

## The Sleeping Beauty

Commodore Damien, Officer Commanding Couriers, was not in a very good mood. This was not unusual—especially on the occasions when Lieutenant Grimes, captain of the Serpent Class Courier Adder, happened to be on the carpet.

"Mr. Grimes . . ." said the Commodore in a tired voice.

"Sir!" responded Grimes smartly.

"Mr. Grimes, you've been and gone and done it again."

The Lieutenant's prominent ears reddened. "I did what I could to save my ship and my people, sir."

"You destroyed a very expensive piece of equipment, as well as playing merry hell with the Federation's colonial policy. My masters—who, incidentally, are also your masters—are not, repeat not, amused."

"I saved my ship," repeated Grimes stubbornly.

The Commodore looked down at the report on his desk. A grim smile did little, if anything, to soften the harsh planes of his bony face. "It says here that your ship saved you."

"She did," admitted Grimes. "It was sort of mutual . . ."

"And it was your ship that killed—I suppose that 'kill' is the right word to use regarding a highly intelligent robot—Mr. Adam . . . H'm. A slightly extenuating circumstance. Nonetheless, Grimes, were it not for the fact that you're a better than average spaceman you'd be O-U-bloody-T, trying to get a job as Third Mate in Rim Runners or some such outfit." He made a steeple of his skeletal fingers, glared at the Lieutenant coldly over the bony erection. "So, in the interests of all concerned, I've decided that your Adder will not be carrying any more passengers for a while—at least, not with you in command of her. Even so, I'm afraid that you'll not have much time to enjoy the social life—such as it is—of Base . . ."

Grimes sighed audibly. Although a certain Dr. Margaret Lazenby was his senior in rank he was beginning to get on well with her.

"As soon as repairs and routine maintenance are completed, Mr. Grimes, you will get the hell off this planet."

"What about my officers, sir? Mr. Beadle is overdue for Leave . . ."

"My heart fair bleeds for him."

"And Mr. McCloud is in hospital . . ."

"Ensign Vitelli, your new Engineering Officer, was ordered to report to your vessel as soon as possible, if not before. The work of fitting a replacement computer to Adder is already well in hand." The Commodore looked at his watch. "It is now 1435. At 1800 hours you will lift ship."

"My Orders, sir . . ."

"Oh, yes, Grimes. Your Orders. A matter of minor importance, actually. As long as you get out of my hair that's all that matters to me. But I suppose I have to put you in the picture. The Shaara are passing through a phase of being nice to humans, and we, of the Federation, are reciprocating. There's a small parcel of very important cargo to be lifted from Droomoor to Brooom, and for some reason or other our arthropedal allies haven't a fast ship of their own handy. Lindisfarne Base is only a week from Droomoor by Serpent Class Courier. So . . ."

So Viper, Asp and Cobra have all been in port for weeks, thought Grimes bitterly, but I get the job.

The Commodore had his telepathic moments. He smiled again, and this time there was a hint of sympathy. He said, "I want you off Lindisfarne, young Grimes, before there's too much of a stink raised over this Mr. Adam affair. You're too honest. I can bend the truth better than you can."

"Thank you, sir," said Grimes, meaning it.

"Off you go, now. Don't forget these." Grimes took the heavily sealed envelope. "And try not to make too much of a balls of this assignment."

"I'll try, sir."

Grimes saluted, marched smartly out of the Commodore's office, strode across the apron to where his "flying darning needle," not yet shifted to a lay-up berth (not that she would be now), was awaiting him.

Mr. Beadle met him at the airlock. He rarely smiled—but he did so, rather smugly, when he saw the Orders in Grimes' hand. He asked casually, "Any word of my relief, Captain?"

"Yes. You're not getting it, Number One," Grimes told him, rather hating himself for the pleasure he derived from being the bearer of bad tidings. "And we're to lift off at 1800 hours. Is the new engineer aboard yet?"

Beadle's face had resumed its normal lugubrious case. "Yes," he said. "But stores, Captain . . . Repairs . . . Maintenance . . ."

"Are they in hand?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then if we aren't ready for space, it won't be our fault." But Grimes knew—and it made him feel as unhappy as his first lieutenant looked—that the ship would be ready.

Adder lifted at precisely 1800 hours. Grimes, sulking hard—he had not been able to see Maggie Lazenby—did not employ his customary, spectacular getting-upstairs-in-a-hurry technique, kept his fingers off the auxiliary reaction drive controls. The ship drifted up and out under inertial drive only, seemingly sharing the reluctance to part of her officer. Beadle was slumped gloomily in his chair, von Tannenbaum, the navigator, stared at his instruments with an elaborate lack of interest, Slovochny, the electronic

communications officer, snarled every time that he had occasion to hold converse with Aerospace Control.

