

The Subtractor

The Federation's Survey Service Cruiser Pathfinder returned to Lindisfarne Base, and Lieutenant Grimes was one of the officers who was paid off there. He was glad to leave the ship; he had not gotten on at all well with Captain Tolliver. Yet he was far from happy. What was going to happen to him? Tolliver—who, for all his faults, was a just man—had shown Grimes part of the report that he had made on Pathfinder's officers, and this part of the report was that referring to Grimes.

"Lieutenant Grimes shows initiative," Tolliver had written, "and has been known to be zealous. Unfortunately his initiative and zeal are invariably misdirected."

Grimes had decided not to make any protest. There had been occasions, he knew very well, when his initiative and zeal had not been misdirected—but never under Tolliver's command. But the Captain, as was his right—his duty—was reporting on Grimes as he had found him. His report was only one of many. Nonetheless Grimes was not a little worried, was wondering what his next appointment would be, what his future career in the Survey Service (if any) would be like.

Dr. Margaret Lazenby had also paid off Pathfinder, at the same time as Grimes. (Her Service rank was Lieutenant Commander, but she preferred the civilian title.) As old shipmates, with shared experiences, she and Grimes tended to knock about in each other's company whilst they were on Lindisfarne. In any case, the Lieutenant liked the handsome red-haired ethnologist, and was pleased that she liked him. With a little bit of luck the situation would develop favorably, he thought. Meanwhile, she was very good company, even though she would permit nothing more than the briefest goodnight kiss.

One night, after a drink too many in the almost deserted B.O.Q. wardroom, he confided his troubles to her. He said, "I don't like it, Maggie . . ."

"What don't you like, John?"

"All this time here, and no word of an appointment. I told you that I'd seen Tolliver's report on me . . ."

"At least six times. But what of it?"

"It's all right for you, Maggie. For all your two and a half rings you're not a space woman. You don't have to worry about such sordid details as promotion. I do. I'm just a common working stiff of a spaceman, a trade school boy. Space is all I know."

"And I'm sure you know it well, duckie." She laughed. "But not to worry. Everything will come right in the end. Just take Auntie Maggie's word for it."

"Thank you for trying to cheer me up," he said. "But I can't help worrying. After all, it's my career."

She grinned at him, looking very attractive as she did so. "All right. I'll tell you. Your precious Captain Tolliver wasn't the only one to put in a report on

your capabilities. Don't forget that the Delta Sextans IV survey was carried out by the Scientific Branch. You, as the spaceman, were officially in command, but actually it was our show. Dr. Kortsoff—or Commander Kortsoff if you'd rather call him that—was the real head of our little expedition. He reported on you too."

"I can imagine it," said Grimes. "I can just imagine it. 'This officer, with no scientific training whatsoever, took it upon himself to initiate a private experiment which, inevitably, will disastrously affect the ecology, ethology, zoology and biology of the planet.' Have I missed any 'ologies' out?"

"We all liked you," said the girl. "I still like you, come to that. Just between ourselves, we all had a good laugh over your 'private experiment.' You might have given your friend Snuffy and his people a slight nudge on to the upward path—but no more than a slight nudge. Sooner or later—sooner rather than later, I think—they'd have discovered weapons by themselves. It was bound to happen.

"Do you want to know what Dr. Kortsoff said about you?"

"It can't be worse than what Captain Tolliver said."

" 'This officer,' " quoted Maggie Lazenby, " 'is very definitely command material.' "

"You're not kidding?" demanded Grimes.

"Most certainly not, John."

"Mphm. "You've made me feel a little happier:"

"I'm glad," she said.

And so Grimes, although he did not get promotion, got command. The Survey Service's Couriers, with their small crews, were invariably captained by two ringers, mere lieutenants. However, as the twentieth century poet Gertrude Stein might have said, "a captain is a captain is a captain . . ." The command course which Grimes went through prior to his appointment made this quiet clear.

There was one fly in the ointment, a big one. His name was Damien, his rank was Commodore, his function was Officer Commanding Couriers. He knew all about Grimes; he made this quite clear at the first interview. Grimes suspected that he knew more about Grimes than he, Grimes, did himself.

He had said, toying with the bulky folder on the desk before him, "There are so many conflicting reports about you, Lieutenant. Some of your commanding officers are of the opinion that you'll finish up as the youngest Admiral ever in the Service, others have said that you aren't fit to be Third Mate in Rim Runners. And then we have the reports from high-ranking specialist officers, most of whom speak well of you. But these gentlemen are not spacemen.

"There's only one thing to do with people like you, Lieutenant. We give you a chance. We give you the command of something small and relatively

unimportant—and see what sort of a mess you make of it. I'm letting you have Adder. To begin with you'll be just a galactic errand boy, but if you shape well, if you shape well, you will be entrusted with more important missions.

"Have I made myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then try to remember all that we've tried to teach you, and try to keep your nose clean. That's all."

Grimes stiffened to attention, saluted, and left Damien's office.

Grimes had come to love his first command, and was proud of her, even though she was only a little ship, a Serpent Class Courier, lightly armed and manned by a minimal crew. In addition to Grimes there were two watch-keeping officers, both Ensigns, an engineering officer, another one ringer, and two communications officers, Lieutenants both. One was in charge of the vessel's electronic equipment, but could be called upon to stand a control room watch if required. The other was the psionic radio officer, a very important crew member, as Adder had yet to be fitted with the Carlotti Deep Space Communications and Direction Finding System. In addition to crew accommodation there was more than merely adequate passenger accommodation; one function of the Couriers is to get V.I.P.s from Point A to Point B in a hurry, as and when required.

