth-born but, like so many spacemen who had made their various ways to this frontier of the dark, he belonged on the Rim, had come to accept that almost empty sky—the sparsely scattered, unreachable island universes, the galaxy itself no more than a dim-glowing ellipsoid—as being altogether right and proper and, somehow, far more natural than worlds in toward the center.

He was sitting in Rim Jaguar's control room now, at ease in his acceleration chair, his seamed, pitted face and his still youthful gray eyes almost obscured by the cloud of acrid smoke from his vile, battered pipe. He was listening tolerantly to the third officer's long list of grievances; shortly after departure from Mellise he had made it quite plain that he wouldn't bite and also that anything told to him by the ship's people would not be taken down and used as evidence against them.

"And annual leave, sir," the young man was saying. "I realize that it isn't always possible to release an officer on the exact date due, but when there's a delay of two, or even three months . . ."

"We just haven't enough personnel, Mr. Sanderson," Grimes told him, "to ensure a prompt relief. Also, when it comes to appointments I try to avoid putting square pegs into round holes. You know what that can lead to."

"The Rim Griffon business, sir?"

"Yes. Everybody hating everybody, and the ship suffering in consequence. A

very sorry affair."

"I see your point, sir, but—" An alarm pinged sharply. "Excuse me."

It was the Mass Proximity Indicator that had sounded off, the only piece of navigational equipment, apart from the Carlotti Direction Finder, that was functional while the Interstellar Drive was in operation. Grimes swiveled his chair so that he could look at the globular tank that was the screen of the device. Yes, there was something there all right, something that had no business to be there, something that, in the screen, was only a little to one side of the glowing filament that was the extrapolation of the ship's trajectory.

Sanderson was speaking briskly into the telephone. "Control Room here, sir. Unidentified object 000 01.5, range 3,000, closing. Bearing opening."

Grimes heard Captain Drakenberg's reply. "I'll be right up, Mr. Sanderson."

Drakenberg, an untidy bear of a man, looked into the screen and grunted. He turned to Grimes. "And what do you make of it, sir?"

"It's something. . . ."

"I could have told you that, Commodore."

Grimes felt his prominent ears redden. Drakenberg was a highly competent shipmaster, popular rather than otherwise with his officers, but at times lacking in the social graces.

The third officer said, "According to Traffic Control there are no ships in this sector. . . ."

"Would it be a Rim Ghost?" asked the Captain. "You're something of an expert on them, Commodore. Would one show up on the M.P.I.?"

"Conditions would have to be exactly right," said Grimes. "We would have had to slip into its continuum, or it into ours. The same applies, of course, to any attempt to establish radio communication."

"We'll try that, sir," said Drakenberg bluntly. Then, to Sanderson, "Line up the Carlotti."

The watch officer switched on the control room Carlotti communicator, a miniature version of the main set in the ship's radio office, which was a miniature version of the huge, planet-based beacons. The elliptical Mobius Strip that was the antenna began to rotate about its long axis, fading into apparent insubstantiality as it did so. Sanderson threw the switch that hooked it up with the Mass Proximity Indicator. At once the antenna began to swing on its universal mounting, turning unsteadily, hesitantly in a wide arc. After its major oscillations had ceased it hunted for a few seconds, finally locked on.

"Pass me the microphone," Drakenberg ordered. Then he said, speaking slowly and very distinctly, "Rim Jaguar calling unidentified vessel. Rim Jaguar calling unidentified vessel. Come in, please. Come in, please."

There was a silence, broken by Grimes. "Perhaps she hasn't got M.P.I.," he suggested. "Perhaps she hasn't seen us."

"It's a compulsory fitting, isn't it?" growled the master.

"For the Federation's ships. And for ours. But the Empire of Waverley hasn't made it compulsory yet. Or the Shakespearian Sector." He got out of his chair, moved to the screen. "Besides, I don't think that this target is a ship. Not with a blip that size, and at this range. . . ."

"What the hell else can it be?" demanded Drakenberg.

"I don't know," admitted Grimes. "I don't know. . . ."

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It hung there against the unrelieved blackness of Rim Space, a planet where no planet should have been, illuminated by a sun that wasn't there at all. There was an atmosphere, with cloud masses. There were seas and continents. There were polar icecaps. And it was real, solid, with enough mass to hold the ship—her Inertial Drive and her Mannschenn Drive shut down—in a stable orbit about it. An Earth-type world it was, according to Rim Jaguar's instruments—an inhabited world, with the scintillant lights of cities clearly visible scattered over its night hemisphere.

All attempts at communication had failed. The inhabitants did not seem to have radio, either for entertainment or for the transmission of messages. Grimes, still in the control room, looked with some distaste at the useless Carlotti transceiver. Until the invention of this device, whereby ships could talk with each other, and with shore stations regardless of range and with no time lag, psionic radio officers had always been carried. In circumstances such as these a trained telepath would have been invaluable, would have been able to achieve contact with a least a few minds on the planet below. Psionic radio officers were still carried by fighting ships and by survey vessels, but Rim Jaguar was neither. She was a merchantman, and the employment of personnel required for duty only upon very special occasions would have been uneconomical.

She did not carry sounding rockets, even. Grimes, as Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners, had been responsible for that piece of economy, had succeeded in having the regulations amended. He had argued that ships trading only in a well charted sector of space had no need for such expensive toys. It had not been anticipated that an unknown planet—matter or anti-matter?—would appear suddenly upon the track between Mellise and Lorn.

But the construction of a small liquid fuel rocket is little more than a matter of plumbing, and the Jaguar's engineers were able to oblige. Her second officer—as well as being the ship's navigator he specialized in gunnery in the Confederacy's Naval Reserve—produced a crude but effective homing device for the thing. It was hardly necessary. The range was short and the target a big one.

The rocket was fired on such a trajectory that it would hit the night side while the ship was directly over the hemisphere. Radar tracked it down to

the outer reaches of the atmosphere, where it disintegrated. But it was a normal, meteoric destruction by impact and friction, not the flare of released energy that would have told of the meeting of matter and anti-matter. That was that. The initial reports of the sighting, together with all the relevant coordinates, had already been sent to Lorn; all that remained now was to report the results of the sounding rocket experiment. Grimes was scribbling the message down on a signal pad, and Drakenberg was busy with the preliminaries of putting the ship back on to trajectory, when the radio officer came into the control room. He was carrying three envelopes, one of which he handed to the Captain, giving the two to the Commodore. Grimes knew what their contents would be, and sighed audibly. Over the years he had become too much of an expert on the dimensional oddities encountered out on the rim of the galaxy. And he was the man on the spot—just when he was in a hurry to be getting home.

The first message was from Rim Runners' Board of Management and read, Act as instructed by Admiral Commanding Confederate Navy. The second one was from Admiral Kravinsky. Carry out full investigation of strange planet. Drakenberg, scowling, handed Grimes the flimsy that had been inside his own envelope. Its content was clear enough, Place self and vessel under orders of Commodore Grimes, Rim Worlds Naval Reserve.

"Keep the ship in orbit, Captain," ordered Grimes resignedly.

