

What You Know

Lieutenant John Grimes, captain of the Serpent Class Courier Adder, was in a bitter and twisted mood. He had his reasons. To begin with, he had just been hauled over the coals by Commodore Damien, Officer Commanding Couriers, and still resented being blamed for the disappearance of Cragge Rock from Olgana. Then he had been told that his ship's stay at Lindisfarne Base was to be a very short one—and Dr. Maggie Lazenby, with whom he hoped to achieve something warmer than mere friendship, was off planet and would not be returning until after his own departure. Finally, he had seen the latest Promotion List and had noted that officers junior to himself had been given their half rings, were now Lieutenant Commanders. And some of those same officers, in Grimes's words, wouldn't be capable of navigating a plastic duck across a bathtub.

Ensign Beadle, his first lieutenant was sympathetic. He said, "But it isn't what you do, Captain. It isn't what you know, even. It's whom you know . . ."

"You could be right, Number One," admitted Grimes. "But in my case I'm afraid that it boils down to who knows me . . . Did you ever see that book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*? I often think that I must have read the wrong half, the second half . . ."

Beadle made a noncommittal noise. Then, "We're ready to lift ship, Captain. Mechanically, that is. Mr. Hollister, the new psionic radio officer, has yet to join—and, of course, there are the passengers . . ." Grimes allowed himself a sardonic smile. "I wonder what the Commodore has against them!"

Beadle took the question literally. "We're the only Courier in port, Captain, and it's essential that the Commissioner reaches Dhartana as soon as possible . . ."

" . . . if not before," finished Grimes. "Mphm. All right, Number One. Is the V.I.P. suite swept and garnished?"

"I . . . I've been busy with the important preparations for space, Captain . . ."

Grimes scowled. "I sincerely hope, Number One, that Mrs. Commissioner Dalwood never hears you implying that she's unimportant. We'll make a tour of the accommodation now."

Followed by Beadle he strode up the ramp into the airlock of his little ship, his "flying darning needle." The V.I.P. suite took up almost the entire compartment below the officers' flat. As he passed through the sliding door into the sitting room Grimes's prominent ears reddened; with him it was a sign of anger as well as of embarrassment. "Damn it all, Number One," he exploded, "don't you realize that this woman is one of the civilian big wheels on the Board of Admiralty? You may not want promotion—but I do. Look at that table top! Drinking glass rings—and it must have been something sweet and sticky!—and bloody nearly an inch of cigarette ash! And the ashtrays! They haven't been emptied since Christ was a pup!"

"The suite hasn't been used since we carried Mr. Alberto . . ."

"I know that. Am I to suppose that you've kept it the way he left it in loving memory of him?"

"You did say, sir, that bearing in mind the circumstances of his death we should leave everything untouched in case his department wanted to make a thorough investigation . . ."

"And his department did check just to make sure that he'd left nothing of interest on board when he disembarked on Doncaster. But that was months ago. And this bedroom . . . The way it is now I wouldn't put a dog into it. Get on the blower at once to Maintenance, ask them? no, tell them—to send a cleaning detail here immediately."

Grimes became uncomfortably aware that there was somebody behind him. He turned slowly, reluctantly, looked into the hard, steel-grey eyes of the woman who was standing just inside the doorway. She returned his stare coldly. She was tall, and she was handsome, with short-cut platinum blonde hair, wearing a beautifully tailored grey costume that looked like a uniform but wasn't, that looked more like a uniform than a deliberately casual rig of the day affected by Grimes and Beadle in common with all Courier Service officers. Her figure seemed to be that of a girl—but her face, although unlined, was old. There were no physical marks of age, but it was somehow obvious that she had seen too much, experienced too much. Grimes thought, If she smiles, something will crack.

She didn't smile.

She said—and her voice, although well modulated, was hard as the rest of her—"Mr. Grimes . . ."

"Ma'am?"

"I am Commissioner Dalwood."

She did not extend her hand. Grimes bowed stiffly. "Honored to have you aboard, Ma'am."

"The honor is all yours, Mr. Grimes. Tell me, is the rest of your ship like this pigsty?"

"We're having the suite put to rights, Mrs. Dalwood."

"Pray do not put yourself out on my behalf, Mr. Grimes. My lady's maid and my two robot servants are at this moment bringing my baggage aboard. The robots are versatile. If you will let them have the necessary cleaning gear they will soon have these quarters fit for human occupancy."

"Mr. Beadle," ordered Grimes, "belay that call to Maintenance. See that Mrs. Dalwood's servants are issued with what they need."

"Very good, sir," replied Beadle smartly, glad of the chance to make his escape.

"And now, Mr. Grimes, if I may sit down somewhere in less squalid

surroundings . . ."

"Certainly, Ma'am. If you will follow me . . ."

Grimes led the way out of the suite. The two humanoid robots, with expensive-looking baggage piled at their feet, stared at him impassively. The maid—small, plump, pert, and darkly brunette—allowed a flicker of sympathy to pass over her rosy face. Grimes thought that she winked, but couldn't be sure. On the way up to his own quarters Grimes was relieved to see that Beadle had kept the rest of the ship in a reasonably good state of cleanliness, although he did hear one or two disapproving sniffs from his passenger. His own day cabin was, he knew, untidy. He liked it that way. He was not surprised when Mrs. Dalwood said, "Your desk, Mr. Grimes. Surely some of those papers are of such a confidential nature that they should be in your safe." Grimes said, "Nobody comes in here except by invitation. I trust my officers, Ma'am."

The Commissioner smiled thinly. Nothing cracked. She said, "What a child you are, Lieutenant. One of the first lessons I learned in politics was never to trust anybody."

"In space, aboard ship, you have to trust people, Ma'am."

She sat down in Grimes's easy chair, extending her long, elegant legs. Grimes suspected that she looked at her own limbs with brief admiration before returning her regard to him. Her laugh was brittle. "How touching, Lieutenant. And that is why ships are lost now and again."

"Can I offer you refreshment, Ma'am?" Grimes said, changing the subject.

"And do you drink, Lieutenant?"

I know damn well that I'm only a two ringer, Grimes thought, but I do like being called Captain aboard my own ship . . . He said, "Never on departure day, Mrs. Dalwood."

"Perhaps I shall be wise if I conform to the same rule. I must confess that I am not used to travelling in vessels of this class, and it is possible that I shall need all my wits about me during lift off. Might I ask for a cup of coffee?"

Grimes took from its rack the thermos container, which he had refilled from the galley coffee maker that morning. After he had removed the cap he realized that he had still to produce a cup, sugar bowl, spoon and milk. His tell-tale ears proclaiming his embarrassment, he replaced the container, conscious of the woman's coldly amused scrutiny. At last he had things ready, finally filling the jug from a carton of milk in his refrigerator.

She said. "The milk should be warmed."

"Yes, Mrs. Dalwood. Of course. If you wouldn't mind waiting . . ."

"If I took my coffee white I should mind. But I prefer it black, and unsweetened."

Grimes poured out, remembering that the coffee maker was long overdue

for a thorough cleaning. Adder's coffee had a tang of its own. Her people were accustomed to it. The Commissioner was not. After one cautious sip she put her cup down, hard. She asked, "And what is the food like aboard this ship?"

"Usually quite good. Ma'am. We carry no ratings or petty officers, so we take it by turns cooking. Mr. Beadle—he's my First Lieutenant—makes an excellent stew." Grimes babbled on. "It's a sort of a curry, actually, but not quite, if you know what I mean . . ."