And yet, once the vessel was clear of the atmosphere, Grimes began to feel almost happy. Growl you may, he thought, but go you must. He had gone. He was on his way. He was back in what he regarded as his natural element. Quite cheerfully he went through the motions of lining Adder up on the target star, was pleased to note that von Tannenbaum was cooperating in his usual highly efficient manner. And then, once trajectory had been set, the Mannschenn Drive was put into operation and the little ship was falling at a fantastic speed through the warped Continuum, with yet another mission to be accomplished.

The captain made the usual minor ritual of lighting his pipe. He said, "Normal Deep Space routine, Number One."

"Normal Deep Space routine, sir."

"Who has the watch?"

"Mr. von Tannenbaum, Captain."

"Good. Then come to see me as soon as you're free."

When Beadle knocked at his door Grimes had the envelope of instructions open. He motioned the first lieutenant to a chair, said, "Fix us drinks, Number One, while I see what's in this bumf . . ." He extended a hand for the glass that the officer put into it, sipped the pink gin, continued reading. "Mphm. Well, we're bound for Droomoor, as you know . . ."

"As well I know." Beadle then muttered something about communistic bumblebees.

"Come, come, Mr. Beadle. The Shaara are our brave allies. And they aren't at all bad when you get to know them."

"I don't want to get to know them. If I couldn't have my leave I could have been sent on a mission to a world with real human girls and a few bright lights . . ."

"Mr. Beadle, you shock me. By your xenophobia as well as by your low tastes. However, as I was saying, we are to proceed to Droomoor at maximum velocity consistent with safety. There we are to pick up a small parcel of very important cargo, the loading of which is to be strictly supervised by the local authorities. As soon as possible thereafter we are to proceed to Brooom at maximum velocity etc. etc."

"Just delivery boys," grumbled Beadle. "That's us."

"Oh, well," Grimes told him philosophically, "it's a change from being coach drivers. And after the trouble we've had with passengers of late it should be a welcome one."

Droomoor is an Earth-type planet, with the usual seas, continents, polar icecaps and all the rest of it. Evolution did not produce any life-forms deviating to any marked degree from the standard pattern; neither did it

come up with any fire-making, tool-using animals. If human beings had been the first to discover it, it would have become a Terran colony. But it was a Shaara ship that made the first landing, so it was colonized by the Shaara, as was Brooom, a very similar world.

Grimes brought Adder in to Port Sherr with his usual competence, receiving the usual cooperation from the Shaara version of Aerospace Control. Apart from that, things were not so usual. He and his officers were interested to note that the aerial traffic which they sighted during their passage through the atmosphere consisted of semirigid airships rather than heavier-than-air machines. And the buildings surrounding the landing apron at the spaceport were featureless, mud-colored domes rather than angular constructions of glass and metal. Beadle mumbled something about a huddle of bloody beehives, but Grimes paid no attention. As a reasonably efficient captain he was interested in the lay-out of the port, was trying to form some idea of what facilities were available. A ship is a ship is a ship, no matter by whom built or by whom manned—but a mammal is a mammal and an arthropod is an arthropod, and each has its own separate requirements.

"Looks like the Port Officials on their way out to us," remarked von Tannenbaum.

A party of Shaara had emerged from a circular opening near the top of the nearer dome. They flew slowly towards the ship, their gauzy wings almost invisible in the sunlight. Grimes focused his binoculars on them. In the lead was a Princess, larger than the others, her body more slender, glittering with the jeweled insignia of her rank. She was followed by two drones, so hung about with precious stones and metal that it was a wonder that they were able to stay airborne. Four upper caste workers, less gaudily caparisoned than the drones, but with sufficient ornamentation to differentiate them from the common herd, completed the party.

"Number One," said Grimes, "attend the airlock, please. I shall receive the boarding party in my day cabin."

He went down from the control room to his quarters, got out the whisky—three bottles, he decided, should be sufficient, although the Shaara drones were notorious for their capacity.

The Princess was hard, businesslike. She refused to take a drink herself, and under her glittering, many-faceted eyes the workers dare not accept Grimes's hospitality, and even the drones limited themselves to a single small glass apiece. She stood there like a gleaming, metallic piece of abstract statuary, motionless, and the voice that issued from the box strapped to her thorax was that of a machine rather than of a living being.

She said, "This is an important mission, Captain. You will come with me, at once, to the Queen Mother, for instructions."