"You will proceed," said Commodore Damien to Grimes, "from Lindisfarne Base to Doncaster at maximum speed, but considering at all times the safety of your vessel."

"And the comfort of my passenger, sir?" asked Grimes.

"That need not concern you, Lieutenant." Damien grinned, his big teeth yellow in his skull-like face. "Mr. Alberto is . . . tough. Tougher, I would say, than the average spaceman."

Grimes's prominent ears flushed. The Commodore had managed to imply that he, Grimes, was below average. "Very well, sir," he said. "I'll pile on the Gees and the Lumes."

"Just so as you arrive in one piece," growled Damien. "That's all that our masters ask of you. Or, to more exact, just so as Mr. Alberto arrives in one piece, and functioning." He lifted a heavily sealed envelope off his desk, handed it to Grimes. "Your Orders, to be opened after you're on trajectory. But I've already told you most of it." He grinned again. "On your bicycle, spaceman!"

Grimes got to his feet, put on his cap, came stiffly to attention. He saluted with his free right hand, turned about smartly and marched out of the Commodore's office.

This was his first Sealed Orders assignment. Clear of the office, Grimes continued his march, striding in time to martial music audible only to himself. Then he paused, looking towards the docking area of the

spaceport. There was his ship, already positioned on the pad, dwarfed by a huge Constellation Class cruiser to one side of her, a Planet Class transport to the other. But she stood there bravely enough on the apron, a metal spire so slender as to appear taller than she actually was, gleaming brightly in the almost level rays of the westering sun. And she was his. It did not matter that officers serving in larger vessels referred to the couriers as flying darning needles.

So he strode briskly to the ramp extruded from the after airlock of his flying darning needle, his stocky body erect in his smart—but not too smart—uniform. Ensign Beadle, his First Lieutenant, was there to greet him. The young man threw him a smart salute. Grimes returned it with just the right degree of sloppiness.

"All secure for lift off—Captain!"

"Thank you, Number One. Is the passenger aboard?"

"Yes, sir. And his baggage."

Grimes fought down the temptation to ask what he was like. Only when one is really senior can one unbend with one's juniors. "Very well, Number One." He looked at his watch. "My lift off is scheduled for 1930 hours. It is now 1917. I shall go straight to Control, Mr. Beadle . . ."

"Mr. von Tannenbaum and Mr. Slovtny are waiting for you there, sir, and Mr. McCloud is standing by in the engine room."

"Good. And Mr. Deane is tucked safely away with his poodle's brain in aspic?"

"He is, sir."

"Good. Then give Mr. Alberto my compliments, and ask him if he would like to join us in Control during lift off."

Grimes negotiated the ladder in the axial shaft rapidly, without losing breath. (The Serpent Class couriers were too small to run to an elevator.) He did not make a stop at his own quarters. (A courier captain was supposed to be able to proceed anywhere in the Galaxy, known or unknown, at a second's notice.) In the control room he found Ensign von Tannenbaum ("The blond beast") and Lieutenant Slovtny (just "Sparks") at their stations. He buckled himself into his own chair. He had just finished doing so when the plump, lugubrious Beadle pulled himself up through the hatch. He addressed Grimes. "I asked Mr. Alberto if he'd like to come up to the office, Captain . . ."

"And is he coming up, Number One,?" Grimes looked pointedly at the clock on the bulkhead.

"No, Captain. He said . . ."

"Out with it man. It's time we were getting up them stairs."

"He said, 'You people look after your job, and I'll look after mine.' "

Grimes shrugged. As a courier captain he had learned to take V.I.P.s as they came. Some—a very few of them—he would have preferred to have left. He asked, "Are Mr. Alberto and Mr. Deane secured for lift off?"

"Yes, Captain, although Spooky's not happy about the shockproof mount for his amplifier . . ."

"He never is. Clearance, Sparks . . ."

"Clearance, Captain." The wiry little radio officer spoke quietly into his microphone. "Mission 7DKY to Tower. Request clearance."

"Tower to Mission 7DKY. You have clearance. Bon voyage."

"Thank him," said Grimes. He glanced rapidly around the little control room. All officers were strapped in their acceleration chairs. All tell-tale lights were green. "All systems Go . . ." he muttered, relishing the archaic expression.

He pushed the right buttons, and went.

It was a normal enough courier lift off. The inertial drive developed maximum thrust within microseconds of its being started. Once his radar told him that the ship was the minimum safe altitude above the port, Grimes cut in his auxiliary rockets. The craft was built to take stresses that, in larger vessels, would have been dangerous. Her personnel prided themselves on their toughness. And the one outsider, the passenger. Grimes would have grinned had it not been for the acceleration flattening his features. Commodore Damien had said that Mr. Alberto was tough—so Mr. Alberto would just have to take the G's and like it.

The ship drove up through the last, high wisps of cirrus, into the darkling, purple sky, towards the sharply bright, unwinking stars. She plunged outward through the last, tenuous shreds of atmosphere, and the needles of instruments flickered briefly as she passed through the van Allens. She was out and clear now, out and clear, and Grimes cut both inertial and reaction drives, used his gyroscopes to swing the sharp prow of the ship on to the target star, the Doncaster sun, brought that far distant speck of luminosity into the exact center of his spiderweb sights. Von Tannenbaum, who was Navigator, gave him the corrections necessitated by Galactic Drift; it was essential to aim the vessel at where the star was now, not where it was some seventy-three years ago.