"I don't, Lieutenant. Nor do I wish to. As I have already told you, my robots are versatile. Might I suggest that they take over galley duties, first of all thoroughly cleaning all vessels and implements, starting with your coffee maker? Apart from anything else it will mean that your officers will have more time to devote to their real duties."

"If you want it that way, Mrs. Dalwood . . ."

"I do want it that way."

To Grimes's intense relief the intercom phone buzzed. He said to the Commissioner, "Excuse me, Ma'am," and then into the speaker/microphone, "Captain here."

"First Lieutenant, Captain. Mr. Hollister, the new P.C.O., has just boarded. Shall I send him up to report to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Beadle. Tell him that I'll see him in the Control Room. Now." He turned to Mrs. Dalwood. "I'm afraid I must leave you for a few minutes, Ma'am. There are cigarettes in that box, and if you wish more coffee . . ."

"I most certainly do not. And, Mr. Grimes, don't you think that you had better put those papers away in your safe before you go about your pressing business?" She allowed herself another thin smile. "After all, you haven't asked yet to see my identification. For all you know I could be a spy."

And if you are, thought Grimes, I hope I'm the officer commanding the firing squad. He said, "You are very well known, Ma'am." He swept his desk clean, depositing the pile of official and private correspondence on the deck, then fumbled through the routine of opening his safe. As usual the door stuck. Finally he had the papers locked away. He bowed again to Mrs. Dalwood, who replied with a curt nod. He climbed the ladders to Control, glad to get to a part of the ship where, Commissioner or no Commissioner, he was king.

Beadle was awaiting him there with a tall, thin, pale young man who looked like a scarecrow rigged out in a cast-off Survey Service uniform. He announced, before Beadle could perform the introductions, "I don't like this ship. I am very sensitive to atmosphere. This is an unhappy ship."

"She didn't use to be," Grimes told him glumly.

Usually Grimes enjoyed shiphandling. Invariably he would invite his passengers to the control room during lift off, and most times this

invitation would be accepted. He had extended the courtesy to Mrs. Dalwood, hoping that she would refuse the offer. But she did not. She sat there in the spare acceleration seat, saying nothing but noticing everything. It would almost have been better had she kept up a continual flow of Why-do-you-do-this? and Why-don't-you-do-that?

Her very presence made Grimes nervous. The irregular beat of the inertial drive sounded wrong to him as Adder climbed slowly up and away from her pad. And, as soon as she was off the ground, the ship yawed badly, falling to an angle of seven degrees from the vertical. It must look bad, Grimes knew. It looked bad and it felt worse. The only thing to do about it was to get upstairs in a hurry before some sarcastic comment from Port Control came through the transceiver. Grimes picked his moment for turning on the auxiliary rockets, waiting until the tall, slender tower that was Adder was canted away from the wind. That way, he hoped, he could make it all look intentional, convey the impression that he was using the quite stiff northwester to give him additional speed. He managed to turn in his seat in spite of the uncomfortable acceleration and said, forcing out the words, "Letting . . . the . . . wind . . . help . . . us . . ."

She—calm, unruffled—lifted her slender eyebrows and asked, with apparently genuine unconcern, "Really?"

"Time . . ." Grimes persisted, "Is . . . money . . ."

"So," she told him, "is reaction mass."

Flushing, Grimes returned to his controls. Apart from that annoying yaw the ship was handling well enough. Beadle, and von Tannenbaum, the navigator, and Slovtovny, electronic communications, were quietly efficient at their stations. They were certainly quiet. There was none of the usual good-humored banter.

Sulkily Grimes pushed Adder up through the last, high wisps of cirrus, into the purple twilight, towards the bright, unwinking stars. She screamed through the last tenuous shreds of atmosphere, and shortly thereafter von Tannenbaum reported that she was clear of the Van Allens. Grimes, still far too conscious of the Commissioner's cold regard, cut inertial and reaction drives, then slowly and carefully—far more slowly than was usual—used his directional gyroscopes to swing the sharp prow of the ship on to the target star. He applied correction for Galactic Drift—and then realized that he had put it on the wrong way. He mumbled something that sounded unconvincing even to himself about overcompensation and, after a few seconds that felt more like minutes, had the vessel headed in the right direction.

He wondered what would happen when he started the Mannschenn Drive—but nothing did; nothing, that is, worse than the familiar but always disquieting sense of *déjà vu*. He had a vision of himself as an old, old lieutenant with a long white beard—but this was nothing to do with the temporal precession field of the Drive, was induced rather by the psionic field generated by the Commissioner. He didn't like her and had a shrewd suspicion that she didn't like him.

She said, "Very educational, Mr. Grimes. Very educational."

She unstrapped herself from her chair. Slovtovny and von Tannenbaum got up from their own seats, each determined courteously to assist her from hers. They collided, and von Tannenbaum tripped and fell, and Beadle fell over him.

"Very educational," repeated the Commissioner, gracefully extricating herself from her chair unaided. "Oh, Mr. Grimes, could you come to see me in ten minutes' time? We have to discuss the new galley routine."

"Certainly, Mrs. Dalwood." Grimes turned to his embarrassed officers. "Deep Space Routine, Mr. Beadle." Usually he said, "Normal Deep Space Routine," but had more than a suspicion that things would not be at all normal.

Things were not normal.

Usually Adder's people were gourmands rather than gourmets, and a certain tightness of waistbands was an accepted fact of life. Even when whoever was doing the cooking produced an inedible mess bellies could be filled, and were filled, with sandwiches of the doorstep variety. But these relatively happy days were over.

As she had told Grimes, the Commissioner's robots were skilled cooks. To have called them chefs would not have been exaggerating. Insofar as subtlety of flavorings and attractiveness of presentation were concerned nobody could fault them. To the average spaceman, however, quantity is as important as quality. But there were no second helpings. The coldly efficient automatons must have calculated just how much nutriment each and every person aboard required to operate efficiently himself—and that was all that he ever got. Too, there was always at least one of the mechanical servitors doing something or other around the galley and storerooms, and Grimes and his officers knew that the partaking of snacks between meals would be reported at once to Mrs. Dalwood.

A real Captain, one with four gold bands on his shoulderboards and scrambled egg on the peak of his cap, would never have tolerated the situation. But Grimes, for all his authority and responsibility, was too junior an officer. He was only a Lieutenant, and a passed-over one at that, while the Commissioner, although a civilian, could tell Admirals to jump through the hoop.

But he was hungry.

One morning ship's time, he went down to the solarium for his daily exercises. This compartment could, more aptly, have been called the gymnasium, but since it was part of the "farm" it got its share of the ultra violet required for the hydroponics tanks. Mrs. Dalwood and her maid, Rosaleen, were still there, having their daily workout, when Grimes came in. Always he had timed his arrival until the two women had finished, but for some reason he was running late. It was not that he was prudish, and neither were they, but he had decided that the less he had to do with them the better.

As he came into the room he noticed their gowns hanging outside the sauna. He shrugged. So what? This was his ship. He took off his own robe and then, clad only in trunks, mounted the stationary bicycle. He began to

pedal away almost happily, watching the clock as he did so.