Grimes didn't like being ordered around, especially aboard his own ship, but was well aware that it is foolish to antagonize planetary rulers. He said:

"Certainly, Your Highness. But first I must give instructions to my officers. And before I can do so I must have some information. To begin with, how long a stay do we have on your world?"

"You will lift ship as soon as the consignment has been loaded." She consulted the jeweled watch that she wore strapped to a forelimb. "The underworkers will be on their way out to your vessel now." She pointed towards the four upper caste working Shaara. "These will supervise stowage. Please inform your officers of the arrangements."

Grimes called Beadle on the intercom, asked him to come up to his cabin. Then, as soon as the First Lieutenant put in an appearance, he told him that he was to place himself at the disposal of the supervisors and to ensure that Adder was in readiness for instant departure. He then went through into his bedroom to change into a dress uniform, was pulling off his shirt when he realized that the Princess had followed him.

"What are you doing?" she asked coldly.

"Putting on something more suitable, Your Highness," he told her.

"That will not be necessary, Captain. You will be the only human in the presence of Her Majesty, and everybody will know who and what you are."

Resignedly Grimes shrugged himself back into his uniform shirt, unadorned save for shoulder boards. He felt that he should be allowed to make more of a showing, especially among beings all dressed up like Christmas trees themselves, but his orders had been to cooperate fully with the Shaara authorities. And, in any case, shorts and shirt were far more comfortable than long trousers, frock coat, collar and tie, fore-and-aft hat and that ridiculous ceremonial sword. He hung his personal communicator over his shoulder, put on his cap and said, "I'm ready, Your Highness."

"What is that?" she asked suspiciously. "A weapon?"

"No, Your Highness! A radio transceiver. I must remain in touch with my ship at all times."

"I suppose it's all right," she said grudgingly.

When Grimes walked down the ramp, following the princess and her escorting drones, he saw that a wheeled truck had drawn up alongside Adder and that a winch mounted on the vehicle was reeling in a small airship, a bloated gasbag from which was slung a flimsy car, at the after end of which a huge, two-bladed propeller was still lazily turning. Workers were scurrying about on the ground and buzzing between the blimp and the truck.

"Your cargo," said the Princess. "And your transport from the spaceport to the palace."

The car of the airship was now only a foot above the winch. From it the workers lifted carefully a white cylinder, apparently made from some plastic, about four feet long and one foot in diameter. Set into its smooth surface were dials, and an indicator light that glowed vividly green even in the bright sunlight. An insulated lead ran from it to the airship's engine compartment where, thought Grimes, there must be either a battery or a generator. Yes, a battery it was. Two workers, their wings a shimmering transparency, brought it out and set it down on the concrete beside the

cylinder.

"You will embark," the princess stated.

Grimes stood back and assessed the situation. It would be easy enough to get on to the truck, to clamber on top of the winch and from there into the car—but it would be impossible to do so without getting his white shorts, shirt and stockings filthy. Insofar as machinery was concerned the Shaara believed in lubrication, and plenty of it.

"I am waiting," said the Princess.

"Yes, Your Highness, but . . ."

Grimes did not hear the order given—the Shaara communicated among themselves telepathically—so was somewhat taken aback when two of the workers approached him, buzzing loudly. He flinched when their claws penetrated the thin fabric of his clothing and scratched his skin. He managed to refrain from crying out when he was lifted from the ground, carried the short distance to the airship and dumped, sprawling, on to the deck of the open car. The main hurt was to his dignity. Looking up at his own vessel he could see the grinning faces of von Tannenbaum and Slovtny at the control room viewports.

He scrambled somehow to his feet, wondering if the fragile decking would stand his weight. And then the Princess was with him, and the escorting drones, and the upper caste worker in command of the blimp had taken her place at the simple controls and the frail contraption was ballooning swiftly upwards as the winch brake was released. Grimes, looking down, saw the end of the cable whip off the barrel. He wondered what would happen if the dangling wire fouled something on the ground below, then decided that it was none of his business. These people had been playing around with airships for quite some years and must know what they were about.

The Princess was not in a communicative mood, and obviously the drones and the workers talked only when talked to—by her—although all of them wore voice boxes. Grimes was quite content with the way that things were. He had decided that the Shaaran was a bossy female, and he did not like bossy females, mammalian, arthropedal or whatever. He settled down to enjoy the trip, appreciating the leisurely—by his standards—flight over the lush countryside. There were the green, rolling hills, the great banks of flowering shrubs, huge splashes of color that were vivid without being gaudy. Thousands of workers were busily employed about the enormous blossoms. There was almost no machinery in evidence—but in a culture such as this there would be little need for the machine, workers of the lower grades being no more than flesh-and-blood robots.

Ahead of them loomed the city.