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A dust mote in the emptiness, Rim Jaguar's number two lifeboat fell toward the mysterious planet. In it were two men only—Grimes and Sanderson, the freighter's third officer. There had been no shortage of volunteers, from the Master on down, but Grimes, although a high ranking officer of the Naval Reserve, was still an employee of a commercial shipping line. To make a landing on an unknown world with horse, foot and artillery is all very well when you have the large crew of a warship to draw upon; should the initial expedition come to grief there is sufficient personnel left aboard the vessel to handle her and, if necessary, to man her weaponry. But insofar as manning is concerned, a merchant ship is run on a shoestring. There are no expendable ratings, and the loss of even one officer from any department means, at least, considerable inconvenience.

Grimes's decision to take only Sanderson with him had not been a popular one, but the young man had been the obvious choice. He was unmarried—was an orphan. He did not have a steady girlfriend, even. Furthermore, he had just completed a period of Naval Reserve training and rather fancied himself a small arms expert.

Rim Jaguar, however did not carry much of an armory. Grimes had with him his own Minetti and one of the ship's laser handguns. Sanderson had one of the other lasers—there were only three on board—and a vicious ten millimeter projectile pistol. There were spare power packs and a good supply of ammunition for all weapons.

The third officer, who was handling the boat, was talkative on the way down. Grimes did not mind—as long as the young man kept his trap shut and concentrated on his piloting as soon as the little craft hit the

atmosphere.

"This is a rum go," he was saying. "How do you explain it, sir? All that obvious sunlight, and no sun at all in the sky . . ."

"I've seen worse," Grimes told him. Like, he thought, the series of alternative universes he had explored—although not thoroughly—in that voyage of the Faraway Quest that somebody had referred to as a Wild Ghost Chase. And that other universe, into which he had quite literally blown his ship, the one in which those evil non-human mutants had ruled the Rim. On both of those occasions Sonya had been with him. She should have been with him now—not this lanky, blond, blue-eyed puppy. But that wasn't Sanderson's fault, and in any case Grimes did not think that he would find the young man lacking in any respect.

"I suppose," the third officer rattled on, "that it's all something to do with different dimensions. Here we're at the very edge of the expanding galaxy, and the barriers between continua must be stretched thin, very thin. That planet's popped through into our continuum, but only half through, if you see what I mean. Its primary has stayed put on the other side of the boundary. . . ."

"A fairish hypothesis," admitted Grimes. "It will have to do until we can think of a better one."

And, he told himself, there must be a better one. As far as he knew the difference between the universes were cultural rather than cosmological. There just couldn't be a planet here—or a sun with a family of planets.

"And I wonder what the people are like, sir. Would they be humanoid, do you think, or even human? They must be civilized. They have cities."

Grimes muttered something about plastic jungles.

"Not plastic, sir. They haven't radio, so the chances are that they don't run to chemical engineering. Concrete jungles . . . would that be better?"

Grimes allowed himself to suppose that it might be.

"You couldn't have timed it better, sir. That large town you decided on will be just clear of the terminator when we get down."

In the Federation's Survey Service, thought Grimes, we were drilled so that such timing became second nature. How had that instructor put it? "Make your first landing just west of the terminator, and unless some bastard chases you off you've the whole day to play silly buggers in."

"Better fasten seat belts, sir."

Grimes pulled the webbing taut across his body, snapped shut the buckle. In a boat fitted with Inertial Drive the ride down to the planetary surface should be a smooth one, provided that there was no atmosphere turbulence. But here there was no spaceport control to give information on meteorological conditions. He spoke into the microphone of the transceiver. "Commodore to Rim Jaguar. We are now entering exosphere. So far all in going as planned." He heard Drakenberg acknowledge.

The air below the boat was clear, abnormally so. The lights of the cities were like star clusters. For a brief second Grimes entertained the crazy idea that they were star clusters, that he and Sanderson had broken through into some other time and space, were somehow adrift in regions toward the heart of a galaxy. He looked upward for reassurance. But he did not, through the transparency of the overhead viewport, see the familiar, almost empty Rim sky. The firmament was ablaze with unfamiliar constellations. It was frightening. Had Sanderson, somehow, turned the boat over just as Grimes had shifted his regard? He had not, as a glance at the instrument panel made obvious. He had not—and below were still the city lights, and from zenith to horizon there were the stars, and low to the west was a great golden moon. Astern, the first rosy flush of dawn was in the sky.

His voice unemotional, deliberately flat, Grimes reported his observations to the ship.

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Swiftly the boat fell through the atmosphere, so fast that interior temperature rose appreciably. But Sanderson was a first class pilot and at no time did he allow the speed of descent to approach dangerous limits. Swiftly the boat fell, her Inertial Drive purring gently, resisting but not overcoming the gravitational field that had her in its grip. Through the morning twilight she dropped, and above her only the brighter stars were visible in the pale sky, and below her the land masses were gray-green rather than black, and the city lights had lost their sharp scintillance and were going out, street by street.

It was toward what looked like a park that Sanderson, on Grimes's instructions, was steering, an irregular rectangle of comparative darkness outlined by such lights as were still burning. There were trees there, the men could see as the boat lost altitude; there were trees, and there were dull-gleaming ribbons and amoeboid shapes that looked like water, and featureless patches that must be clear level ground. Bordering the park were the towers of the city—tall, fantastically turreted and, when struck by the first bright rays of the rising sun, shining like jewels in the reflected radiance.

The boat grounded gently on a soft, resilient surface. Grimes looked at Sanderson and Sanderson looked at Grimes, and then they both stared out of the viewports. They had landed in the middle of the park, on what looked like a lawn of emerald green grass, not far from the banks of a stream. There were trees in the foreground, low, static explosions of dark foliage among which gleamed, scarlet and crimson and gold, what were either fruit or flowers. In the background were the distant towers, upthrusting like the suddenly frozen spray of some great fountain, an opalescent tracery against the clear blue sky.

"Open up, sir?" asked the young officer at last.

"Yes," said Grimes. An itemized list of all the precautions that should be taken before setting foot on a strange planet briefly flashed before his mind's eye, but he ignored it. And to wear a spacesuit in this huge, gorgeous garden would be heresy. But not all of his training could be

dismissed so easily. Reluctantly he picked up the microphone, made his report to the ship. He concluded with the words, "We're going out, now, to make contact with the natives. You have your instructions, Captain."

"Yes, Commodore Grimes." Grimes wondered why Drakenberg should sound so anxious. "If I don't hear from you again twenty-four standard hours from now, at the latest, I'm to make a report directly to the Admiralty and await their orders." He hesitated, then brought out the final words with some difficulty." And on no account am I to attempt another landing."

"That is correct, Captain Drakenberg. Over."

"Good luck, Commodore Grimes. Over and out."

Sanderson already had both air lock doors open and the cool breeze had eddied gently through the little cabin, flushing out the acridity of hot oil and machinery, bringing with it the scent of flowers, of dew-wet grass. There were birds singing outside and then, faint yet clear, the sound of a great clock somewhere in the city striking the hour. Automatically Grimes looked at his watch, made to reset it and then smiled at his foolishness. He did not know yet what sort of time it was that these people kept.