From the corner of his eye he saw the door to the sauna open. The Commissioner, followed by her maid, came out. It was the first time that he had seen her naked. He almost whistled, then thought better of it. She was a bit of all right, he admitted, if you liked 'em lean and hungry. He inclined his head towards her courteously, carried on pedaling.

Rather to his surprise she stood there, looking him over. She said, "Mr. Grimes, there is a little improvement in your condition, but that probably is due to a properly balanced diet." She walked towards him, her feet slim and elegant on the carpeted deck, her breasts jouncing over so slightly. "Get off that thing will you?" Grimes did so, on the side away from her. She stooped, with fluid grace, and tested the pedals with her right hand.

"Mr. Grimes! How in Space do you hope to get any benefit from these exercises unless you do them properly?" Her hand went to the adjusting screw of the roller on top of the wheel, turned it clockwise. The muscles of her right arm stood out clearly under the smooth brown skin as she tested the pedals again. Then she actually smiled, saying, "On your bicycle, spaceman!"

Grimes remounted. He had to push, hard, to start the wheel rotating. He had to push, to keep it rotating. Now and again he had ridden on real bicycles, but almost always had dismounted rather than pedal up a steep hill. She stood there watching him. Until now he would have thought it impossible actively to dislike an attractive naked woman. But there has to be a first time for anything.

The Commissioner turned to her maid. "Rosaleen, you were last on the bicycle. Did you readjust it?"

The girl blushed guiltily over her entire body. "Yes, Ma'am."

"I see that I shall have to watch you too." The woman glanced at the watch that was her only article of clothing. "Unluckily I have some work to do. However, you may stay here for another thirty minutes. The bicycle again, the rowing machine, the horizontal bars. And you, Mr. Grimes, will see to it that she does something about shedding that disgusting fat."

Grimes did not say what he was thinking. He had little breath to say anything. He managed to gasp, "Yes, Ma'am."

Mrs. Dalwood went to her gown, shrugged it on, thrust her feet into her sandals. She walked gracefully to the door. She did not look back at the man on the bicycle, the girl on the rowing machine.

As soon as the door had shut behind her Rosaleen stopped rowing.

She said, "Phew!"

Grimes went on pedaling.

"Hey, Captain. Take five. Avast, or whatever you say."

Grimes stopped. He said, "You'd better carry on with your rowing."

The girl grinned. "We're quite safe, Captain. She is so used to having every order implicitly obeyed that she'd never dream of coming back to check up on us."

"You know her better than I do," admitted Grimes.

"I should." She got up from the sliding seat of the rowing machine, then flopped down on to the deck. She was, Grimes decided, at least as attractive as her mistress, and she had the advantage of youth. And there was so much more of her. The spaceman looked her over, studying her almost clinically. Yes, she had been losing weight. Her skin was not as taut as it should have been.

She noticed his look. She complained, "Yes, I'm starved . . ."

"You get the same as we do, Rosaleen."

"That's the trouble, Captain."

"But you have this sort of feeding all the time."

"Like hell I do. I have my nights off, you know, and then I can catch up on the pastries and candy, and the hot rolls with lots of butter, and the roast pork, with crackling . . ."

"Please stop," begged Grimes. "You're making me ravenous."

She went on, "But aboard your ship I have to toe the line. There's no escape."

"I suppose not."

"But surely you can do something. You've storerooms, with bread . . ."

"Yes, but . . ."

"You aren't scared of her, Captain?" She looked at him through her big, dark eyes. He had thought that they were black—now he saw that they were a very deep violet.

"Mphm." He allowed his glance to stray downwards, then hastily looked back at her face. There had been invitation in every line of her ample body. He was no snob, and the fact that her status was that of a servant weighed little with him. But she was the Commissioner's servant. A lady has no secrets from her lady's maid—is the converse true? Anyhow, they were both women, and no doubt happily prattled to each other, disparity of social status notwithstanding. She said plaintively, "I'm hungry, Captain."

"So am I, Rosaleen."

"But you're the Captain."

Grimes got off the bicycle. He said, "It's time for my sauna." He threw his shorts in the general direction of the hook on which his robe was hanging, strode to the door of the hot room, opened it. She followed him. He stretched out on one of the benches, she flopped on one opposite him. She

said, "I'm hungry."

"It's those damned robots," complained Grimes. "Always hanging around the galley and storerooms."

"They won't be there tonight."

"How do you know?"

"They're much more than cooks. Even I don't know all the things they've been programmed for. This I do know. She has been working on a report, and tomorrow it will be encoded for transmission. The way that she does it is to give it to John—he's the one with the little gold knob on top of his head—to encode. And James decodes each sheet as John finishes it, to ensure that there are no errors."

"Are there ever any?"

"No. But she likes to be sure."

"She would." He wondered when he was going to start sweating. The girl was already perspiring profusely. "Tell me, when does this encoding decoding session take place?"

"After dinner."

"And there's no chance of her breaking it off?"

"None at all. When she starts something she likes to finish it."

"Mphm." The sweat was starting to stream out of Grimes's pores now. The girl got up, began to flick the skin of his back lightly with the birch twigs. He appreciated the attention. "Mphm. And are you free while all this Top Secret stuff is going on?"

"Yes."

"And she should have her nose stuck into it by 2000?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Then meet me outside the galley at, say, 2015 . . ."

"Yes!"

"Thick buttered toast . . ." murmured Grimes, deciding that talking about food took his mind off other things.

"Lots of butter . . ." she added.

"And sardines . . ."

"Fat, oily sardines . . ."

"With lemon wedges . . ."

"With mayonnaise . . ." she corrected.

"All right. Mayonnaise."

"And coffee. With sugar, and great dollops of cream . . ."

"I'll have beer, myself, even though it is fattening."

"We can have beer with, and coffee after . . ."

The door slid open and Hollister came in. Naked, the telepath looked more like a living skeleton than ever. Grimes regarded him with some distaste and wondered if the psionic radio officer had been eavesdropping. To do so would be contrary to the very strict code of the Rhine Institute—but espers, in spite of their occasional claims to superiority, are only humans.

He said, "I'm just about cooked, Rosaleen."

"So am I, Captain." She got up from her bench, the perspiration streaming down her still plump body, went through into the shower room. Through the closed door Grimes heard the hiss of the water, her little scream as its coldness hit her. There was the whine of the blowers as she dried off, and then she ran through the hot room on her way back into the solarium.

"Quite a dish, Captain," commented Hollister.

"We," Grimes told him coldly, "are neither kings nor peasants."

He took his own cold shower, and when he stepped out into the gymnasium Rosaleen was gone.

Dinner that night was as unsatisfying as usual. A clear soup, a small portion of delicious baked fish with a green salad, a raw apple for desert. Grimes, at the head of the table, tried to make conversation, but the Commissioner was in a thoughtful mood and hardly spoke at all. Beadle, Slovtny, Vitelli, and Hollister wolfed their portions as though eating were about to be made illegal, saying little. The four officers excused themselves as soon as they decently could—Slovtny going up to Control to relieve von Tannenbaum for his dinner, Beadle to have a look at the air circulatory system, Vitelli to check up on the Mannschenn Drive. Hollister didn't bother to invent an excuse. He just left. Von Tannenbaum came down, took his place at the table. He was starting to acquire a lean and hungry look that went well with his Nordic fairness. The Commissioner nodded to him, then patted her lips gently with her napkin. Grimes, interpreting the signs correctly, got up to help her from her chair. She managed to ignore the gesture.