Just a huddle of domes it was, some large, some small, with the greatest of all of them roughly in the center. This one, Grimes saw as they approached it, had a flattened top, and there was machinery there—a winch, he decided.

The airship came in high, but losing altitude slowly, finally hovering over

the palace, its propeller just turning over to keep it stemming the light breeze. Two workers flew up from the platform, caught the end of the dangling cable, snapped it on to the end of another cable brought up from the winch drum. The winch was started and, creaking in protest, the blimp was drawn rapidly down. A set of wheeled steps was pushed into position, its upper part hooked on to the gunwale of the swaying car. The princess and her escort ignored this facility, fluttering out and down in a flurry of gauzy wings. Grimes used the ladder, of course, feeling grateful that somebody had bothered to remember that he was a wingless biped.

"Follow me," snapped the Princess.

The spaceman followed her, through a circular hatch in the platform. The ramp down which she led him was steep and he had difficulty in maintaining his balance, was unable to gain more than a confused impression of the interior of the huge building. There was plenty of light, luckily, a green-blue radiance emanating from clusters of luminescent insects hanging at intervals from the roof of the corridor. The air was warm, and bore an acrid but not unpleasant tang. It carried very few sounds, however, only a continuous, faintly sinister rustling noise. Grimes missed the murmur of machinery. Surely—apart from anything else—a vast structure such as this would need mechanical ventilation. In any case, there was an appreciable air flow. And then, at a junction of four corridors, he saw a group of workers, their feet hooked into rings set in the smooth floor, their wings beating slowly, maintaining the circulation of the atmosphere.

Down they went, and down, through corridors that were deserted save for themselves, through other corridors that were busy streets, with hordes of workers scurrying on mysterious errands. But they were never jostled; the lower caste Shaara always gave the Princess and her party a respectfully wide berth. Even so, there seemed to be little, if any curiosity; only the occasional drone would stop to stare at the Earthman with interest.

Down they went, and down . . .

They came, at last, to the end of a long passageway, closed off by a grilled door, the first that Grimes had seen in the hive. On the farther side of it were six workers, hung about with metal accoutrements. Workers? No, Grimes decided, soldiers, Amazons. Did they, he wondered, have stings, like their Terran counterparts? Perhaps they did—but the laser pistols that they held would be far more effective.

"Who comes?" asked one of them in the sort of voice that Grimes associated with sergeant-majors.

"The Princess Shrla, with Drones Brrynn and Drryhr, and Earth-Drone-Captain Grrimes."

"Enter, Princess Shrla, Enter, Earth-Drone-Captain Grrimes."

The grille slid silently aside, admitting Grimes and the Princess, shutting again, leaving the two drones on its further side. Two soldiers led the way along a tunnel that, by the Earthman's standards, was very poorly illuminated, two more brought up the rear. Grimes was pleased to note that the Princess seemed to have lost most of her arrogance.

They came, then, into a vast chamber, a blue-lit dimness about which the shapes of the Queen-Mother's attendants rustled, scurried and crept. Slowly they walked over the smooth, soft floor—under Grimes's shoes it felt unpleasantly organic—to the raised platform on which lay a huge, pale shape. Ranged around the platform were screens upon which moved pictures of scenes all over the planet—one of them showed the spaceport, with Adder standing tall slim and gleaming on the apron—and banks of dials and meters. Throne-room this enormous vault was, and nursery, and the control room of a world.

Grimes's eyes were becoming accustomed to the near-darkness. He looked with pity at the flabby, grossly distended body with its ineffectual limbs, its useless stubs of wings. He did not, oddly enough, consider obscene the slowly moving belt that ran under the platform, upon which, at regular intervals, a glistening, pearly egg was deposited, neither was he repelled by the spectacle of the worker whose swollen body visibly shrank as she regurgitated nutriment into the mouth of the Shaara Queen—but he was taken aback when that being spoke to him while feeding was still in progress. He should not have been, knowing as he did that the artificial voice boxes worn by the Shaara have no connection with their organs of ingestion.

"Welcome, Captain Grimes," she said in deep, almost masculine tones.

"I am honored, Your Majesty," he stammered.

"You do us a great service, Captain Grimes."

"That is a pleasure as well as an honor, Your Majesty."

"So . . . But, Captain Grimes, I must, as you Earthmen say, put you in the picture." There was a short silence. "On Brooom there is crisis. Disease has taken its toll among the hives, a virus, a mutated virus. A cure was found—but too late. The Brooom Queen-Mother is dead. All Princesses not beyond fertilization age are dead. Even the royal eggs, larvae and pupae were destroyed by the disease.