The Inertial Drive was restarted, and the ever-precessing rotors of the Mannschenn Drive were set in motion. There was the usual brief queasiness induced by the temporal precession field, the usual visual shock as colors sagged down the spectrum, as the hard, bright stars outside the viewports became iridescent nebulosities. Grimes remained in his chair a few minutes, satisfying himself that all was as it should be. Slowly and carefully he filled and lit his foul pipe, ignoring a dirty look from Beadle who, in the absence of a Bio-Chemist, was responsible for the ship's air-regeneration system.

Then, speaking through a swirl of acrid smoke, he ordered. "Set Deep Space watches, Number One. And tell Mr. Deane to report to Lindisfarne Base that we are on trajectory for Doncaster."

"E.T.A. Doncaster, Captain?" asked Beadle.

Grimes pulled the sealed envelope from the pouch at the side of his chair, looked at it. He thought, For Your Eyes Only. Destroy By Fire Before Reading. He said, "I'll let you know after I've skimmed through this bumf." After all, even in a small ship informality can be allowed to go only so far. He unbuckled himself, got up from his seat, then went down to his quarters to read the Orders.

There was little in them that he had not already been told by Commodore Damien. Insofar as the E.T.A. was concerned, this was left largely to his own discretion, although it was stressed that the courier was to arrive at Doncaster not later than April 23, Local Date. And how did the Doncastrian calendar tally with that used on Lindisfarne? Grimes, knowing that the Blond Beast was now on watch, called Control and threw the question on to von Tannenbaum's plate, knowing that within a very short time he would have an answer accurate to fourteen places of decimals, and that as soon as he, Grimes, made a decision regarding the time of arrival the necessary adjustment of velocity would be put in hand without delay. Von Tannenbaum called back. "April 23 on Doncaster coincides with November 8 on Lindisfarne. I can give you the exact correlation, Captain . . ."

"Don't bother, Pilot. My Orders allow me quite a bit of leeway. Now, suppose we get Mr. Alberto to his destination just three days before the deadline . . . It will give him time to settle in before he commences his duties, whatever they are, in the High Commissioner's office. As far as I can gather, we're supposed to stay on Doncaster until directed elsewhere—so an extra three days in port will do us no harm."

"It's a pleasant planet, I've heard, Captain." There was a pause, and Grimes could imagine the burly, flaxen-headed young man running problems through the control room computer, checking the results with his own slipstick. "This calls for a reduction of speed. Shall I do it by cutting down the temporal precession rate, or by reducing actual acceleration?"

"Two G is a little heavy," admitted Grimes.

"Very well, Captain. Reduce to 1.27?"

"That will balance?"

"It will balance."

"Then make it so."

Almost immediately the irregular throbbing of the Inertial Drive slowed. Grimes felt his weight pressing less heavily into the padding of his chair. He did not need to glance at the accelerometer mounted among the other tell-tale instruments on the bulkhead of his cabin. Von Tannenbaum was a good man, a good officer, a good navigator.

There was a sharp rap on his door.

"Come in," called Grimes, swiveling his seat so that he faced the caller. This, he realized, would be his passenger, anticipating the captain's

invitation to an introductory drink and talk.

He was not a big man, this Mr. Alberto, and at first he gave an impression of plumpness, of softness. But it was obvious from the way that he moved that his bulk was solid muscle, not fat. He was clad in the dark grey that was almost a Civil Service uniform—and even Grimes, who knew little of the niceties of civilian tailoring, could see that both the material and the cut of Alberto's suit were superb. He had a broad yet very ordinary looking face; his hair was black and glossy, his eyes black and rather dull. His expression was petulant. He demanded rather than asked, "Why have we slowed down?"

Grimes bit back a sharp retort. After all, he was only a junior officer, in spite of his command, and his passenger probably piled on far more G's than a mere lieutenant. He replied, "I have adjusted to a comfortable actual velocity, Mr. Alberto, so as to arrive three days, local, before the deadline. I trust that this suits your plans."

"Three days . . ." Alberto smiled—and his face was transformed abruptly from that of a sulky baby to that of a contented child. It was, Grimes realized, no more than a deliberate turning of charm—but, he admitted to himself, it was effective. "Three days . . . That will give me ample time to settle down, Captain, before I start work. And I know, as well as you do, that overly heavy acceleration can be tiring."

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Alberto? A drink, perhaps?"

"Thank you, Captain. A dry sherry, if I may . . ."

Grimes grinned apologetically. "I'm afraid that these Couriers haven't much of a cellar. I can offer you gin, scotch, brandy . . ."

"A gin and lime, then."

The Lieutenant busied himself at his little bar, mixed the drinks, gave Alberto his glass, raised his own in salute. "Here's to crime!"

Alberto smiled again. "Why do you say that, Captain?"

"It's just one of those toasts that's going the rounds in the Service. Not so long ago it was, 'Down the hatch!' Before that it was, 'Here's mud in yer eye' . . ."

"I see." Alberto sipped appreciatively. "Good gin, this."