She said, "You must excuse me, Mr. Grimes and Mr. von Tannenbaum. I am rather busy this evening."

"Can I, or my officers, be of any assistance?" asked Grimes politely.

She took her time replying, and he was afraid that she would take his offer. Then she said, "Thank you, Mr. Grimes. But it is very confidential work, and I don't think that you have Security clearance."

It may have been intended as a snub, but Grimes welcomed it.

"Good night, Ma'am."

"Good night, Mr. Grimes."

Von Tannenbaum turned to the serving robot which was waiting until he had finished his meal. "Any chance of another portion of fish, James?"

"No, sir," the thing replied in a metallic voice. "Her Excellency has instructed me that there are to be no second helpings, for anybody."

"Oh."

In sulky silence the navigator finished his meal. Grimes was tempted to include him in the supper party, but decided against it. The fewer people who knew about it the better.

The two men got up from the table, each going to his own quarters. In his day cabin Grimes mixed himself a drink, feeling absurdly guilty as he did so. "Damn it all," he muttered, "this is my ship. I'm captain of her, not that cast iron bitch!" Defiantly—but why should he feel defiant?—he finished what was in his glass, then poured another generous portion. But he made it last, looking frequently at his clock as he sipped.

20:14 . . .

Near enough.

He got up, went out to the axial shaft, tried not to make too much noise going down the ladder. He paused briefly in the officers' flat, on the deck below and abaft his own. Faint music emanated from behind the door of von Tannenbaum's cabin—Wagner? It sounded like it—and loud snores from inside Beadle's room. His own air circulatory system could do with overhauling, thought Grimes. Slovtovny was on watch, and Hollister, no doubt, was wordlessly communicating with his psionic amplifier, the poodle's brain in aspic. Vitelli could be anywhere, but was probably in the engine room.

The V.I.P. suite was on the next deck down. As he passed the door Grimes could hear the Commissioner dictating something, one of the robots repeating her words. That took care of her. Another deck, with cabins for not very important people . . . He thought of tapping on Rosaleen's door, then decided against it. In any case, she was waiting for him outside the galley.

She whispered, "I was afraid you'd change your mind, Captain."

"Not bloody likely."

He led the way into the spotless—thanks to the industry of the robot servitors—galley. He was feeling oddly excited. It reminded him of his training cruise, when he had been a very new (and always hungry) cadet. But then there had been locks to pick . . .

He opened the door of the tinned food storeroom, ran his eye over the shelves. He heard Rosaleen gasp. "New Erin ham . . . Carinthian sausage . . ."

"You'll have Atlantan sardines, my girl, and like 'em . . . Ah, here we are . . . A can each?"

"Two cans."

"All right. Here you are. You can switch on the toaster while I rummage in the bread locker . . .

He thrust the cans into her eager hands, then collected bread, butter and seasonings. He tore open the wrapper of the loaf, then put the thick slices on the rack under the griller. The smell of the cooking toast was mouth-watering—too mouth-watering. He hoped that it would not be distributed throughout the ship by the ventilation system. But the Commissioner's overly efficient robots must, by this time, have put the air out-take filters to rights.

One side done . . . He turned the slices over. Rosaleen asked plaintively, "How do you work this opener?"

A metallic voice replied, "Like this, Miss Rosaleen—but I forbid you to use it."

"Take your claws off me, you tin bastard!"

Grimes turned fast. Behind him the toast smoldered unheeded. His hands went out to clamp on the wrists of the robot, whose own hands gripped the girl's arms. The automaton ignored him. If it could have sneered it would have done so.

"Mr. Grimes! Rosaleen!" The Commissioner's voice was hard as metal. In her all-grey costume she looked like a robot herself. "Mr. Grimes, please do not attempt to interfere with my servitor." She stood there, looking coldly at the little group. "All right, John, you may release Miss Rosaleen. But not until Mr. Grimes has taken his hands off you. And now, Mr. Grimes, what is the meaning of this? I seem to have interrupted a disgusting orgy. Oh, John, you might extinguish that minor conflagration and dispose of the charred remains."

"Supper," said Grimes at last.

"Supper?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Rosaleen and I were about to enjoy a light snack."

"A light snack? Don't you realize the trouble that went into working out suitable menus for this ship?" She paused, looking at Grimes with an expression of extreme distaste. "Legally, since your superiors, in a moment of aberration, saw fit to appoint you to command, you may do as you like aboard this vessel—within limits. The seduction of my maid is beyond those limits."

"Seduction?" This was too much. "I assure you that . . ."

"I was not using the word in its sexual sense. Come, Rosaleen, we will leave Mr. Grimes to his feast. He has to keep his strength up—although just for what I cannot say."

"Ma'am!" The girl's face was no longer soft, her voice held a compelling ring. "Since you use that word—it was I who seduced the captain."

"That hardly improves matters, Rosaleen. The commanding officer of a warship, even a very minor one, should not allow himself to be influenced by a woman passenger."

"You said it!" snapped Grimes. This could mean the ruin of his career, but he had been pushed too far. "You said it, Mrs. Dalwood. I should never have let myself be influenced by you. I should never have allowed your tin dieticians to run loose in my galley. I should have insisted, from the very start, on running my ship my way! Furthermore . . ." He was warming up nicely. "Furthermore, I doubt if even your fellow Commissioners will approve of your ordering an officer to spy on his captain."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Grimes."

"Don't you, Mrs. Dalwood? Who put you wise to this little party in the galley? Who would have known about it, who could have known about it but Hollister? I shouldn't like to be in your shoes when the Rhine Institute gets my report on my psionic radio officer. They're no respecters of admirals and their female equivalents."

"Have you quite finished, Mr. Grimes?" With the mounting flush on her cheeks the Commissioner was beginning to look human.

"For the time being."

"Then let me tell you, Lieutenant, that whatever secrets Lieutenant Hollister may have learned about you are still safely locked within his mind. If you had been reading up on the latest advances in robotics—which, obviously, you have not—you would have learned that already psionic robots, electronic telepaths, are in production. This has not been advertised—but neither is it a secret. Such automata can be recognized by the little gold knob on top of their skulls . . ."

The robot John inclined its head towards Grimes, and the golden embellishment seemed to wink at him sardonically.

"You tin fink!" snarled the spaceman.

"I am not a fink, sir. A fink is one who betrays his friend—and you were never a friend to me and my kind. Was it not in this very vessel, under your command, that Mr. Adam met his end?"

"That will do, John!" snapped the Commissioner.

"I still resent being spied upon!" almost shouted Grimes.

"That will do, Lieutenant!"

"Like hell it will. I give you notice that I have resigned from the Survey Service. I've had a bellyful of being treated like a child . . ."

"But that is all that you are."

"Captain," Rosaleen was pleading. "Please stop it. You're only making things worse. Mrs. Dalwood, it was my fault. I swear that it was . . ."

"Anything that happens aboard my ship is my fault," insisted Grimes.

"From your own mouth you condemn yourself, Lieutenant. I am tempted, as a Commissioner, to accept your resignation here and now, but I feel . . ." Her features sagged, the outlines of her body became hazy, the grey of her costume shimmered iridescently. "Leef I tub . . ." She was her normal self again. "But I feel . . ." Again the uncanny change. "Leef I tub . . ."