"We, of course, are best able to afford help to our daughters and sisters on Brooom. We offered to send a fertilizable Princess to become Queen-Mother, but the Council of Princesses which now rules the colony insists that their new monarch be born, as it were, on the planet. So, then, we are dispatching, by your vessel, a royal pupa. She will tear the silken sheath and emerge, as an imago, into the world over which she will reign."

"Mphm . . ." grunted Grimes absentmindedly. "Your Majesty," he added hastily.

The Queen-Mother turned her attention to the television screens. "If we are not mistaken," she said, "the loading of the refrigerated canister containing the pupa has been completed. Princess Shrla will take you back to your ship. You will lift and proceed as soon as is practicable." Again she paused, then went on. "We need not tell you, Captain Grimes, that we Shaara have great respect for Terran spacemen. We are confident that you will carry out your mission successfully. We shall be pleased, on your return to our planet, to confer upon you the Order of the Golden Honeyflower.



"On your bicycle, spaceman!"

Grimes looked at the recumbent Queen dubiously. Where had she picked up that expression? But he had heard it said—and was inclined to agree—that the Shaara were more human than many of the humanoids throughout the Galaxy.

He bowed low—then, following the Princess, escorted by the soldiers, made his way out of the throne-room.

It is just three weeks, Terran Standard, from Droomoor to Brooom as the Serpent Class Courier flies. That, of course, is assuming that all systems are Go aboard the said Courier. All systems were not Go insofar as Adder was concerned. This was the result of an unfortunate combination of circumstances. The ship had been fitted with a new computer at Lindisfarne Base, a new Engineering Officer—all of whose previous experience had been as a junior in a Constellation Class cruiser—had been appointed to her, and she had not been allowed to stay in port long enough for any real maintenance to be carried out.

The trouble started one evening, ship's time, when Grimes was discussing matters with Spooky Deane, the psionic communications officer. The telepath was, as usual, getting outside a large, undiluted gin. His captain was sipping a glass of the same fluid, but with ice cubes and bitters as additives.

"Well, Spooky," said Grimes, "I don't think that we shall have any trouble with this passenger. She stays in her cocoons—the home-grown one and the plastic outer casing—safe and snug and hard-frozen, and thawing her out will be up to her loyal subjects. By that time we shall be well on our way . . ."

"She's alive, you know," said Deane.

"Of course she's alive."

"She's conscious, I mean. I'm getting more and more attuned to her thoughts, her feelings. It's always been said that it's practically impossible for there to be any real contact of minds between human and Shaara telepaths, but when you're cooped up in the same ship as a Shaara, a little ship at that . . ."

"Tell me more," ordered Grimes.

"It's . . . fascinating. You know, of course, that race memory plays a big part in the Shaara culture. The princess, when she emerges as an imago, will know just what her duties are, and what the duties of those about her are. She knows that her two main functions will be to rule and to breed. Workers exist only to serve her, and every drone is a potential father to her people . . ."

"Mphm. And is she aware of us?"

"Dimly, Captain. She doesn't know, of course, who or what we are. As far as she's concerned we're just some of her subjects, in close attendance upon

her . . ."

"Drones or workers?"

Spooky Deane laughed. "If she were more fully conscious, she'd be rather confused on that point. Males are drones, and drones don't work . . ."

Grimes was about to make some unkind remarks about his officers when the lights flickered. When they flickered a second time he was already on his feet. When they went out he was halfway through the door of his day cabin, hurrying towards the control room. The police lights came on, fed from the emergency batteries—but the sudden cessation of the noise of pumps and fans, the cutting off in mid-beat of the irregular throbbing of the inertial drive, was frightening. The thin, high whine of the Mannschenn Drive Unit deepened as the spinning, precessing gyroscopes slowed to a halt, and as they did so there came the nauseating dizziness of temporal disorientation.

Grimes kept going, although—as he put it, later—he didn't know if it was Christmas Day or last Thursday. The ship was in Free Fall now, and he pulled himself rapidly along the guide rail, was practically swimming in air as he dived through the hatch into Control.

Von Tannenbaum had the watch. He was busy at the auxiliary machinery control panel. A fan restarted somewhere, but a warning buzzer began to sound. The navigator cursed. The fan motor slowed down and the buzzer ceased.

"What's happened, Pilot?" demanded Grimes.

"The Phoenix Jennie I think, Captain. Vitelli hasn't reported yet . . ."

Then the engineer's shrill, excited voice sounded from the intercom speaker. "Auxiliary engine room to Control! I have to report a leakage of deuterium!"

"What pressure is there in the tank?" Grimes asked.

"The gauges still show 20,000 units. But . . ."

"But what?" Grimes snapped.