"Not bad. We get it from Van Diemen's Planet." There was a brief silence. Then, "Will you be long on Doncaster, Mr. Alberto? I rather gained the impression that we're supposed to wait there until you've finished your . . . business."

"It shouldn't take long."

"Diplomatic?"

"You could call it that." Again the smile—but why should those white teeth look so carnivorous? Imagination, thought Grimes.

"Another drink?"

"Why, yes. I like to relax when I can."

"Yours is demanding work?"

"And so is yours, Captain."

The brassy music of a bugle drifted into the cabin through the intercom.

"Mess call," said Grimes.

"You do things in style, Captain."

Grimes shrugged. "We have a tape for all the calls in general use. As for the tucker . . ." He shrugged again. "We don't run to a cook in a ship of this class. Sparks—Mr. Slovoṭny—prepares the meals in space. As a chef he's a good radio officer . . ."

"Do you think he'd mind if I took over?" asked Alberto. "After all, I'm the only idler aboard this vessel."

"We'll think about it," said Grimes.

"You know what I think, Captain . . ." said Beadle.

"I'm not a telepath, Number One," said Grimes. "Tell me."

The two men were sitting at ease in the Courier's control room. Each of them was conscious of a certain tightness in the waistband of his uniform shorts. Grimes was suppressing a tendency to burp gently. Alberto, once he had been given a free hand in the galley, had speedily changed shipboard eating from a necessity to a pleasure. (He insisted that somebody else always do the washing up, but this was a small price to pay.) This evening, for example, the officers had dined on saltim-bocca, accompanied by a rehydrated rough red that the amateur chef had contrived, somehow, to make taste like real wine. Nonetheless he had apologized—actually apologized!—for the meal. "I should have used prosciutto, not any old ham. And fresh sage leaves, not dried sage . . ."

"I think" said Beadle, "that the standard of the High Commissioner's entertaining has been lousy. Alberto must be a cordon bleu chef, sent out to Doncaster to play merry hell in the High Commissioner's kitchen."

"Could be," said Grimes. He belched gently. "Could be. But I can't see our lords and masters laying on a ship, even a lowly Serpent Class Courier, for a cook, no matter how talented. There must be cooks on Doncaster just as good."

"There's one helluva difference between a chef and a cook."

"All right. There must be chefs on Doncaster."

"But Alberto is good. You admit that."

"Of course I admit it. But one can be good in quite a few fields and still retain one's amateur status. As a matter of fact, Alberto told me that he

was a mathematician . . . "

"A mathematician?" Beadle was scornfully incredulous. "You know how the Blond Beast loves to show off his toys to anybody who'll evince the slightest interest. Well, Alberto was up in the control room during his watch; you'll recall that he said he'd fix the coffee maker. Our Mr. von Tannenbaum paraded his pets and made them do their tricks. He was in a very disgruntled mood when he handed over to me when I came on. How did he put it? 'I don't expect a very high level of intelligence in planetlubbers, but that Alberto is in a class by himself. I doubt if he could add two and two and get four twice running . . .'"

"Did he fix the machinetta?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. It makes beautiful coffee now."

"Then what are you complaining about, Number One?"

"I'm not complaining, Captain. I'm just curious."

And so am I, thought Grimes, so am I. And as the commanding officer of the ship he was in a position to be able to satisfy his curiosity. After Mr. Beadle had gone about his multifarious duties Grimes called Mr. Deane on the telephone. "Are you busy, Spooky?" he asked.

"I'm always busy, Captain," came the reply. This was true enough. Whether he wanted it or not, a psionic radio officer was on duty all the time, sleeping and waking, his mind open to the transmitted thoughts of other telepaths throughout the Galaxy. Some were powerful transmitters, others were not, some made use, as Deane did, of organic amplifiers, others made do with the unaided power of their own minds. And there was selection, of course. Just as a wireless operator in the early days of radio on Earth's seas could pick out his own ship's call sign from the babble and Babel of Morse, could focus all his attention on an S.O.S. or T.T.T, so the trained telepath could "listen" selectively. At short ranges he could, too, receive the thoughts of the non-telepaths about him—but, unless the circumstances were exceptional, he was supposed to maintain the utmost secrecy regarding them.

"Can you spare me a few minutes, Spooky? After all, you can maintain your listening watch anywhere in the ship, in my own quarters as well as in yours."

"Oh, all right, Captain. I'll be up. I already know what you're going to ask me."

You would, thought Grimes.

A minute or so later, Mr. Deane drifted into his day cabin. His nickname was an apt one. He was tall, fragile, so albinoid as to appear almost translucent. His white face was a featureless blob.

"Take a pew, Spooky," ordered Grimes. "A drink?"

"Mother's ruin, Captain."

Grimes poured gin for both of them. In his glass there was ice and a generous sprinkling of bitters. Mr. Deane preferred his gin straight, as colorless as he was himself.

The psionic radio officer sipped genteelly. Then: "I'm afraid that I can't oblige you, Captain."

"Why not, Spooky?"

"You know very well that we graduates of the Rhine Institute have to swear to respect privacy."

"There's no privacy aboard a ship, Spooky. There cannot be."

"There can be, Captain. There must be."

"Not when the safety of the ship is involved."

It was a familiar argument—and Grimes knew that after the third gin the telepath would weaken. He always did.

"We got odd passengers aboard this ship, Spooky. Surely you remember that Waldegren diplomat who had the crazy scheme of seizing her and turning her over to his Navy . . ."