This is all I need . . . thought Grimes, listening to the sudden, irregular warbling of the Manneschenn Drive, recognizing the symptoms of breakdown, time running backward and déjà vu. He had another vision—but this time he was not an elderly Survey Service Lieutenant; he was an even more elderly Rim Runners Third Mate. They'd be the only outfit in all the Galaxy that would dream of employing him—but even they would never promote him.

The thin, high keening of the Drive faded to a barely audible hum, then died as the tumbling, ever-precussing gyroscopes slowed to a halt. From the bulkhead speakers came Slovtny's voice—calm enough, but with more than a hint of urgency. "Captain to Control, please. Captain to Control . . ."

"On my way!" barked Grimes into the nearest speaker/microphone. "Carry on with emergency procedure."

"All hands secure for Free Fall. All hands secure for Free Fall. The inertial drive will be shut down in precisely thirty seconds."

"What is happening, Mr. Grimes?" demanded the Commissioner.

"It should be obvious, even to you."

"It is. Just what one could expect from this ship."

"It's not the ship's fault. She's had no proper maintenance for months!"

He pushed past the women and the robot, dived into the axial shaft. The greater part of his journey to Control was made in Free Fall conditions. He hoped maliciously that the Commissioner was being spacesick.

At least neither the Commissioner nor her robots had the gall to infest the control room. Grimes sat there, strapped into the command seat, surrounded by his officers. "Report, Mr. Vitelli," he said to the engineer, who had just come up from the engine room.

"The Drive's had it, Captain," Vitelli told him. A greenish pallor showed through the engineer's dark skin, accentuated by a smear of black grease. "Not only the governor bearings, but the rotor bearings."

"We have spares, of course."

"We should have spares, but we don't. The ones we had were used by the shore gang during the last major overhaul, as far as I can gather from Mr. McCloud's records. They should have been replaced—but all that's in the

boxes is waste and shavings."

"Could we cannibalize?" asked Grimes. "From the inertial drive generators?"

"We could—if we had a machine shop to turn the bearings down to size. But that wouldn't do us much good."

"Why not?"

"The main rotor's warped. Until it's replaced the Drive's unusable."

Beadle muttered something about not knowing if it was Christmas Day or last Thursday. Grimes ignored this—although, like all spacemen, he dreaded the temporal consequences of Mannschenn Drive malfunction.

"Sparks—is anybody within easy reach? I could ask for a tow."

"There's Princess Helga, Captain. Shall I give her a call?"

"Not until I tell you. Mr. Hollister, have you anything to add to what Mr. Slovtny has told me?"

"No, sir." The telepath's deep-set eyes were smoldering with resentment, and for a moment Grimes wondered why. Then he realized that the man must have eavesdropped on his quarrel with the Commissioner, had "heard" Grimes' assertion that he, Hollister, had carried tales to Mrs. Dalwood. I'm sorry, Grimes thought. But how was I to know that that blasted robot was a mind-reader?

"I should have warned you, sir," admitted Hollister. The others looked at Grimes and Hollister curiously. Grimes could almost hear them thinking, Should have warned him of what?

"Princess Helga . . ." murmured Grimes.

"Light cruiser, Captain," Slovtny told him. "Royal Skandian Navy."

"And is the Federation on speaking terms with Skandia?" wondered Grimes audibly. He answered his own question. "Only just. Mphm. Well, there's no future—or too bloody much future!—in sitting here until somebody really friendly chances along. Get the Princess on the Carlotti, Sparks. Give her our coordinates. Ask her for assistance. Perhaps her engineers will be able to repair our Drive, otherwise they can tow us to the nearest port."

"Shouldn't we report first to Base, Captain?" asked Slovtny.

Yes, we should, thought Grimes. But I'm not going to. I'll put out a call for assistance before Her Highness shoves her oar in. After that—she can have a natter to Base. He said, "Get the signal away to Princess Helga. Tell her complete Mannschenn Drive breakdown. Request assistance. You know."

"Ay, Captain." Slovtny busied himself at his Carlotti transceiver. The pilot antenna, the elliptical Mobius strip rotating about its long axis, quivered, started to turn, hunting over the bearing along which the Skandian cruiser, invisible to optical instruments, unreachable by ordinary radio—which, in any case, would have had far too great a time lag—must lie.

"Locked on," announced the radio officer at last. He pushed the button that actuated the calling signal. Then he spoke into the microphone. "Adder to Princess Helga. Adder to Princess Helga. Can you read me? Come in, please."

There was the slightest of delays, and then the swirl of colors in the little glowing screen coalesced to form a picture. The young woman looking out at them could have been Princess Helga (whoever she was) herself. She was blue-eyed, and hefty, and her uniform cap did nothing to confine the tumbling masses of her yellow hair.

"Princess Helga to Adder. I read you loud and clear. Pass your message."

"Complete interstellar drive breakdown," said Slovtny. "Request assistance—repairs if possible, otherwise tow. Coordinates . . ." He rattled off a string of figures from the paper that von Tannenbaum handed him.

The girl was replaced by a man. He should have been wearing a horned helmet instead of a cap. His eyes were blue, his hair and beard were yellow. He grinned wolfishly. He demanded, "Your Captain, please."

Grimes released himself from his own chair, pulled himself into the one vacated by Slovtny. "Lieutenant Grimes here, Officer Commanding Courier Ship Adder."

"Captain Olaf Andersen here, Lieutenant. What can I do for you?"

"Can your engineers repair my Drive?"

"I doubt it. They couldn't change a fuse."

"What about a tow to Dhartana?"

"Out of the question, Captain. But I can take you in to my own Base, on Skandia. The repair facilities there are excellent."

Grimes weighed matters carefully before answering. Skandia, one of the small, independent kingdoms, was only just on speaking terms with the Interstellar Federation. At the very best the Skandians would charge heavily for the two, would present a fantastically heavy bill for the repair work carried out by their yard. (But he, Grimes, would not be paying it.) At the worst, Adder and her people might be interned, could become the focus of a nasty little interstellar incident, a source of acute embarrassment to the Survey Service. And so, Grimes asked himself mutinously, what? That Promotion List had made him dangerously dissatisfied with his lot, the Commissioner had strained what loyalties remained to the breaking point. The Commissioner . . .

"What exactly is going on here?" she asked coldly.

So she was getting in his hair again.

"I'm arranging a tow," Grimes told her. "The alternative is to hang here . . ." he gestured towards the viewports, to the outside blackness, to the sharp, bright, unwinking, distant stars . . . "in the middle of sweet damn all, thinking more and more seriously of cannibalism with every passing

day."

"Very funny, Lieutenant." She stared at the screen. "Is that officer wearing Skandian uniform?"

"Of course, Madam," replied the Skandian Captain, who seemed to be very quick on the uptake. "Captain Olaf Andersen, at your service." He smiled happily. "And you, if I am not mistaken, are Mrs. Commissioner Dalwood, of the Federation's Board of Admiralty. According to our latest Intelligence reports you are en route to Dhartana." He smiled again. "Delete 'are.' Substitute 'were.' "

"Mr. Grimes, I forbid you to accept a tow from that vessel."

"Mrs. Dalwood, as commanding officer of this ship I must do all I can to ensure her safety, and that of her people."

"Mr. Slovtny, you will put through a call to Lindisfarne Base at once, demanding immediate assistance."