"Captain, the tank is empty."

Grimes pulled himself to his chair, strapped himself in. He looked out through the viewports at the star-begemmed blackness, each point of light hard and sharp, no longer distorted by the temporal precession fields of the Drive, each distant sun lifetimes away with the ship in her present condition. Then he turned to face his officers—Beadle, looking no more (but no less) glum than usual, von Tannenbaum, whose normally ruddy face was now as pale as his hair, Slovtorny, whose dark complexion now had a greenish cast, and Deane, ectoplasmic as always. They were joined by Vitelli, a very ordinary looking young man who was, at the moment, more than ordinarily frightened.

"Mr. Vitelli," Grimes asked him. "This leakage—is it into our atmosphere or

outside the hull?"

"Outside, sir."

"Good. In that case . . ." Grimes made a major production of filling and lighting his battered pipe. "Now I can think. Mphm. Luckily I've not used any reaction mass this trip, so we have ample fuel for the emergency generator. Got your slipstick ready, Pilot? Assuming that the tanks are full, do we have enough to run the inertial and interstellar drives from here to Brooom?"

"I'll have to use the computer, Captain."

"Then use it. Meanwhile, Sparks and Spooky, can either of you gentlemen tell me what ships are in the vicinity?"

"The Dog Star Line's Basset," Slovoṭny told him. "The cruiser Draconis " added Deane.

"Mphm." It would be humiliating for a Courier Service Captain to have to call for help, but Draconis would be the lesser of two evils. "Mphm. Get in touch with both vessels, Mr. Deane. I'm not sure that we can spare power for the Carlotti, Mr. Slovoṭny. Get in touch with both vessels, ask their positions and tell them ours. But don't tell them anything else."

"Our position, sir, is . . . ?"

Grimes swiveled his chair so that he could see the chart tank, rattled off the coordinates, adding, "Near enough, until we get an accurate fix . . ."

"I can take one now, Captain," von Tannenbaum told him.

"Thank you, Pilot. Finished your sums?"

"Yes." The navigator's beefy face was expressionless. "To begin with, we have enough chemical fuel to maintain all essential services for a period of seventy-three Standard days. But we do not have enough fuel to carry us to Brooom, even using Mannschenn Drive only. We could, however, make for ZX1797—Sol-type, with one Earth-type planet, habitable but currently uninhabited by intelligent life forms . . ."

Grimes considered the situation. If he were going to call for help he would be better off staying where he was, in reasonable comfort.

"Mr. Vitelli," he said, "you can start up the emergency generator. Mr. Deane, as soon as Mr. von Tannenbaum has a fix you can get a message out to Basset and Draconis . . ."

"But she's properly awake," Deane muttered. "She's torn open the silk cocoon, and the outer canister is opening . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about?" barked Grimes.

"The Princess. When the power went off the refrigeration unit stopped. She . . ." The telepath's face assumed an expression of rapt devotion. "We must go to her . . ."

"We must go to her . . ." echoed Vitelli.

"The emergency generator!" almost yelled Grimes. But he, too, could feel that command inside his brain, the imperious demand for attention, for . . . love. Here, at last, was something, somebody whom he could serve with all the devotion of which he was, of which he ever would be capable. And yet a last, tattered shred of sanity persisted.

He said gently, "We must start the emergency generator. She must not be cold or hungry."

Beadle agreed. "We must start the emergency generator. For her."

They started the emergency generator and the ship came back to life—of a sort. She was a small bubble of light and warmth and life drifting down and through the black immensities.

The worst part of it all, Grimes said afterwards, was knowing what was happening but not having the willpower to do anything about it. And then he would add, "But it was educational. You can't deny that. I always used to wonder how the Establishment gets away with so much. Now I know. If you're a member of the Establishment you have that inborn . . . arrogance? No, not arrogance. That's not the right word. You have the calm certainty that everybody will do just what you want. With our Establishment it could be largely the result of training, of education. With the Shaara Establishment no education or training is necessary.

"Too, the Princess had it easy—almost as easy as she would have done had she broken out of her cocoon in the proper place at the proper time. Here she was in a little ship, manned by junior officers, people used to saluting and obeying officers with more gold braid on their sleeves. For her to impose her will was child's play. Literally child's play in this case. There was a communication problem, of course, but it wasn't a serious one. Even if she couldn't actually speak, telepathically, to the rest of us, there was Spooky Deane. With him she could dot the i's and cross the t's.

"And she did."

And she did.