He was first out of the boat, jumping down onto the velvety turf, joined almost at once by Sanderson. "This is beautiful!" exclaimed the young man. "I hope that the natives come up to what we've seen so far." He added, "The girls especially."

Grimes should have reproved him, but he didn't. He was too busy wondering what it was that made everything, so far, so familiar. He had never seen this world before, or any planet like it, and yet. . . How did he know, for example, that this city's name was Ayonoree? How could he know?

"Which way do we go, sir?" Sanderson was asking.

Which way? The memory, if it was memory, wasn't quite good enough. "We'll follow the stream," he decided.

It was a short walk to the near bank of the little river, along which ran a path of flagstones. The water was crystal clear, gently flowing. On it floated great lily pads, and on one of these sat a huge frog, all gold and emerald, staring at them with bright, protuberant eyes. It croaked loudly.

"It's saying something!" cried Sanderson.

"Rubbish!" snapped Grimes, who was trying to break the odd spell that had been cast over them. But were those words that they could hear?

Follow stream stay in the dream.

Follow stream stay in the dream.

"You!" shouted Sanderson. "What do you mean?"

In reply the batrachian croaked derisively, splashed into the water and struck out slowly for the further shore.

So we follow the stream, thought Grimes. He set off along the path, the young man tailing behind. Suddenly he stopped. There was a tree, gracefully trailing its tendrillike branches almost to the water, to one side of the flagstones, another tree a few yards inshore from it. Between the trunks was a huge, glittering web. There was a spider, too, disgustingly hairy, as large as a man's clenched fist, scuttling toward the center of its fragile-seeming net. And there was an insect of some kind, a confused fluttering of gauzy wings, snared by the viscous strands.

Grimes made to detour around the landward tree. After all, spiders were entitled to a meal, just as he was. Insofar as the uglier sides of Nature were concerned he tried to maintain his neutrality. He did not especially like spiders—but, in all probability, that oversized insect in the web was something even more unpleasant.

Behind him he heard Sanderson cry out, heard the hiss of his laser pistol and felt the heat of the beam that narrowly missed his right ear. The fleshy body of the spider exploded and hung there, tattered and steaming. There was a sickening stench of burned flesh.

Grimes turned angrily on the young man. "What the hell do you think you're doing? For all we know, spiders are sacred on this world!"

"More likely these are!"

Sanderson had pushed past Grimes and, with gentle hands, was freeing the trapped creature. "Look!" he was saying. "Look!"

The Commodore looked. This was not, as he assumed, an insect. It was humanoid, a winged woman, but tiny, tiny. Her lustrous golden hair hung to her waist, and beneath her filmy green robe was the hint of perfectly formed breasts. Her mouth was scarlet and her eyes blue, and her features were perfectly formed. She sat there in the third officer's cupped hands, looking up at him. Her voice, when she spoke, was like the tinkling of a little silver bell.

"Follow stream, and follow river,

"When danger threatens do not quiver;

"Follow stream to Ogre's Keep,

"Wake the Princess from her sleep!"

"What princess?" demanded Grimes.

She turned to glare to him.

"Prince's servitors like you,

"Should only speak when spoken to."

Sanderson was shocked. "This is the Commodore," he said severely to the winged being.

"Commodore, Schmommodore!" she replied sweetly—and then, with hardly

a quiver of those impractical looking pinions, was gone.

"So you're promoted," said Grimes dryly. "And I'm demoted."

"All the same, sir, it was absolute sauce on her part." Then he went on a little smugly. "The odd part is that I am a prince. My father was King of Tavistock, until they threw him out."

"And your great-grandfather," said Grimes, "who founded the dynasty, was a semi-piratical tramp skipper. I know the history."

"Do we follow the stream, sir?"

"Yes. It's as good a way to explore this world as any."

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They followed the stream. Through the great park it led them, past enormous beds of fantastic, glowing flowers, through a grove of gaunt, contorted trees. The transition from parkland to city street was abrupt; suddenly there were cobbles underfoot instead of the worn flagstones, and on every hand towered multi-colored buildings, convoluted structures that made nonsense of all the laws of architecture and engineering.

People were abroad now, men and women, a great number of children. They were human enough in outward appearance at least, but there was an oddness about them, an oversimplification of all features, a peculiar blend of stylization and caricature. There was no vehicular traffic, but there were riders—some upon horses, some upon camels, some upon the lizard-like roadrunners indigenous to Tarizeel, some upon beasts that were utterly strange even to the widely traveled Grimes.

The two explorers marched on, ignored by the brightly dressed natives, ignoring them. They should, Grimes knew, have tried to make contact, which would not have been hard. From the scraps of conversation they overheard it was obvious that Anglo-Terran was the language of this planet. They should have demanded to be taken to the king, president or whatever authority it was that ruled this world. But it was not important. What was important was to find the Ogre's Keep, to awaken the sleeping princess. It was as though some outside power had taken control of them. The feeling should have been nightmarish, but it was not. Grimes was oddly grateful that somebody—or something—else was making the decisions that he should have been making.

The stream joined a river, and the path continued along the bank of the larger body of water, taking the two men clear of the city. They walked on steadily, feeling no fatigue, maintaining a brisk pace. They were away from the crowds of the city, met only an occasional pedestrian, and now and again a peasant man or woman pushing a barrow high-laden with produce in to market. One of these latter, a wizened, black-clad crone dragging a little cart fitted with pumpkins, accosted them. Raising high a skinny claw she declaimed in a cracked voice,

"Dare the dragon! Storm the Keep!"

"Save us all from endless sleep!"

"The dragon, madam?" inquired Grimes politely.

But she was given no time to answer him. From the cloudless sky crackled a bolt of lightning, dazzling, terrifying, striking the path between her and the two men. She waited, "I didn't say anything! I didn't say anything!" and was gone, scuttling toward the city, the cart bouncing along behind her, a trail of bruised and burst pumpkins in her wake.

"Somebody Up There doesn't like her," remarked Sanderson. Then, brightly, "Do you feel in the mood for dragon-slaying, sir?"

"Why not?" countered Grimes. After all, it would be no more outrageous than any of their other encounters to date. Outrageous? He repeated the word mentally. Where had he got it from? Nothing, so far, justified its use: the frog, the fairy in the spider's web, all the talk of ogres' keeps and sleeping princesses and dragons, it had all been perfectly natural. In any well-regulated world sleeping princesses were there to be awakened, and ogres' keeps to be stormed, and the dragons to be slain. Of course, the way he and the young prince were dressed was all wrong—more like peasants than like knights errant. But that could not be helped. Disguise was allowable.

"Shall we press on, Your Highness?" he suggested.

"Yes, Sir John. No doubt the dragon awaits us eagerly." Sanderson pulled the projectile pistol from its holster, spun it carelessly with his right forefinger through the trigger guard. "Methinks that our magic weapons will prove more efficacious than swords."

"Mehopes that you're right, Your Highness."

"Then come, Sir John. Time's a-wasting."