Slovtny looked appealingly at Grimes. Grimes nodded glumly. The grinning face of the Skandian faded from the screen, was replaced by a swirl of color as the pilot antenna swung away from its target. Sound came from the speaker—but it was a loud warbling note only. The radio officer worked desperately at the controls of the Carlotti transceiver. Then he looked up and announced, "They're jamming our signals; they have some very sophisticated equipment, and they're only light minutes distant."

"Are you sure you can't get through?" demanded the Commissioner.

"Quite sure," Slovtny told her definitely.

She snorted, turned to Hollister. "Mr. Hollister, I'll have to rely on you."

"What about your own chrome-plated telepath?" Grimes asked her nastily.

She glared at him. "John's transmission and reception is only relatively short range. And he can't work with an organic amplifier, as your Mr. Hollister can."

"And my organic amplifier's on the blink," said Hollister.

"What do you mean?" demanded Grimes.

The telepath explained patiently. "There has to be a . . . relationship between a psionic communications officer and his amplifier. The amplifier, of course, is a living dog's brain . . ."

"I know, I know," the Commissioner snapped. "Get on with it."

Hollister would not be hurried. "The relationship is that which exists between a kind master and a faithful dog—but deeper, much deeper. Normally we carry our own, personal amplifiers with us, from ship to ship, but mine died recently, and so I inherited Mr. Deane's. I have been working hard, ever since I joined this ship, to win its trust, its affection. I was making headway, but I was unable to give it the feeling of security it

needed when the temporal precession field of the Drive started to fluctuate. The experience can be terrifying enough to a human being who knows what is happening; it is even more terrifying to a dog. And so . . ."

"And so?" demanded the woman.

"And so the amplifier is useless, possibly permanently." He added brightly, "But I can get in touch with Princess Helga any time you want."

"You needn't bother," she snarled. Then, to Grimes, "Of all the ships in the Survey Service, why did I have to travel in this one?"

Why? echoed Grimes silently. Why?

Even the Commissioner was obliged to give Captain Andersen and his crew full marks for spacemanship. Princess Helga emerged into normal space-time only feet from the drifting Adder. At one moment there was nothing beyond the courier's viewports but the blackness of interstellar space, the bright, distant stars—at the next moment she was there, a vague outline at first, but solidifying rapidly. She hung there, a great spindle of gleaming plastic and metal, the sleekness of her lines marred by turrets and antennae. Another second—and the shape of her was obscured by the tough pneumatic fenders that inflated with almost explosive rapidity. Another second—and Adder's people heard and felt the thump of the magnetic grapnels as they made contact.

Andersen's pleasant, slightly accented voice came from the transceiver. "I have you, Captain. Stand by for acceleration. Stand by for resumption of Mannschenn Drive."

"I suppose that your temporal precession field will cover us?" asked Grimes.

"Of course. In any case there is physical contact between your ship and mine."

"Where are you taking us?" demanded Mrs. Dalwood.

"To Kobenhaven, of course, Madam. Our Base on Skandia."

"I insist that you tow us to the nearest spaceport under Federation jurisdiction."

"You insist, Madam?" Grimes, looking at the screen, could see that Andersen was really enjoying himself. As long as somebody was . . . "I'm sorry, but I have my orders."

"This is piracy!" she flared.

"Piracy, Madam? The captain of your ship requested a tow, and a tow is what he's getting. Beggars can't be choosers. In any case, Space Law makes it quite plain that the choice of destination is up to the officer commanding the vessel towing, not the captain of the vessel towed."

She said, almost pleading but not quite, "In these circumstances the Federation could be generous."

Andersen lost his smile. He said, "I am a Skandian, Madam. My loyalty is to my own planet, my own Service. Stand by for acceleration."

The screen went blank. Acceleration pushed the group in Adder's control room down into their chairs; Mrs. Dalwood was able to reach a spare seat just in time. Faintly, the vibration transmitted along the tow wires, they heard and felt the irregular throbbing of Princess Helga's inertial drive—and almost coincidentally there was the brief period of temporal-spatial disorientation as the field of the cruiser's Mannschenn Drive encompassed both ships.

"You realize what this means to your career," said the Commissioner harshly.

"What was that?" asked Grimes. He had been trying to work out how it was that Princess Helga had been able to start up her inertial drive before the interstellar drive, how it was that there had been no prior lining up on a target star.

"You realize what this means to your career," repeated the woman.

"I haven't got one," said Grimes. "Not any longer."

And somehow it didn't matter.

The voyage to Kobenhaven was not a pleasant one.

The Commissioner made no attempt to conceal her feelings insofar as Grimes was concerned. Rosaleen, he knew, was on his side—but what could a mere lady's maid do to help him? She could have done quite a lot to make him less miserable, but her mistress made sure that there were no opportunities. The officers remained loyal—but not too loyal. They had their own careers to think about. As long as Grimes was captain they were obliged to take his orders, and the Commissioner knew it as well as they did. Oddly enough it was only Hollister, the newcomer, the misfit, who showed any sympathy. But he knew, more than any of the others, what had been going on, what was going on in Grimes's mind.

At last the two ships broke out into normal space-time just clear of Skandia's Van Allens. This Andersen, Grimes admitted glumly to himself, was a navigator and shiphandler of no mean order. He said as much into the transceiver. The little image of the Skandian captain in the screen grinned out at him cheerfully. "Just the normal standards of the Royal Skandian Navy, Captain. I'm casting you off, now. I'll follow you in. Home on the Kobenhaven Base beacon." He grinned again. "And don't try anything."

"What can I try?" countered Grimes, with a grin of his own.

"I don't know. But I've heard about you, Lieutenant Grimes. You have the reputation of being able to wriggle out of anything."

"I'm afraid I'm losing my reputation, Captain." Grimes, through the viewports, watched the magnetic grapnels withdrawn into their recesses in Princess Helga's hull. Then, simultaneously, both he and Andersen applied

lateral thrust. As the vessel surged apart the fenders were deflated, sucked back into their sockets.

Adder, obedient to her captain's will, commenced her descent towards the white and gold, green and blue sphere that was Skandia. She handled well, as well as Grimes had ever known her to do. But this was probably the last time that he would be handling this ship, any ship. The Commissioner would see to that. He shrugged. Well, he would make the most of it, would try to enjoy it. He saw that Beadle and von Tannenbaum and Slovtny were looking at him apprehensively. He laughed. He could guess what they were thinking. "Don't worry," he told them. "I've no intention of going out in a blaze of glory. And now, Sparks, do you think you could lock on to that beacon for me?"

"Ay, Captain," Slovtny replied. And then, blushing absurdly, "It's a damn shame, sir."

"It will all come right in the end," said Grimes with a conviction that he did not feel. He shrugged again. At least that cast-iron bitch and her tin boyfriends weren't in Control to ruin the bitter-sweetness of what, all too probably, would be his last pilotage.

Adder fell straight and true, plunging into the atmosphere, countering every crosswind with just the right application of lateral thrust. Below her continents and seas expanded, features—rivers, forests, mountains, and cities—showed with increasing clarity.

And there was the spaceport, and there was the triangle of brilliant red winking lights in the center of which Grimes was to land his ship. He brought her down fast—and saw apprehension dawning again on the faces of his officers. He brought her down fast—and then, at almost the last possible second, fed the power into his inertial drive unit. She shuddered and hung there, scant inches above the concrete of the apron. And then the irregular throbbing slowed, and stopped, and Adder was down, with barely a complaint from the shock absorbers.