Adder's officers gathered in the cargo compartment that was now the throne-room. A table had been set up, covered with a cloth that was, in actuality, a new Federation ensign from the ship's flag locker. To it the Princess—the Queen, rather—clung with her four posterior legs. She was a beautiful creature, slim, all the colors of her body undimmed by age. She was a glittering, bejeweled piece of abstract statuary, but she was alive, very much alive. With her great, faceted eyes she regarded the men who hovered about her. She was demanding something. Grimes knew that, as all of them did. She was demanding something—quietly at first, then more and more insistently.

But what?

Veneration? Worship?

"She hungers," stated Deane.

She hungers . . . thought Grimes. His memory was still functioning, and he tried to recall what he knew of the Shaara.

He said, "Tell her that her needs will be satisfied."

Reluctantly yet willingly he left the cargo compartment, making his way to the galley. It did not take him long to find what he wanted, a squeeze bottle of syrup. He hurried back with it.

It did not occur to him to hand the container to the Queen. With his feet in contact with the deck he was able to stand before her, holding the bottle in his two hands, squeezing out the viscous fluid, drop by drop, into the waiting mouth. Normally he would have found that complexity of moving parts rather frightening, repulsive even—but now they seemed to possess an essential rightness that was altogether lacking from the clumsy masticatory apparatus of a human being. Slowly, carefully he squeezed, until a voice said in his mind, Enough. Enough.

"She would rest now," said Deane.

"She shall rest," stated Grimes.

He led the way from the cargo compartment to the little wardroom.

In a bigger ship, with a larger crew, with a senior officer in command who, by virtue of his rank, was a member of the Establishment himself, the spell might soon have been broken. But this was only a little vessel, and of her personnel only Grimes was potentially a rebel. The time would come when this potentiality would be realized—just as, later, the time of compromise would come—but it was not yet. He had been trained to obedience—and now there was aboard Adder somebody whom he obeyed without question, just as he would have obeyed an Admiral.

In the wardroom the officers disposed of a meal of sorts, and when it was over Grimes, from force of habit, pulled his pipe from his pocket, began to fill it.

Deane admonished him, saying, "She wouldn't like it. It taints the air."

"Of course," agreed Grimes, putting his pipe away.

Then they sat there, in silence, but uneasily, guiltily. They should have been working. There was so much to be done about the Hive. Von Tannenbaum at last unbuckled himself from his chair and, finding a soft rag, began, unnecessarily, to polish a bulkhead. Vitelli muttered something about cleaning up the engine room and drifted away, and Slovtny, saying that he would need help, followed him. Beadle took the dirty plates into the pantry—normally he was one of those who washes the dishes before a meal.

"She is hungry," announced Deane.

Grimes went to the galley for another bottle of syrup.

So it went on, for day after day, with the Queen gaining strength and, if it were possible, even greater authority over her subjects. And she was learning. Deane's mind was open to her, as were the minds of the others, but to a lesser degree. But it was only through Deane that she could speak.

"She knows," said the telepath, "that supplies in the Hive are limited, that sooner or later, sooner rather than later, we shall be without heat, without air or food. She knows that there is a planet within reach. She orders us to proceed there, so that a greater Hive may be established on its surface."

"Then let us proceed," agreed Grimes.

He knew, as they all knew, that a general distress call would bring help—but somehow was incapable of ordering it made. He knew that the establishment of a Hive, a colony on a planet of ZX1797 would be utterly impossible—but that was what she wanted.

So Adder awoke from her sleeping state, vibrating to the irregular rhythm of the inertial drive and, had there been an outside observer, flickered into invisibility as the gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive unit precessed and tumbled, falling down and through the warped continuum, pulling the structure of the ship with them.

Ahead was ZX1797, a writhing, multi-hued spiral, expanding with every passing hour.

It was von Tannenbaum who now held effective command of the ship—Grimes had become the Queen's personal attendant, although it was still Deane who made her detailed wishes known. It was Grimes who fed her, who cleansed her, who sat with her hour after hour in wordless communion. A part of him rebelled, a part of him screamed soundlessly and envisaged hard fists smashing those great, faceted eyes, heavy boots crashing through fragile chitin. A part of him rebelled—but was powerless—and she knew it. She was female and he was male and the tensions were inevitable, and enjoyable to one if not to the other.

And then Deane said to him, "She is tiring of her tasteless food."

She would be, thought Grimes dully. And then there was the urge to placate, to please. Although he had never made a deep study of the arthropedal race he knew, as did all spacemen, which Terran luxuries were appreciated by the Shaara. He went up to his quarters, found what he was looking for. He decanted the fluid from its own glass container into a squeeze bottle. Had it been intended for human consumption this would not have been necessary, now that the ship was accelerating, but Shaara queens do not, ever, feed themselves.