They walked on—and then, just ahead of them, Grimes saw a pontoon landing dock on the river. There was a ship alongside it, an archaic side-wheel paddle steamer, smoke issuing from its tall funnel. At the shoreward side of the stage was a notice board and on it, in big black letters on a white ground, the sign:

RIVER TRIPS TO OGRE'S KEEP.

HALF A FLORIN. VERY CHEAP.

"Your Highness," said Grimes, "let's take the boat and rest awhile, then face the dragon with a smile."

"Have you the wherewithal, Sir John, to pay the fare agreed upon?"

"I have a pass, Prince Sanderson. And so have you—your trusty gun."

Something at the back of the Commodore's mind winced at the doggerel and cried voicelessly, You're a spaceman, not a character out of a children's book! Grimes almost ignored it, tried to ignore it, but the nagging doubt that had been engendered persisted.

They marched on to the pontoon, their sturdily shod feet ringing on the planking, their weapons drawn and ready. Side by side, but with Sanderson slightly in the lead, they tramped up the gangway. At the head of it stood a man in uniform—and, incongruously, his trappings were those of a purser in the Waverley Royal Mail Line. He held out his hand." Good knights, if you would board this ship, pay passage money for your trip."

"Varlet, stand back! The ride is free for this, the bold Sir John, and me!"

"And here, as you can plainly see," added Grimes, making a meaningful gesture with his Minetti, "is our loud-voiced authority."

"Sir, it speaks loud enough for me," admitted the purser, standing to one side. As they passed him Grimes heard him mutter. "The Royal Mail could not be worse. They never made me speak in verse."

Grimes, who was always at home aboard ships of any kind, led the way down to the saloon, a large compartment, darkly paneled, with black leather upholstery on chairs and settees. At one end of it there was a bar, but it was shut. Along both sides were big windows, barely clear of the surface of the water. There were no other passengers.

Overhead there was the thudding of feet on planking. Then there was a jangling of bells, followed at once by the noise of machinery below decks. From above came the long mournful note of a steam whistle, and then came the steady chunk, chunk, chunk of the paddles. The ship was underway, heading down river. On either side the banks were sliding past, a shifting panorama of forest and village, with only rarely what looked like a cultivated field, but very often a huge, frowning, battlemented castle.

The rhythm of paddles and engines was a soothing one and Grimes, at least, found that it made him drowsy. He lolled back in his deep chair, halfway between consciousness and sleep. When he was in this state his real memories, his very real doubts and worries came suddenly to the surface of his mind. He heard his companion murmur, "Speed, bonny boat, like a bird through the sky. Carry us where the dragon must die."

"Come off it, Sanderson," ordered the Commodore sharply.

"Sir John, please take yourself in hand. Such insolence I will not stand!"

"Come off it!" ordered Grimes again—and then the spell, which had been so briefly broken, took charge again. "Your Highness, I spoke out of turn. But courtesy I'll try to learn."

"My good Sir John, you better had. Bad manners always make me mad. But look through yonder port, my friend. Methinks we neareth journey's end."

Journey's end or not, there was a landing stage there toward which the paddle steamer was standing in. Inshore from it the land was thickly wooded and rose steeply. On the crest of the hill glowered the castle, a grim pile of gray stone, square-built, ugly, with a turret at each corner. There was a tall staff from which floated a flag. Even from a distance the two men could make out the emblem: a white skull-and-crossbones in a black ground. And then, as the ship neared the shore, the view was shut

out and, finally, only the slime-covered side of the pontoon could be seen through the window.

The paddle steamer came alongside with a gentle crunch and, briefly, the engines were reversed to take the way off her. From forward and aft there was a brief rattle of steam winches as she was moored, and then there were no more mechanical noises.

The purser appeared in the saloon entrance. "Good knights, you now must leave this wagon. So fare you forth to face the dragon."

"And you will wait till we are done?" asked Grimes.

"We can't, Sir Knight, not on this run.

"Come rain, come shine, come wind, come snow,

"Back and forth our ferries go.

"Like clockwork yet, sir, you should try 'em,

"And even set your wristwatch by 'em."

"Enough, Sir John," said Sanderson, "this wordy wight will keep us gabbing here all night. In truth, he tells a pretty tale—this lackey from the Royal Mail!"

The spell was broken again. "You noticed too!" exclaimed Grimes.

"Yes. I noticed. That cap badge with a crown over the silver rocket." Sanderson laughed. "It was when I tried to find a rhyme for tale that things sort of clicked into place."

Grimes turned on the purser. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded.

"Alas, Sir Knight, I cannot say. I cannot say?" The young man's pudgy face stiffened with resolution. "No! Come what may . . ."

Whatever it was that came, it was sudden. He was standing there, struggling to speak, and then he was . . . gone, vanished in a gentle thunderclap as the air rushed in to fill the vacuum where he had stood. Then another man stamped into the saloon, in captain's uniform with the same familiar trappings.

"Begone, good knights," he shouted, "to meet your fate! Get off my ship, I'm running late."

"Sir," began Grimes—and then that influence gripped his mind again. He said, "Thank you for passage, sir. Goodbye. We fare forth now, to do or die!"

"Well said, Sir John," declaimed Sanderson. "Well said, my friend. We go—to shape the story's end."

"I hope, good knights, you gallant two," growled the captain, "that story's end does not shape you." He led the way from the saloon up to the

gangway.

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They stood on the pontoon, watching the little steamer round the first bend on her voyage up river, then walked to the bridge that spanned the gap between landing stage and bank. Overhead the sky was darkening and the air was chill. The westering sun had vanished behind a bank of low clouds. Grimes, his shirt and slacks suddenly inadequate, shivered. What am I doing here? he asked himself. And then, quite suddenly, Who am I? It was a silly question, and he at once knew how foolish it was. The answer shaped itself in his mind. I am the one they call Sir John, true comrade to Prince Sanderson.

"We forward march," announced the Prince, "my cobber bold, to meet the perils long foretold. Up yonder hill, let us then, to beard the dragon in his den."

"The dragon wastes no time on fuss," remarked Grimes. "He's coming down, and bearding us."

Yes, the beast was coming down, either from the castle or from somewhere else atop the hill. It was airborne—and even in his bemused state Grimes realized that it should never have gotten off the ground. Its head and body were too large, its wings too small, too skimpy. But it was a terrifying sight, a monstrous, batwinged crocodile, its mouth, crowded with jagged teeth, agape, the long, sharp claws of its forefeet extended. It dived down on them, roaring, ignoring the laser beams that the two men directed at it, even though its metallic scales glowed cherry red where they scored hits. It dived down on them—and there was more than mere sound issuing from that horrid maw. The great gout of smoky flame was real enough, and Grimes and Sanderson escaped it only by diving into the undergrowth on either side of the steep path.

The beast pulled out of its dive and flapped away slowly, regaining altitude. The men watched it until it was only a darker speck in the dark sky, then realized that the speck was rapidly increasing in size. It was coming for them again.