"I remember, Captain." Deane extended his glass which, surprisingly, was empty. Grimes wondered, as he always did, if its contents had been teleported directly into the officer's stomach, but he refilled it.

"Mr. Alberto's another odd passenger," he went on.

"But a Federation citizen," Deane told him.

"How do we know? He could be a double agent. Do you know?"

"I don't." After only two gins Spooky was ready to spill the beans. This was unusual. "I don't know anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Usually, Captain, we have to shut our minds to the trivial, boring thoughts of you psionic morons. No offense intended, but that's the way we think of you. We get sick of visualizations of the girls you met in the last port and the girls you hope to meet in the next port." He screwed his face up in disgust, made it evident that he did, after all, possess features. "Bums, bellies and breasts! The Blond Beast's a tit man, and you have a thing about legs . . ."

Grimes's prominent ears reddened, but he said nothing.

"And the professional wishful thinking is even more nauseating. When do I get my half ring? When do I get my brass hat? When shall I make Admiral?"

"Ambition . . ." said Grimes.

"Ambition, shambition! And of late, of course, I wonder what Alberto's

putting on for breakfast? For lunch? For dinner?"

"What is he putting on for dinner?" asked Grimes. "I've been rather wondering if our tissue culture chook could be used for Chicken Cacciatore . . ."

"I don't know."

"No, you're not a chef. As well we know, after the last time that you volunteered for galley duties."

"I mean, I don't know what the menus will be." It was Deane's turn to blush. "As a matter of fact, Captain, I have been trying to get previews. I have to watch my diet . . ."

Grimes tried not to think uncharitable thoughts. Like many painfully thin people, Deane enjoyed a voracious appetite.

He said, "You've been trying to eavesdrop?"

"Yes. But there are non-telepaths, you know, and Alberto's one of them. True non-telepaths, I mean. Most people transmit, although they can't receive. Alberto doesn't transmit."

"A useful qualification for a diplomat," said Grimes. "If he is a diplomat. But could he be using some sort of psionic jammer?"

"No. I'd know if he were."

Grimes couldn't ignore that suggestively held empty glass any longer. He supposed that Deane had earned his third gin.

The Courier broke through into normal space-time north of the plane of Doncaster's ecliptic. In those days, before the Carlotti Beacons made FTL position fixing simple, navigation was an art rather than a science—and von Tannenbaum was an artist. The little ship dropped into a trans-polar orbit about the planet and then, as soon as permission to land had been granted by Aerospace Control, descended to Port Duncannon. It was, Grimes told himself smugly, one of his better landings. And so it should have been; conditions were little short of ideal. There was no cloud, no wind, not even any clear air turbulence at any level. The ship's instruments were working perfectly, and the Inertial Drive was responding to the controls with no time lag whatsoever. It was one of those occasions on which the Captain feels that his ship is no more—and no less—than a beautifully functioning extension of his own body. Finally, it was morning Local Time, with the sun just lifting over the verdant, rolling hills to the eastward, bringing out all the color of the sprawling city a few miles from the spaceport, making it look, from the air, like a huge handful of gems spilled carelessly on a green carpet.

Grimes set the vessel down in the exact center of the triangle marked by the blinkers, so gently that, until he cut the drive, a walnut under the vaned landing gear would not have been crushed. He said quietly, "Finished with engines."

"Receive boarders, Captain?" asked Beadle.

"Yes, Number One." Grimes looked out through the viewport to the ground cars that were making their way from the Administration Block. Port Health, Immigration, Customs . . . The Harbormaster paying his respects to the Captain of a visiting Federation warship . . . And the third vehicle? He took a pair of binoculars from the rack, focused them on the flag fluttering from the bonnet of the car in the rear. It was dark blue, with a pattern of silver stars, the Federation's colors. So the High Commissioner himself had come out to see the ship berth. He wished that he and his officers had dressed more formally, but it was too late to do anything about it now. He went down to his quarters, was barely able to change the epaulettes of his shirt, with their deliberately tarnished braid, for a pair of shining new ones before the High Commissioner was at his door.

Mr. Beadle ushered in the important official with all the ceremony that he could muster at short notice. "Sir, this is the Captain, Lieutenant Grimes. Captain, may I introduce Sir William Willoughby, Federation High Commissioner on Doncaster?"

Willoughby extended a hand that, like the rest of him was plump. "Welcome aboard, Captain. Ha, ha. I hope you don't mind my borrowing one of the favorite expressions of you spacefaring types!"

"We don't own the copyright, sir."

"Ha, ha. Very good."

"Will you sit down, Sir William?"

"Thank you, Captain, thank you. But only for a couple of minutes. I shall be out of your hair as soon as Mr. Alberto has been cleared by Port Health, Immigration and all the rest of 'em. Then I'll whisk him off to the Residence." He paused, regarding Grimes with eyes that, in the surrounding fat, were sharp and bright. "How did you find him, Captain?"

"Mr. Alberto, sir?" What was the man getting at? "Er . . . He's a very good cook . . ."

"Glad to hear you say it, Captain. That's why I sent for him. I have to do a lot of entertaining, as you realize, and the incompetents I have in my kitchens couldn't boil water without burning it. It just won't do, Captain, it just won't do, not for a man in my position."

"So he is a chef, sir."

Again those sharp little eyes bored into Grimes's skull. "Of course. What else? What did you think he was?"