He went back to the throne-room. Deane and the huge arthroped watched him. The Queen's eyes were even brighter than usual. She lifted her forelimbs as though to take the bottle from Grimes, then let them fall to her side. Her gauzy wings were quivering in anticipation.

Grimes approached her slowly. He knelt before her, holding the bottle before him. He raised it carefully, the nipples end towards the working mandibles. He squeezed, and a thin, amber stream shot out. Its odor was

rich and heavy in the almost still air of the compartment.

More! the word formed itself in his mind. More!

He went on squeezing.

But . . . You are not a worker . . . You are a drone . . .

And that word "drone" denoted masculinity, not idleness.

You are a drone . . . You shall be the first father of the new Hive . . .

"Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker . . ." muttered Deane, struggling to maintain a straight face.

Grimes glared at the telepath, What was so funny about this? He was feeling, strongly, the stirrings of desire. She was female, wasn't she? She was female, and she was beautiful, and he was male. She was female—and in his mind's eye those flimsy wings were transparent draperies enhancing, not concealing, the symmetry of the form of a lovely woman—slim, with high, firm breasts, with long, slender legs. She wanted him to be her mate, her consort.

She wanted him.

She . . .

Suddenly the vision flickered out.

This was no woman spread in alluring, naked abandon.

This was no more than a repulsive insect sprawled in drunken untidiness, desecrating the flag that had been spread over the table that served it for a bed. The wings were crumpled, a dull film was over the faceted eyes. A yellowish ichor oozed from among the still-working mandibles.

Grimes retched violently. To think that he had almost . . .

"Captain!" Deane's voice was urgent. "She's out like a light! She's drunk as a fiddler's bitch!"

"And we must keep her that way!" snapped Grimes. He was himself again. He strode to the nearest bulkhead pick-up. "Attention, all hands! This is the Captain speaking. Shut down inertial and interstellar drive units. Energize Carlotti transceiver. Contact any and all shipping in the vicinity, and request aid as soon as possible. Say that we are drifting, with main engines inoperable due to fuel shortage." He turned to Deane. "I'm leaving you in charge, Spooky. If she shows signs of breaking surface, you know what to do." He looked sternly at the telepath. "I suppose I can trust you . . ."

"You can," the psionic communications officer assured him. "You can. Indeed you can, captain. I wasn't looking forward at all, at all, to ending my days as a worker in some peculiar Terran-Shaara Hive!" He stared at Grimes thoughtfully. "I wonder if the union would have been fertile?"

"That will do, Mr. Deane," growled Grimes.

"Fantastic," breathed Commodore Damien. "Fantastic. Almost, Mr. Grimes, I feel a certain envy. The things you get up to . . ."

The aroma of good Scotch whisky hung heavily in the air of the Commodore's office. Damien, although not an abstainer, never touched the stuff. Grimes's tastes were catholic—but on an occasion such as this he preferred to be stone cold sober.

"It is more than fantastic," snarled the Shaara Queen-Emissary, the special envoy of the Empress herself. Had she not been using a voice-box her words would have been slurred. "It is . . . disgusting. Reprehensible. This officer forced liquor down the throat of a member of our Royal family. He . . ."

"He twisted her arm?" suggested the Commodore.

"I do not understand. But she is now Queen-Mother of Brooom. A drunken, even alcoholic Queen-Mother."

"I saved my ship and my people," stated Grimes woodenly.

Damien grinned unpleasantly. "Isn't this where we came in, Lieutenant? But no matter. There are affairs of far more pressing urgency. Not only do I have to cope with a direct complaint from the personal representative of Her Imperial Majesty . . ."

Even though she was wearing a voice-box, the Queen-Emissary contrived to hiccup. And all this, Grimes knew, was going down on tape. It was unlikely that he would ever wear the ribbon of the Order of the Golden Honeyflower, but it was equally unlikely that he would be butchered to make a Shaara holiday.

"He weaned her on Scotch . . ." persisted the Queen-Emissary.

"Aren't you, perhaps, a little jealous?" suggested Damien. He switched his attention back to Grimes. "Meanwhile, Lieutenant, I am being literally bombarded with Carlottigrams from Her not-so-Imperial Majesty on Brooom demanding that I dispatch to her, as soon as possible if not before, the only drone, in the Galaxy with whom she would dream of mating . . ."

"No!" protested Grimes. "NO!"

"Yes, mister. Yes. For two pins I'd accede to her demands." He sighed regretfully. "But I suppose that one must draw some sort of a line somewhere . . ." He sighed again—then, "Get out, you drone!" he almost shouted. It was a pity that he had to spoil the effect by laughing.

"We are not amused," said the Shaara Queen.