Something was wrong, very wrong. In the fairy stories the dragons never kill the heroes . . . but this dragon looked like being the exception to prove the rule. Grimes holstered his laser pistol, pulled out his Minetti. He doubted that the little weapon would be of any avail against the armored monstrosity, but it might be worth trying. From the corner of his eyes he saw that Sanderson had out and ready his heavy projectile pistol. "Courage, Sir John," called the young man. "Aim for his head. We've no cold steel; we'll try hot lead!"

"Cold steel, forsooth!" swore Grimes. "Hot lead, indeed! A silver bullet's what we need!"

"Stand firm, Sir John, and don't talk rot! Don't whine for what we haven't got!"

Grimes loosed off a clip at the diving dragon on full automatic. Sanderson,

the magazine of whose pistol held only ten rounds, fired in a more leisurely manner. Both men tried to put their shots into the open mouth, the most obviously vulnerable target. Whether or not they succeeded they never knew. Again they had to tumble hastily off the path just as the jet of flame roared out at them. This time it narrowly missed Grimes's face. It was like being shaved with a blowtorch.

He got groggily to his feet, fumbled another clip of cartridges out of the pouch at his belt, reloaded the little automatic. He saw that Sanderson was pushing a fresh magazine into the butt of his heavy pistol. The young man smiled grimly and said, "Sir John, the ammo's running low. When all is spent, what shall we do?"

"The beast will get us if we run. Would that we'd friends to call upon!"

"Many did give us good advice. If they gave us more it would be nice."

"What of the fairy Lynnimame?"

"And how, Sir John, do you know her name?"

The dragon was coming in again, barely visible in the fast gathering dusk. The men held their fire until the last possible moment—and it was almost the last moment for both of them. Barely did they scramble clear of the roaring, stinking flame, and as they rolled in the brush both of them were frantically beating out their smoldering clothing. The winged monster, as before, seemed to be uninjured.

Suddenly Sanderson cried out, swung to turn his just reloaded pistol on a new menace. It was Grimes who stopped him, who knocked his arm down before he could fire. In the glowing ovoid of light was a tiny human figure, female, with gauzy wings. She hung there over the rough, stony path. She was smiling sweetly, and her voice, when she spoke, was a silvery tintinnabulation. "Prince, your companion called my name. I am the fairy Lynnimame. I am she who, this very morn, from the jaws of the spider foul was torn. I pay my debts; you rescued me. I'll rescue you, if that's your fee."

"Too right it is, you lovesome sprite."

"Then take this, Prince. And now, good night."

She put something into Sanderson's hand and vanished. Before she flickered into invisibility Grimes, by the pale luminosity of her, saw what it was. It was a cartridge case, ordinary enough in appearance except that the tip of the bullet looked too bright to be lead. "A silver bullet!" marveled Sanderson. "A silver bullet. We are saved. He'll play Goliath to my David!"

"Unless you load, you pious prig, he'll play the chef to your long pig!"

Hastily Sanderson pulled the magazine from the butt of his pistol, ejected the first cartridge, replaced it with the silver bullet. He shoved the clip back home with a loud click. He was just in time; the dragon was upon them again, dropping almost vertically. The first lurid flames were gushing from its gaping mouth when the third officer fired. The result was spectacular.

The thing exploded in mid-air, and the force of the blast sent Grimes tumbling head over heels into the bushes, with only a confused impression of a great, scarlet flower burgeoning against the night.

He recovered consciousness slowly. As before, when he had dozed briefly aboard the river steamer, he was aware of his identity, knew what he was supposed to be doing. And then Sanderson's words severed the link with reality, recast the spell.

"Arise, Sir John! No time for sleep! We march against the Ogre's Keep!"

* * *

They marched against the Ogre's Keep—but it was more an undignified scramble up the steep path than a march. Luckily the moon was up now, somewhere above the overcast, and its diffused light was helpful, showed them the dark mass of briars that barred their way before they blundered into the thorny growth. Luckily they had not lost their weapons, and with their laser pistols they slashed, and slashed again, and slashed until their wrists ached with fatigue and their thumbs were numb from the continual pressure on the firing studs. For a long while they made no headway at all; it seemed that the severed, spiny tendrils were growing back faster than they were being destroyed. When the power packs in the pistols were exhausted they were actually forced back a few feet while they were reloading. It was Grimes who thought of renewing the attack with a wide setting instead of the needle beams that they had been using at first. The prickly bushes went up with a great whoosh of smoky flame, and the two men scrambled rather than ran through the gap thus cleared, and even then the barbed thorns were clutching at skin and clothing.

Then, with the fire behind them, they climbed on, bruised, torn and weary. They climbed, because it was the only thing to do. At last they were high enough up the hillside to see the castle again, black and forbidding against the gray sky. The few squares of yellow light that were windows accentuated rather than relieved the darkness.

They gained the rock-strewn plateau in the center of which towered the Keep. They stumbled across the uneven surface, making their way between the huge boulders, avoiding somehow the fissures that made the ground a crazy pattern of cracks. From some of these sounded ominous hissings and croakings and gruntings, from some there was a baleful gleaming of red eyes, but nothing actively molested them. And there was a rising wind now, damp and cold, that made a mockery of their rent, inadequate clothing, that whined and muttered in their ears like unquiet ghosts.

But they kept on at a staggering, faltering pace and came at last to the great iron-studded doorway. Barely within Sanderson's reach—and he was a tall man—was a huge knocker, forged in the semblance of a snarling lion's head. The young officer had to stretch to reach it; and as he put his hand to it, it moved of its own accord, emitting a thunderous clangor like an artillery barrage. Boom, boom! Boom, boom! Boom!

Almost as loud were the heavy footsteps that sounded thunderously behind the door. Almost as loud was the deep voice that asked, "Who on this

night, so bleak and froze, disturbs the Giant Blunderbore?"

The double doors crashed outward. Standing there, silhouetted against the light, was a human figure. It was all of ten feet tall, and broad in proportion. It looked down at them, its eyes gleaming yellow in the black face, and bellowed, "Enter, Princeling! Enter, Knight! Ye shall be my guests tonight." Then, as the two men drew back, it went on, "Come in, come in! This is Liberty Hall—you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

The lapse from rhymed couplets and the use of an expression that had never failed to annoy him snapped Grimes back to reality. He was Commodore John Grimes, of the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, not Sir John, and he was supposed to be investigating this crazy planet. But the castle was real enough, as was the giant who loomed there in the open doorway, as were the bruises on his body that still ached, the scratches and burns that still smarted.

"What's the matter?" he asked nastily. "Can't you find a rhyme for 'bastard'? And who are you, anyhow?"

"And who are you? All I know is that you are outsiders, and I'm supposed to stop you. Not that I want to. This damn foolishness has gone on too long. Much too long."

From the sky thundered a great voice, "Blunderbore, your duty's plain! These prying strangers must be slain!"

The giant stared upward, growled, "—you. I've had you, chum, in a big way."

The answer was a sizzling bolt of lightning, a crackling streak of dazzling energy that should have incinerated Blunderbore where he stood. But he caught it with a huge hand, laughed and hurled it back like a flaming javelin, shouting, "Try that on for size, damn you!"

"What's going on?" Sanderson whimpered. "What's going on here?"

"It's a long story," Blunderbore told him.