"Well, as a matter of fact we were having a yarn the other night, and he sort of hinted that he was some sort of a mathematician . . ."

"Did he?" Then Willoughby chuckled. "He was having you on. But, of course, a real chef is a mathematician. He has to get his equations just right—this quantity, that quantity, this factor, that factor . . ."

"That's one way of looking at it, Sir William."

Beadle was back then, followed by Alberto. "I must be off, now, Captain," said the passenger, shaking hands. "Thank you for a very pleasant voyage."

"Thank you," Grimes told him, adding, "We shall miss you."

"But you'll enjoy some more of his cooking," said the High Commissioner genially. "As officers of the only Federation warship on this world you'll have plenty of invitations—to the Residence as well as elsewhere. Too, if Mr. Alberto manages to train my permanent staff in not too long a time you may be taking him back with you."

"We hope so," said Grimes and Beadle simultaneously.

"Good day to you, then. Come on, Mr. Alberto—it's time you started to show my glorified scullions how to boil an egg!"

He was gone, and then the Harbormaster was at the door. He was invited in, took a seat, accepted coffee. "Your first visit to Doncaster," he announced rather than asked.

"Yes, Captain Tarran. It looks a very pleasant planet."

"Hphm." That could have meant either "yes" or "no."

"Tell me, sir, is the cooking in the High Commissioner's Residence as bad as he makes out?"

"I wouldn't know, Captain. I'm just a merchant skipper in a shore job, I don't get asked to all the posh parties, like you people." The sudden white grin in the dark, lean face took the rancor out of the words. "And I thank all the Odd Gods of the Galaxy for that!"

"I concur with your sentiments, Captain Tarran. One never seems to meet any real people at the official bunstruggle . . . it's all stiff collars and best behavior and being nice to nongs and drongoes whom normally you'd run a mile to avoid . . ."

"Still," said Mr. Beadle, "the High Commissioner seems to have the common touch . . ."

"How so?" asked Grimes.

"Well, coming out to the spaceport in person to pick up his chef . . ."

"Cupboard love," Grimes told him. "Cupboard love."

There were official parties, and there were unofficial ones. Tarran may not have been a member of the planet's snobocracy, but he knew people in all walks of life, in all trades and professions, and the gatherings to which, through him, Grimes was invited were far more entertaining affairs than the official functions which, now and again, Grimes was obliged to attend. It was at an informal supper given by Professor Tolliver, who held the Chair of Political Science at Duncannon University, that he met Selma Madigan.

With the exception of Tarran and Grimes and his officers all the guests were university people, students as well as instructors. Some were human

and some were not. Much to his surprise Grimes found that he was getting along famously with a Shaara Princess, especially since he had cordially detested a Shaara Queen to whom he had been introduced at a reception in the Mayor's Palace. ("And there I was," he had complained afterwards to Beadle, "having to say nice things to a bedraggled old oversized bumblebee loaded down with more precious stones than this ship could lift . . . and with all that tonnage of diamonds and the like she couldn't afford a decent voice box; it sounded like a scratched platter and a worn-out needle on one of those antique record players . . .") This Shreen was—beautiful. It was an inhuman beauty (of course), that of a glittering, intricate mobile. By chance or design—design thought Grimes—her voice box produced a pleasant, almost seductive contralto, with faintly buzzing undertones. She was an arthropod, but there could be no doubt about the fact that she was an attractively female member of her race.

She was saying, "I find you humans so fascinating, Captain. There is so much similarity between yourselves and ourselves, and such great differences. But I have enjoyed my stay on this planet . . ."

"And will you be here much longer, Your Highness?"

"Call me Shreen, Captain," she told him.

"Thank you, Shreen. My name is John. I shall feel honored if you call me that." He laughed. "In any case, my real rank is only Lieutenant."

"Very well, Lieutenant John. But to answer your question. I fear that I shall return to my own world as soon as I have gained my degree in Socio-Economics. Our Queen Mother decided that this will be a useful qualification for a future ruler. The winds of change blow through our hives, and we must trim our wings to them." And very pretty wings, too, thought Grimes.

But Shreen was impossibly alien, and the girl who approached gracefully over the polished floor was indubitably human. She was slender, and tall for a woman, and her gleaming auburn hair was piled high in an intricate coronal. Her mouth was too wide for conventional prettiness, the planes of her thin face too well defined. Her eyes were definitely green. Her smile, as she spoke, made her beautiful.

"Another conquest, Shreen?" she asked.

"I wish it were, Selma," replied the Princess. "I wish that Lieutenant John were an arthropod like myself."

"In that case," grinned Grimes, "I'd be a drone."

"From what I can gather," retorted the human girl, "that's all that spaceship captains are anyhow."

"Have you met Selma?" asked Shreen. Then she performed the introductions.

"And are you enjoying the party, Mr. Grimes?" inquired Selma Madigan.

"Yes, Miss Madigan. It's a very pleasant change from the usual official

function—but don't tell anybody that I said so."

"I'm glad you like us. We try to get away from that ghastly Outposts of Empire atmosphere. Quite a number of our students are like Shreen here, quote aliens unquote . . ."

"On my world you would be the aliens."

"I know, my dear, and I'm sure that Mr. Grimes does too. But all intelligent beings can make valuable contributions to each other's cultures. No one race has a sacred mission to civilize the Galaxy."