"Finished with engines," said Grimes quietly.

He looked out of the ports at the soldiers who had surrounded the ship.

"Are we under arrest, Captain?" asked von Tannenbaum.

"Just a guard of honor for the Commissioner," said Grimes tiredly.

Grimes's remark was not intended to be taken seriously—but it wasn't too far from the mark. The soldiers were, actually, members of the Royal Bodyguard and they did, eventually, escort Mrs. Commissioner Dalwood to the Palace. But that was not until after the King himself had been received aboard Adder with all due courtesy, or such courtesy as could be mustered by Grimes and his officers after a hasty reading of Dealings With Foreign Dignitaries; General Instructions. Grimes, of course, could have appealed to the Commissioner for advice; she moved in diplomatic circles and he did not. He could have appealed to her. He thought, As long as I'm Captain of this ship I'll stand on my own two feet. Luckily the Port Authorities had given him warning that His Skandian Majesty would be making a personal

call on board.

He was a big young man, this King Eric, heavily muscled, with ice-blue eyes, a flowing yellow moustache, long, wavy yellow hair. Over baggy white trousers that were thrust into boots of unpolished leather he wore a short-sleeved shirt of gleaming chain mail. On his head was a horned helmet. He carried a short battle-axe. The officers with him—with the exception of Captain Andersen, whose own ship was now down—were similarly uniformed, although the horns of their helmets were shorter, their ceremonial axes smaller. Andersen was in conventional enough space captain's dress rig.

Grimes's little day cabin was uncomfortably crowded. There was the King, with three of his high officers. There was Andersen. There was (of course) the Commissioner, and she had brought her faithful robot, John, with her. Only King Eric and Mrs. Dalwood were seated.

John, Grimes admitted, had his uses. He mixed and served drinks like a stage butler. He passed around cigarettes, cigarillos, and cigars. And Mrs. Dalwood had her uses. Grimes was not used to dealing with royalty, with human royalty, but she was. Her manner, as she spoke to the King, was kind but firm. Without being disrespectful she managed to convey the impression that she ranked with, but slightly above, the great-grandson of a piratical tramp skipper. At first Grimes feared (hoped) that one of those ceremonial but sharp axes would be brought into play—but, oddly enough, King Eric seemed to be enjoying the situation.

"So you see, Your Majesty," said the Commissioner, "that it is imperative that I resume my journey to Dhartana as soon as possible. I realize that this vessel will be delayed for some time until the necessary repairs have been effected, so I wonder if I could charter one of your ships." She added, "I have the necessary authority."

Eric blew silky fronds of moustache away from his thick lips. "We do not question that, Madam Commissioner. But you must realize that We take no action without due consultation with Our advisors. Furthermore . . ." he looked like a small boy screwing up his courage before being saucy to the schoolteacher . . . "We do not feel obliged to go out of Our way to render assistance to your Federation."

"The Princess Ingaret incident was rather unfortunate, Your Majesty . . ." admitted Mrs. Dalwood sweetly. "But I never thought that the Skandians were the sort of people to bear grudges . . ."

"I . . ." he corrected himself hastily . . . "We are not, Madam Commissioner. But a Monarch, these days, is servant to as well as leader of his people . . ."

Grimes saw the generals, or whatever they were, exchanging ironical glances with Captain Andersen.

"But, Your Majesty, it is to our common benefit that friendly relations between Skandia and the Federation be re-established."

Friendly relations? thought Grimes. She looks as though she wants to take

him to bed. And he knows it.

"Let me suggest, Madam Commissioner, that you do me—Us—the honor of becoming Our guest? At the Palace you will be able to meet the Council of Earls as soon as it can be convened. I have no doubt—We have no doubt that such a conference will be to the lasting benefit of both Our realms."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. We are . . ." She saw Grimes looking at her sardonically and actually blushed. "I am honored."

"It should not be necessary for you to bring your aides, or your own servants," said King Eric.

"I shall bring John and James," she told him. "They are my robot servitors."

Eric, whose face had fallen, looked cheerful again. "Then We shall see that all is ready for you." He turned to one of his own officers. "General, please inform the Marshal of the Household that Madam Commissioner Dalwood is to be Our guest."

The general raised his wrist transceiver to his bearded lips, passed on the instructions.

"John," ordered the Commissioner, "tell Miss Rosaleen and James to pack for me. Miss Rosaleen will know what I shall require."

"Yes, Madam," replied the robot, standing there. He was not in telepathic communication with his metal brother—but UHF radio was as good.

"Oh, Your Majesty . . ."

"Yes, Madam Commissioner?"

"What arrangements are being made for Lieutenant Grimes and his officers, and for my lady's maid? Presumably this ship will be under repair shortly, and they will be unable to live aboard."

"Mrs. Dalwood!" Grimes did not try very hard to keep his rising resentment from showing. "May I remind you that I am captain of Adder? And may I remind you that Regulations insist that there must be a duty officer aboard at all times in foreign ports?"

"And may I remind you, Mr. Grimes, that an Admiral of the Fleet or a civilian officer of the Board of Admiralty with equivalent rank can order the suspension of any or all of the Regulations? Furthermore, as such a civilian officer, I know that nothing aboard your ship, armament, propulsive units or communications equipment, is on the Secret List. You need not fear that our hosts' technicians will learn anything at all to their advantage." She added, too sweetly, "Of course, you might learn from them . . ."

King Eric laughed gustily. "And that is why We must insist, Lieutenant, that neither you nor your officers are aboard while repairs are in progress. Captain Andersen, please make arrangements for the accommodation of the Terran officers."

"Ay, Your Majesty," replied Andersen smartly. He looked at Grimes and said

without words, I'm sorry, spaceman, but that's the way it has to be.

Grimes and his officers were housed in the Base's Bachelor Officers' Quarters, and Rosaleen was accommodated in the barracks where the female petty officers lived. They weren't prisoners—quite. They were guests—but strictly supervised guests. They were not allowed near their own ship—and that hurt. They were not allowed near any of the ships—in addition to Princess Helga and Adder there were three destroyers, a transport and two tugs in port. Captain Andersen, who seemed to have been given the job of looking after them, was apologetic.

"But I have to remember that you're spacemen, Lieutenant. And I have to remember that you have the reputation of being a somewhat unconventional spaceman, with considerable initiative." He laughed shortly. "I shudder to think what would happen if you and your boys flew the coop in any of the wagons—yours or ours—that are berthed around the place."

Grimes sipped moodily from his beer—he and the Captain were having a drink and chat in the well-appointed wardroom of the B.O.Q. He said, "There's not much chance of our doing that, sir. You must remember that the Commissioner is my passenger, and that I am responsible for her. I could not possibly leave without her."

"Much as you dislike her," grinned the other. "I think that she is quite capable of looking after herself."

"I know that she is, Captain. Even so . . ."

"If you're thinking of rescuing her . . ." said Andersen.

"I'm not," Grimes told him. He had seen the Palace from the outside, a grim, grey pile that looked as though it had been transported, through space and time, from Shakespeare's Elsinore. But there was nothing archaic about its defenses, and it was patrolled by well-armed guards who looked at least as tough as the Federation's Marines. He went on, almost incuriously, "I suppose that she's being well treated."

"I have heard that His Majesty is most hospitable."