"It's a story, all right," agreed Grimes. "The city of Ayonoree . . . the Frog Prince . . . the Fairy Lynnimame . . . and you, Blunderbore." Yes, it was all coming back to him, and it was all making a fantastic kind of sense.

"Can you be killed?" Blunderbore was asking.

"I suppose so," said Grimes, conscious of the smart of his wounds. "Yes, I fear so. We're the outsiders. We don't belong in the series, do we? And you and the others go on from installment to installment. . . ."

"Only because we're trapped. But come in. You have to wake the Princess. It's the only way out, for all of us."

The huge man stood to one side as Grimes and Sanderson hurried into the castle. They were barely in time, were almost knocked from their feet by the wind from the crashing volley of great rocks that fell from the black sky. Splinters stung the backs of their legs painfully. Grunting, Blunderbore

pushed past them, seized the two sides of the door in his big hands, pulled them shut just as another shower of boulders crashed against the stout, iron-bound timbers. "Hurry!" he shouted. "He's turning nasty!"

The giant led the way across the flagstoned floor, to the far end of the enormous, gloomy hall. He staggered as he ran—and with cause. The very earth was growling beneath their feet, and each successive tremor was more violent than the last. From above came a crash of toppling masonry.

The air was thickening. Tendrils of yellow fog clutched at the running, stumbling men, and the writhing mist had substance. Half-seen, evil faces leered at them, distorted visages that were all teeth and dull-gleaming eyes. Vaporous claws reached out for them, solidifying as they did so. Behind Grimes Sanderson screamed, and the Commodore stopped and turned, slashing with his laser at the gelatinous obscenity that had the young officer in its grip. It piped shrilly as it disintegrated, stinking sulfurously.

"Hurry!" Blunderbore was still shouting. "Hurry!"

The stone floor was crackling underfoot, heaving and buckling, and from the high, vaulted ceiling ominous groans resounded. The castle could not withstand this punishment for long. The flaring torches were going out and there was a strong smell of escaping gas. Then, as a chance spark reignited the explosive mixture, there was a fiery blast that almost finished the destructive work initiated by the earthquake.

Almost finished.

But Blunderbore and the two spacemen were still on their feet, somehow, and there were still walls around them, although crumbling and tottering, and over their heads the last stone arch still held, despite the torrential rain of rubble that was clattering upon and around it. Ahead of them was the great fireplace, into which the giant jumped without stooping. Then he bent slowly and fumbled among the dead ashes, and straightened even more slowly, the muscles of his naked back and arms bulging and glistening. He grunted as he came erect, holding before him an enormous slab of stone. He cast it from him—and the noise of its fall and its shattering was lost amid the general uproar.

Under the slab was a spiral stairway, a helix of rusty iron running down, and down, down to murky depths where an eerie blue glimmer flickered. The prospect was not an inviting one; how long would the walls of the shaft withstand the incessant tremors? Even so, the fire was yet to come, whereas the frying pan was becoming hotter and hotter. Great sheets of flame from the ruptured gas mains were shrieking across the ruined hall, and through them crashed increasingly heavy falls of debris. And the writhing phantasms were back, multiplying in spite of the geysers of burning, exploding gas, coalescing, solidifying, piping and tittering. They were insubstantial no longer; their claws and their teeth were sharp.

"Down with you!" bellowed Blunderbore. "Down with you! It's the only way!"

"You lead!" gasped Grimes, using his laser like a sword, slashing at the half-materialized things that were closing in upon them.

"No . . . I'll hold . . . them off. . . ." The giant had wrenched the great iron spit from its sockets on either side of the fireplace, was flailing away with it, grunting with every stroke. Tattered rags of ectoplasm clung to its ends, eddied through the smoke- and dust-filled air.

Grimes paused briefly at the head of the spiral staircase, then barked to Sanderson, "Come on!" He clattered down the shaking treads, his left hand on the outer guard rail, his pistol clenched in his right fist. The central column seemed to be trying to tie itself into a knot, but it held, although the steps were canting at odd angles. The walls of the shaft were starting to bulge inward.

Grimes ran—down, down, round, round—keeping his footing in spite of the earthquake shocks, in spite of his increasing dizziness. He ran, and after him ran the third officer. Up there above Blunderbore was still fighting; his joyous bellowing came rolling down on them like thunder, loud even above the clangorous destruction of the Ogre's Keep.

Down, down. . . .

Grimes staggered on, forcing his legs to move, to go on moving, taking great gasps of the damp, fetid air. Something barred his way, something long and serpent-like, with absurdly small forelegs, with curved poison-fangs and a flickering black tongue. The Commodore tried to stop, tried to bring his pistol up to a firing position, but could not. His impetus carried him on. Then he was through the monster; its body offered no more resistance than wet tissue paper.

Down, down. . . .

It was more of a fall than a run.

It was a fall.

Grimes thudded gently into something thick and soft, lay sprawled on the soft bed of moss, breathing in great, painful gulps. Slowly he became aware of his surroundings: the cave, lit by a soft, rosy radiance with no apparent source, the opalescent colonnades of stalactite and stalagmite, the tinkling, glittering waterfalls. He focused his attention upon his immediate vicinity. The Prince was still with him, was himself slowly stirring into wakefulness. Sir John knew where he was. This was the Witch's Cave, the home of the wicked Melinee.

She was standing over them, a tall woman, white of skin, black of hair, vividly red of mouth, clad in a robe of misty gray. In either hand she held a crystal goblet, bedewed with condensation. She murmured, "Rest you awhile, good knights and true, and pray accept this cooling brew."

Sanderson reached greedily for the vessel she held out to him—and Grimes, firing from his supine position, exploded it into a spray of splinters and acrid steam.

"It's not the mess," protested Sanderson, "but it's the waste! I never even got a taste!"

"Prince, had we quaffed the witch's wine," Grimes told him, "it would have turned us into swine."

Melinee laughed, a low, throaty gurgle. "You know too much, too much by far. But you'll be more fun the way you are." She looked at Sanderson as she said this. The invitation in her black eyes, her parted scarlet lips, was unmistakable.

The young officer reacted. He got gracefully to his feet, took a step toward the witch. He said gallantly. "Who needs wine when you're around, beautiful?"

"Careful!" warned Grimes.

"Have we been careful so far, sir? We've been collecting all the kicks—it's time that we got our paws on some of the ha'pence." Then, to the woman, "Isn't there somewhere around here a little more private?"

She smiled. "My bower, behind the waterfall . . ."

"Sanderson! I order you to keep away from this female!"

"I give the orders around here, old man," said Melinee sweetly. "This is my cave, and whatever your rank may be it means nothing as long as you're on my property." She turned again to Sanderson. The filmy robe was already slipping down from one smooth shoulder and it was obvious that she was wearing nothing underneath it. "Come," she murmured.

The admonitory voice boomed from the roof of the cavern. "Melinee, you forget yourself!"

"I don't!" she shouted. "I'm remembering myself. I'm a real person, not a character in some stupid children's fairy story! If you can't write adult fiction, buster, I'm taking charge of the plot. I'm supposed to be stopping these men from going any further, aren't I? Then shut up and let me do it my way!"