"I wish you wouldn't preach, Selma." It was amazing how much expression the Princess could get out of her mechanical voice box. "But if you must, perhaps you can make a convert out of Lieutenant John." She waved a thin, gracefully articulated forelimb and was away, gliding off to join a group composed of two human men, a young Hallichek and a gaudy pseudo-saurian from Dekkovar.

Selma Madigan looked directly at Grimes. "And what do you think of our policy of integration?" she asked.

"It has to come, I suppose."

"It has to come," she mimicked. "You brassbound types are all the same. You get along famously with somebody like Shreen, because she's a real, live Princess. But the Shaara royalty isn't royalty as we understand it. The Queens are females who've reached the egg-laying stage, the Princesses are females who are not yet sexually developed. Still—Shreen's a Princess. You have far less in common with her, biologically speaking, than you have with Oona—but you gave Oona the brush-off and fawned all over Shreen."

Grimes flushed. "Oona's a rather smelly and scruffy little thing like a Terran chimpanzee. Shreen's—beautiful."

"Oona has a brilliant mind. Her one weakness is that she thinks that Terrans in pretty, gold-braided uniforms are wonderful. You snubbed her. Shreen noticed. I noticed."

"As far as I'm concerned," said Grimes, "Oona can be Her Imperial Highness on whatever world she comes from, but I don't have to like her."

Professor Tolliver, casually clad in a rather grubby toga, smoking a pipe even fouler than Grimes's, joined the discussion. He remarked, "Young Grimes has a point . . ."

"Too right I have," agreed Grimes. "As far as I'm concerned, people are people—it doesn't matter a damn if they're humanoid, arachnoid, saurian or purple octopi from the next galaxy but three. If they're our sort of people, I like 'em. If they ain't—I don't."

"Oona's our sort of people," insisted Selma.

"She doesn't smell like it."

The girl laughed. "And how do you think she enjoys the stink of your

pipe—and, come to that, Peter's pipe?"

"Perhaps she does enjoy it," suggested Grimes.

"As a matter of fact she does," said Professor Tolliver.

"Men . . ." muttered Selma Madigan disgustedly.

Tolliver drifted off then, and Grimes walked with the girl to the table on which stood a huge punchbowl. He ladled out drinks for each of them. He raised his own glass in a toast. "Here's to integration!"

"I wish that you really meant that."

"Perhaps I do . . ." murmured Grimes, a little doubtfully. "Perhaps I do. After all, we've only one Universe, and we all have to live in it. It's not so long ago that blacks and whites and yellows were at each other's throats on the Home Planet—to say nothing of the various subdivisions within each color group. Von Tannenbaum—that's him over there, the Blond Beast we call him. He's an excellent officer, a first class shipmate, and a very good friend. But his ancestors were very unkind to mine, on my mother's side. And mine had quite a long record of being unkind to other people. I could be wrong—but I think that much of Earth's bloody history was no more—and no less—than xenophobia carried to extremes . . ."

"Quite a speech, John." She sipped at her drink. "It's a pity that the regulations of your Service forbid you to play any active part in politics."

"Why?"

"You'd make a very good recruit for the new Party we're starting. LL . . ."

"LL . . . ?"

"The obvious abbreviation. The League of Life. You were talking just now of Terran history. Even when Earth's nations were at war there were organizations—religions, political parties, even fraternal orders—with pan-national and pan-racial memberships. The aim of the League of Life is to build up a membership of all intelligent species."

"Quite an undertaking."

"But a necessary one. Doncaster could be said to be either unfortunately situated, or otherwise, according to the viewpoint. Here we are, one Man-colonized planet on the borders of no less than two . . . yes, I'll use that word, much as I dislike it . . . no less than two alien empires. The Hallichek Hegemony, the Shaara Super-Hive. We know that Imperial Earth is already thinking of establishing Fortress Doncaster, converting this world into the equivalent of a colossal, impregnable armored and fantastically armed dreadnought with its guns trained upon both avian and arthropod, holding the balance of power, playing one side off against the other and all the rest of it. But there are those of us who would sooner live in peace and friendship with our neighbors. That's why Duncannon University has always tried to attract non-Terran students—and that's why the League of Life was brought into being." She smiled. "You could, I suppose call it enlightened self-interest."

"Enlightened," agreed Grimes.

He liked this girl. She was one of those women whose physical charm is vastly enhanced by enthusiasm. She did far more to him, for him, than the sort of female equally pretty or prettier, whom he usually met.

She said, "I've some literature at home, if you'd like to read it."

"I should—Selma."

She took the use of her given name for granted. Was that a good sign, or not?

"That's splendid—John. We could pick it up now. The party can get along without us."

"Don't you . . . er . . . live on the premises?"

"No. But it's only a short walk from here. I have an apartment in Heathcliff Street."

When Grimes had collected his boat cloak and cap from the cloakroom she was waiting for him. She had wrapped herself in a green academic gown that went well with her hair, matched her eyes. Together they walked out into the misty night. There was just enough chill in the air to make them glad of their outer garments, to make them walk closer together than they would, otherwise—perhaps—have done. As they strode over the damp-gleaming cobblestones Grimes was conscious of the movements of her body against his. Political literature, he thought with an attempt at cynicism. It makes a change from etchings. But he could not remain cynical for long. He had already recognized in her qualities of leadership, had no doubt in his mind that she would achieve high political rank on the world of her birth. Nonetheless, this night things could happen between them, probably would happen between them, and he, most certainly, would not attempt to stem the course of Nature. Neither of them would be the poorer; both of them, in fact, would be the richer. Meanwhile, it was good to walk with her through the soft darkness, to let one's mind dwell pleasantly on what lay ahead at the end of the walk.