"Mphm. Well, we certainly can't complain, apart from a certain lack of freedom. Mind you, Mr. Beadle is whining a bit. He finds your local wenches a bit too robust for his taste. He prefers small brunettes to great, strapping blondes . . . But your people have certainly put on some good parties for us. And Rosaleen was telling me that she's really enjoying herself—the P.O.s' mess serves all the fattening things she loves with every meal."

"Another satisfied customer," said Andersen.

"But I'm not satisfied, Captain. I know damn well that the repairs to my Mannschenn Drive took no more than a day. How long are we being held here?"

"That, Lieutenant, is a matter for my masters—and yours. We—and our ships—are no more than pawns on the board." The Captain looked at his watch. "Talking of ships, I have some business aboard Princess Helga. You

must excuse me." He finished his beer and got to his feet. "Don't forget that after lunch you're all being taken for a sail on the Skaggerak . . ."

"I'll not forget, sir," Grimes informed him.

He was, in fact, looking forward to it. He enjoyed the sailing excursions in stout little wooden ships as much as any Skandian, already had proved himself capable of handling a schooner under a full press of canvas quite competently, and was realizing that seamanship and spacemanship, the skilled balancing of physical forces, have much in common.

He sat down again when Andersen had left the almost deserted wardroom, then saw Hollister coming towards him. The telepath said in a low voice, "I'm afraid you'll not be taking that sail, Captain."

Grimes was going to make some cutting remark about psionic snooping, then thought better of it. He asked, "Why not, Mr. Hollister?"

The psionic communications officer grinned wryly. "Yes, I've been snooping, Captain. I admit it. But not only on you. Not that it was really snooping. I've maintained contact of a sort with John . . ."

"The tin telepath . . ."

"You can call him that. He's very lonely in the Palace, and he's going to be lonelier . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"She has been getting on very well with the King. She has persuaded him to release us, even though the Council of Earls is not altogether in approval. We should get the word this afternoon, and we shall be on our way shortly afterwards. Adder is completely space worthy."

"I know. Captain Andersen's as good as told me. But why is John so lonely that he's spilling all these beans to you?"

"She wanted to make a farewell gift to His Majesty—and he, it seems, has always wanted a robot valet. Humanoid robots are not manufactured on Skandia, as you know."

"And so John's been sold down the river. My heart fair bleeds for him."

"No, Captain. Not John—James. John's 'brother.' They think of each other as brothers. They feel affection, a real affection, for each other . . ."

"Incredible."

"Is it, Captain? I've heard about the Mr. Adam affair, and how a mere machine was loyal to you."

"Then not so incredible . . ."

One of the wall speakers crackled into life. "Will Lieutenant Grimes, captain of the Federation Survey Service Courier Adder, please come at once to telephone booth 14? Will Lieutenant Grimes, captain of the Federation

Survey Service Courier Adder, please come at once to telephone booth 14?"

"Coming," grumbled Grimes. "Coming."

He was not surprised to see Andersen's face in the little screen, to hear him say, "Orders from the Palace, Lieutenant. You're to get your show on the road at 1500 hours Local. Mrs. Dalwood will board at 1430. You, your officers, and Miss Rosaleen Boyle will board at 1330. You will find all in order, all in readiness."

"Thank you, Captain."

Andersen grinned. "Don't thank me. Thank His Majesty—or Commissioner Dalwood."

Grimes returned to the table where he had left Hollister. He said, "You were right."

"Of course I was right. And now, if I may, I'll give you a warning."

"Go ahead."

"Watch John. Watch him very carefully. He's bitter, revengeful."

"Are you in touch with him now?"

"Yes." The telepath's face had the faraway expression that made it obvious that he was engaged in conversation with a distant entity. Suddenly he smiled. "It's all right. He has assured me that even though he feels that Mrs. Dalwood has betrayed him and his brother he is quite incapable of physically harming any human being. The built-in safeguards are too strong for him to overcome."

"Then that's all right." Grimes knew that he should be worrying nonetheless, but the Commissioner was a big girl and could look after herself. And how could the robot harm her in any way but physically? "You've been snooping in its—his—mind, so you know how he ticks."

"Yes, Captain."

Grimes strode to the reception desk and asked the attractive, blonde petty officer to have Adder's crew paged.

Mrs. Dalwood looked well. She was softer, somehow, and she seemed to have put on a little weight!—although not as much as Rosaleen. She sat at ease in her day room, admiring the beautiful, jewel-encrusted watch that now adorned her left wrist. Grimes sat on the edge of his chair, watching her, waiting for her to speak. To one side stood the robot John, silent, immobile.

"Well, Lieutenant," she said, not too unpleasantly, "you managed to get us upstairs without any major catastrophes. I hope that we shall reach our destination in a reasonably intact condition. We should. As you must notice already, the work carried out by the Skandian technicians is of excellent quality . . . Like this watch . . ." She turned her wrist so that Grimes could see it properly. "It seems strange that a robust people such as the

Skandians, space Vikings, should be such outstanding watchsmiths, but they are, as you probably know. His Majesty insisted that I accept this keepsake from him.

"Yes. Things could have been worse. Much worse, as it turned out. His Majesty and I reached an understanding. Together we accomplished more, much more, than the so-called diplomats . . ."

I can imagine it, thought Grimes—and to his surprise experienced a twinge of sexual jealousy.

Her manner stiffened. "But don't think, Mr. Grimes, that I shall not be putting in a full report on your conduct. It is my duty as a Commissioner to do so. I cannot forget that you gave me your resignation . . ."

Suddenly John spoke. He said tonelessly, "He is thinking of you."

The Commissioner seemed to forget that Grimes was present. Her face softened again. "He is? Tell me . . ."

"He misses you, Madam. He is thinking, I really loved her. She reminded me so much of my dear old mother."

Grimes laughed. He couldn't help it. Mrs. Dalwood screamed furiously, "Be silent, John. I forbid you to speak, ever, unless spoken to by me."

"Yes, Madam."

"And as for you, Mr. Grimes, you heard nothing."

Grimes looked at her, into the eyes that were full of appeal. He remembered what he had heard of Mrs. Commissioner Dalwood before ever he had the misfortune to meet her. The beautiful Mrs. Dalwood, the proud Mrs. Dalwood, the so-called femme fatale of the Admiralty who could, and did, compete with much younger women on equal terms. In a less permissive society she could never have attained her high rank; in Earth's past she could have become a King's courtesan.

And in Skandia's present . . . ?

Grimes said softly, "Of course, King Eric's very young . . ."

"Mr. Grimes, you heard nothing . . ."

He could not resist the appeal in her voice, the very real charm. He thought, I may not be an officer much longer, but I'll still try to be a gentleman. He said, "I heard nothing."

Commodore Damien looked at Grimes over his desk, over the skeletal fingers with which he had made the too-familiar steeple. He said, without regret, "So I shall be losing you, Grimes."

"Yes, sir."

"Frankly, I was surprised."

"Yes, sir."

"But not altogether pained."

Grimes wasn't sure how to take this, so said nothing.

"Tomorrow morning, Grimes, you hand over your command to Lieutenant Beadle. I think that he deserves his promotion."

"Yes, sir."

"But how did you do it, Grimes? Don't tell me that . . . ? No. She's not your type, nor you hers."

"You can say that again, sir."

"It can't be what you do. It can't be what you know. It must be whom you know . . ."

Or what you know about whom, thought Lieutenant Commander Grimes a little smugly.

THE END