"Melinee!"

"That's not my name, and you know it." She turned again to Sanderson. "Don't be shy, spaceman. I'll show you just how wicked a wicked witch can be!"

"Mr. Sanderson!" Grimes's voice crackled with authority. "Leave that woman alone!"

The young man stood there, obviously thinking mutinous thoughts but not daring to express them. The woman stood there, looking at him, a contemptuous little smile curving her full lips. And then she turned, began to walk slowly and gracefully toward the waterfall. Her robe was almost transparent.

"Melinee!" The voice from the roof expressed entreaty as well as anger. And why, Grimes asked himself suddenly, should I be on his side? He said aloud, but quietly, "All right, Mr. Sanderson. Go with her."

Sanderson shook his head bewilderedly. "First you tell me not to, and now you say that I can. . . . After all, we are on duty."

"Go with her," repeated Grimes. It was more of an order than a suggestion. "But, sir . . ."

"Damn it all, when I was your age I didn't have to be told twice."

The Wicked Witch called over her shoulder, "Do as the nice man says, darling."

The third officer made a sort of growling noise deep in his throat, glared defiantly at the Commodore, then started after the woman. She had reached the shimmering curtain of the waterfall, was passing through it. As she turned to look back through the rippling transparency Sanderson quickened his pace. Grimes chuckled, pulled from his pocket the battered pipe that somehow had survived unbroken, filled it, then ostentatiously used his laser pistol as a lighter. It was a dangerous trick, but an impressive one.

From beyond the cascade came the sound of a crooning female voice. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?" Then there was a crash of splintering glass and a scream. "No! No! You can't do that to me! I'll fix you! I'll fix you, you . . . you fairy story-teller!"

Melinee burst back into the main cavern. She was shaking with murderous fury. "Look!" she yelled. "Look what that bastard did to me!"

Grimes looked. Sanderson looked. "But—" the latter started to say. Grimes interjected hastily, "It's shocking!" He was lying—as the mirror must have done.

"Come on!" she snarled. "This joke's gone on quite long enough!"

* * *

She led the way into her bower, through the curtain of falling water. As Grimes passed through it he heard behind him the clatter of falling stalactites, felt the brief wave of scalding heat as the waterfall flashed into steam. But it was too late to harm him, and the others were well clear.

On the far wall of the bower was the mirror—or what had been the mirror. Now it was only an elaborately molded golden frame set into the rock face. Melinee scrambled through it, ignoring the sharp edges that ripped her robe from hip to ankle. Sanderson followed her, then Grimes. The tunnel beyond it was unpleasantly organic in appearance, a convoluted tube, with smooth and pinkly glistening walls, winding, pulsing underfoot, writhing.

Melinee ran on, sure-footed. Somewhere she had lost her sandals, had probably used one of them to smash the lying, libelous looking-glass. The men, in their shoes, slipped and slithered, but they kept up with her. Down they went, and down, losing all sense of direction, losing their footing, putting hands out to steady themselves against smooth, warm walls that shrank away from the touch. Down they went, and down, gasping in the hot air, suddenly conscious that the red-glowing walls were steadily

contracting. Soon there would be no going any further ahead, and no turning back.

They were crouching, and then they were slithering on their bellies. Grimes, who had passed Sanderson while it was still possible, while there was still freedom of movement, suddenly found his way blocked, realized that the crown of his head was pressing against the soles of Melinee's bare feet. Faintly her voice came back to him. "We're there . . . at the air lock. But . . . I don't know how to open it. . . ."

"I . . . I have to crawl past you . . ." gasped Grimes. Then, urgently, "Make yourself small, woman! Breathe out!"

"I'll . . . try."

Like an earthworm in its tunnel—but with far less agility, far less speed—the Commodore edged forward. Somehow he managed to get both arms ahead of his body, clutched filmy fabric and the firm flesh beneath. He heard her give a little scream, but he ignored it. Cloth tore, and then he had a firm grip on her waist, just above her hips. His face was over her heels, and then pressing down on her ankles. Somehow he was still able to draw an occasional breath. His nose was sliding—but slowly, slowly—up the valley between her calves. He hunched his back, and the resilient wall above him gave a little.

He grunted as he wriggled forward. Somehow he negotiated her buttocks; then his fingers were on her shoulders. He pulled himself ahead, more rapidly now. He spat out a mouthful of hair, then slid his hands along her upreaching bare arms. And then there was metal, blessedly hard and solid to the touch—and touch was the only sense that he had to guide him.

Was this an air lock door? He did not know; he had only her word for it. And if it were, indeed, an air lock door, was it of the standard pattern? It had to be; otherwise the situation was utterly hopeless. Cramped as he was, Grimes could never get his laser pistol out of its holster—and even if he could its employment in this confined space might well prove fatal to himself and the others.

His fingers groped, scrabbled, feeling nothing at first but smooth, seamless metal. He had almost given up hope when he found what he was looking for: the neat little hole, large enough to admit a space-gloved digit. He had to squirm and contort himself to get his hand to the right angle. Under him Melinee whimpered a little, but did not complain.

The tip of his index finger crept over the flared rim of the hole, pushed into it, at first encountering nothing at all and then, after what seemed an eternity, smooth plastic. Grimes pushed, felt the surface give. He maintained the pressure, relaxed it, pushed again, and again, making "O" in Morse Code—"O" for "Open."

He heard the faint whir of machinery, a noise that suddenly became louder. The inward opening door almost took his finger with it. And then he was in the air lock, closely followed by Sanderson.

Melinee had vanished.

* * *

Slowly Grimes and Sanderson walked through the silent, the too silent alleyways of the ship, fighting the lassitude that threatened to close down upon them, forcing their way through air that seemed to possess the viscosity of cold treacle. But they were not alone. In their ears—or in their minds?—sounded the croaking voice of the Frog Prince, the tinkling soprano of the Fairy Lynnimame, the husky whisper of Melinee. "You must not give in. You have come so far; you must not give in. Waken the Princess. Waken the Princess." And there was Blunderbore's urgent muttering, and the faint voices of the River Queen's captain and purser. "Wake the Princess. Wake the Princess."

They stumbled on, weakening, through the gelid air, the internal atmosphere that didn't even smell right, that didn't smell at all, that lacked the familiar taints of hot oil and machinery, of tobacco smoke and women's perfume, the clean, garden scents of the hydroponics deck. They staggered on, through alleyways and up companionways, fighting every inch of the way, sustained somehow by the fairytale characters whom they had encountered.

And Grimes knew what was wrong, knew the nature of the stasis that must, soon, make them part of itself, unless they reached the Mannschenn Drive room in time. He had read of, but had never until now experienced, the almost impossible balance of forces, the canceling out of opposing temporal precession fields that would freeze a ship and all her people in an eternal Now, forever adrift down and between the dimensions. That had been one of the theories advanced to account for the vanishing, without trace, of that Waverley Royal Mail liner ten standard years ago—the ship aboard which the writer Clay Wilton had been a passenger.