"Here we are John," she said suddenly.

The door of the apartment house was a hazy, golden-glowing rectangle in the dimness. There was nobody in the hallway—not that it mattered. There was an elevator that bore them swiftly upwards, its door finally opening on a richly carpeted corridor. There was another door—one that, Grimes noted, was opened with an old-fashioned metal key. He remembered, then, that voice-actuated locks were not very common on Doncaster.

The furnishing of her living room was austere but comfortable. Grimes, at her invitation, removed his cloak and cap, gave them to her to hang up somewhere with her own gown, sat down on a well-sprung divan. He watched her walk to the window that ran all along one wall, press the switch that drew the heavy drapes aside, press another switch that caused the wide panes to sink into their housing.

She said, "The view of the city is good from here—especially on a misty night. And I like it when you can smell the clean tang of fog in the air . . ."

"You're lucky to get a clean fog," said Grimes, Earth-born and Earth-raised. He got up and went to stand with her. His arm went about her waist. She made no attempt to disengage it. Nonetheless, he could still appreciate the view. It was superb; it was like looking down at a star cluster enmeshed in a gaseous nebula . . .

"Smell the mist . . ." whispered Selma.

Dutifully, Grimes inhaled. Where did that taint of garlic come from? It was the first time that he had smelled it since Alberto ceased to officiate in the ship's galley. It must come from a source in the room with them . . .

Grimes could act fast when he had to. He sensed rather than saw that somebody was rushing at him and the girl from behind. He let go of her, pushed her violently to one side. Instinctively he fell into a crouch, felt a heavy body thud painfully into his back. He dropped still lower, his arms and the upper part of his torso hanging down over the windowsill. What followed was the result of luck rather than of any skill on the spaceman's part—good luck for Grimes, the worst of bad luck for his assailant. The assassin slithered over Grimes's back, head down, in an ungraceful dive. The heel of a shoe almost took one of the Lieutenant's prominent ears with it. And then he was staring down, watching the dark figure that fell into the luminous mist with agonizing slowness, twisting and turning as it plunged, screaming. The scream was cut short by a horridly fluid thud.

Frantically, Selma pulled Grimes back to safety.

He stood there, trembling uncontrollably. The reek of garlic was still strong in the air. He broke away from her, went back to the window and was violently sick.

"There are lessons," said Commodore Damien drily, "that a junior officer must learn if he wishes to rise in the Service. One of them is that it is unwise to throw a monkey wrench into the machinations of our masters."

"How was I to know, sir?" complained Grimes. He flushed. "In any case, I'd do it again!"

"I'm sure that you would, Mr. Grimes. No man in his right senses submits willingly to defenestration—and no gentleman stands by and does nothing while his companion of the evening is subjected to the same fate. Even so . . ." He drummed on his desk top with his skeletal fingers. "Even so, I propose to put you in the picture, albeit somewhat belatedly.

"To begin with, the late Mr. Alberto was criminally careless. Rather a neat play on words, don't you think? Apparently he officiated as usual in the High Commissioner's kitchen on the night in question, and Sir William had, earlier in the day, expressed a wish for pasta with one of the more redolent sauces. As a good chef should, Alberto tasted, and tasted, and tasted. As a member of his real profession he should have deodorized his breath before proceeding to Miss Madigan's apartment—where, I understand, he concealed himself in the bathroom, waiting until she returned to go through

her evening ritual of opening the window of her living room. He was not, I think, expecting her to have company—not that it would have worried him if he had . . ."

"What happened served the bastard right," muttered Grimes.

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Lieutenant. But we are all of us no more than pawns insofar as Federation policy is concerned. Or, perhaps, Alberto was a knight—in the chess sense of the word, although the German name for that piece, *springer*, would suit him better.

"Alberto was employed by the Department of Socio-Economic Science, and directly responsible only to its head, Dr. Barratin. Dr. Barratin is something of a mathematical genius, and uses a building full of computers to extrapolate from the current trends on all the worlds in which the Federation is interested. Doncaster, I need hardly tell you, is such a world, and the League of Life is a current trend. According to the learned Doctor's calculations, this same League of Life will almost certainly gain considerable influence, even power, in that sector of the Galaxy, under the leadership of your Miss Madigan . . ."

"She's not my Miss Madigan, sir. Unfortunately."

"My heart fair bleeds for you. But, to continue. To Dr. Barratin the foreign and colonial policies of the Federation can all be worked out in advance like a series of equations. As you will know, however, equations are apt, at times, to hold undesirable factors. Alberto was employed to remove such factors, ensuring thereby that the good Doctor's sums came out. He was known to his employers as the Subtractor . . ."

"Very funny," said Grimes. "Very funny. Sir."

"Isn't it?" Damien was laughing unashamedly. "But when things went so very badly wrong on Doncaster, Barratin couldn't see the joke, even after I explained it to him. "You see, Grimes, that you were a factor that wasn't allowed for in the equation. Alberto travelled to Doncaster in your ship, a Serpent Class Courier. You were with Miss Madigan when Alberto tried to . . . subtract her.

"And you were captain of the Adder!"