Grimes could remember, vividly, the blurb on the dust jacket of the book that he had bought as a present for the small daughter of a friend. "The last of the dreamers," the author had been called. He had skimmed through it, had laughed at the excellent illustrations and then, to his amazement, had been gripped by the story. It was about a world that never was and was never could be, a planet where sorcery was everyday practice, where talking animals and good fairies and wicked witches interfered in the affairs of men and women.

"You are beginning to understand," whispered Lynnimame.

There was the door ahead of them, with MANNSCHENN DRIVE in shining metal letters above it. The door was closed, stubborn; it would not yield. Human muscles were powerless against the stasis; human muscles with strength flowing into them from outside, somehow, were still powerless. The handle snapped off cleanly in Grimes's hand.

"Let me, sir," Sanderson was saying. "Let me try."

The Commodore stepped slowly to one side, his motions those of a deep-sea diver. He saw that the young man had his laser weapon out of its holster, was struggling to raise it against the dreadful inertia.

He pressed the firing stud.

Slowly, fantastically, the beam of intense light extruded itself from the muzzle, creeping toward that immovable door. After an eternity it made contact, and after another eternity the paint began to bubble. Aeons passed, and there was a crater. More aeons dragged by—and the crater was a hole. Still Sanderson, his face rigid with strain, held the weapon steady. Grimes could imagine that luminous, purple worm crawling across the space from the door to the switchboard. Then Sanderson gasped, "I can't keep it up!" and the muzzle of the pistol wavered, sagged until it was pointing at the deck.

We tried, thought Grimes. Then he wondered, Will Wilton add us to his permanent cast of characters?

Suddenly there was sound again—the dying, deepening whine of a stopped Mannschenn Drive unit, of spinning, processing gyroscopes slowing to final immobility. Like a bullet fired from a gun deflected after the pulling of the trigger, the laser beam had reached its target. There was sound again: fans, and pumps, the irregular throbbing of the Inertial Drive, and all the bubble and clamor of a suddenly awakened ship. From bulkhead speakers boomed a voice, that of the captain of the river steamer. "Whoever you are, come up to the main saloon, please. And whoever you are—thank you."

* * *

Grimes sprawled comfortably in an easy chair, a cold drink ready to hand. He had decided to stay aboard this ship, the Princess of Troon, having persuaded her captain to set trajectory for Lorn. After all, he was already ten years late—a few more weeks would make very little difference. During the voyage the Commodore would be able to question the Princess' personnel still further, to work on his report. He was keeping young Sanderson with him. Drakenberg had not been at all pleased when deprived of the service of a watch officer, but the Commodore piled on far more G's than he did.

Already Grimes was beginning to wonder if his report would be believed, in spite of all the corroborative evidence from the personnel of both ships, Rim Jaguar and Princess of Troon. He recalled vividly the scene in the passenger liner's main saloon when he and Sanderson had made their way into that compartment. The stasis must have been closed down while everybody was at dinner; dishes on the tables were still steaming.

They had all been there: the frog-like Grollan, the old lady who had been the peasant woman encountered on the towpath, the pretty fragile blonde whose name should have been Lynnimame, but was not; all of them looking like the characters in the illustrations to the Clay Wilton books. And there was the big—but not all that big—Negro, who was a physicist, not an ogre and the captain, and the purser. There was the beautiful woman who could have been the model for the Melinee in the pictures and who was, in fact, Mrs. Wilton. There were other officers, other passengers, and among them was Clay Wilton himself. He had the beginnings of a black eye, and a trickle of blood still dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Ship's staff had formed a protective cordon about him, but made it quite obvious that this was only because they had been ordered to do so.

After the first excitement there had been the conference, during which all concerned tried to work out what had happened, and why. Blundell, the big physicist—it had been hard not to think of him as Blunderbore—had said, "I've my own ideas, Commodore Grimes. But you, sir, are the recognized authority on Rim phenomena. . . ."

Grimes was flattered, and tried not to show it. He made a major production of filling and lighting his pipe. After he had it going he said, "I can try to explain. The way I see it is this. The ship went into stasis, and somehow drifted out from the Waverley sector toward the Rim. And out here, at the very edge of the expanding galaxy, there's always an . . . oddness. Time and space are not inclined to follow the laws that obtain elsewhere. Too, thought seems to have more power—physical power, I mean—than in the regions more toward the center. It's all part and parcel of the vagueness—that's not quite the right word—of . . . of everything. We get along with it. We're used to it.

"Look at it this way. You were all frozen in your ever-lasting Now, but you could still think, and you could still dream. And who was the most expert dreamer among you? It had to be Clay Wilton; after all, his publishers refer to him as 'the last of the dreamers.' Mr. Wilton dreamed out the story that he was working on at the time when your Mannschenn Drive went on the blink. Then he dreamed of the next story in the series, and the next, and the next. . . . Somehow a world shaped itself about his dreams. Out here, on the Rim, there must be the raw material for the creation of new galaxies. Somehow that world shaped itself, a solid world, with atmosphere, and vegetation, and people. It was real enough to register on all Rim Jaguar's instruments, even though it vanished when this ship came out of stasis. It was real enough, but, with a few exceptions, the people weren't real. They were little more than mobile scenery. The exceptions, of course, were those characters drawn from real life. And they led a sort of double existence. One body here, aboard the ship, and another body on the surface of that impossible planet, dancing like a puppet as Mr. Wilton manipulated the strings. Toward the end, the puppets were getting restive. . . ."

"You can say that again, Commodore," grinned Blundell.

"Yes, the puppets were getting restive, and realized that they, too, could become puppet-masters, could use Mr. Sanderson and myself to break the stasis. And, at the same time, Mr. Wilton was trying to work us into his current plot." Grimes turned to the writer. "And tell me, sir, did you intend to kill us?"

"Nobody dies in my stories," muttered the man. "Not even the baddies."

"But there has to be a first time for everything. That dragon of yours was far too enthusiastic. And so was your destruction of Blunderbore's castle."

"I'd gotten kind of attached to the place, too," grumbled the physicist.

"I meant no harm." Wilton's voice was sullen.

"Don't you believe him!" flared Mrs. Wilton—Melinee, the Wicked Witch. "He has a nasty, cruel streak in him, and only writes the sweetness and light

fairy-tale rubbish because it makes good money. But that trick of his with my mirror will be grounds for divorce. Any judge, anywhere, will admit that it was mental cruelty."

"But what did you do to me?" demanded the weedy little man, taking a pitiful offensive. "You destroyed my world."

But did we? Grimes was wondering. Did we?

Sanderson and the fragile little blonde had come into the small smoking room, had not noticed him sitting there; they were sharing a settee only a few feet from him.

"The really fantastic thing about it all, Lynnimame—I like to call you that; after all, it was your name when I first met you. You don't mind, do you?" Sanderson was saying.

"Of course not, Henry. If you like it, I like it."

"Good. But as I was saying, the really fantastic thing about it all, the way that I fitted into old Wilton's story, is that I am a prince. . . ."

"But I think," said Grimes coldly as he got up from his chair, "that the Wicked Witch will be able to vouch that you're not a fairy prince."

And would they all live happily ever after? he wondered as he made his way to his cabin. At least he was finally on his way home.