

## The Tin Messiah

"I'm afraid, Lieutenant," said Commodore Damien, "that your passenger, this trip, won't be able to help out in the galley."

"As long as he's not another assassin, he'll do me," said Grimes. "But I've found, sir, that anybody who likes to eat also likes now, and again, to prepare his own favorite dishes . . ."

"This one does. All the time."

Grimes looked at his superior dubiously. He suspected the Commodore's sense of humor. The older man's skull-like face was stiffly immobile, but there was a sardonic glint in the pale grey eyes.

"If he wants galley privileges, sir, it's only fair that he shares, now and again, what he hashes up for himself."

Damien sighed. "I've never known officers so concerned about their bellies as you people in the Adder. All you think about is adding to your weight . . ." Grimes winced—as much because of the unfairness of the imputation as in reaction to the pun. The Couriers—little, very fast ships—did not carry cooks, so their officers, obliged to cook for themselves, were more than usually food-conscious. Adder's crew was no exception to this rule. Damien went on, "I've no doubt that Mr. Adam would be willing to share his . . . er . . . nutriment with you, but I don't think that any of you, catholic as your tastes may be, would find it palatable. Or, come to that, nourishing. But who started this particularly futile discussion?"

"You did, sir," said Grimes.

"You'll never make a diplomat, Lieutenant. It is doubtful that you'll ever reach flag rank in this Service, rough and tough spacemen though we be, blunt and outspoken to a fault, the glint of honest iron showing through the work-worn fabric of our velvet gloves . . . H'm. Yes. Where was I?"

"Talking about iron fists in velvet gloves, sir."

"Before you side-tracked me, I mean. Yes, your passenger. He is to be transported from Lindisfarne Base to Delacron. You just dump him there, then return to Base forthwith." The Commodore's bony hand picked up the heavily sealed envelope from his desk, extended it. "Your Orders."

"Thank you, sir. Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes. Scramble!"

Grimes didn't exactly scramble; nonetheless he walked briskly enough to where his ship, the Serpent Class Courier Adder, was berthed. Dwarfed as she was by the bigger vessels about her she still stood there, tall, proud and gleaming. Grimes knew that she and her kind were referred to, disparagingly, as "flying darning needles," but he loved the slenderness of her lines, would not have swapped her for a hulking dreadnought. (In a dreadnought, of course, he would have been no more than one of many junior officers.) She was his.

Ensign Beadle, his First Lieutenant, met him at the airlock ramp, saluted. He reported mournfully (nobody had ever heard Beadle laugh, and he smiled but rarely), "All secure for lift off, Captain."

"Thank you, Number One."

"The . . . the passenger's aboard . . ."

"Good. I suppose we'd better extend the usual courtesy. Ask him if he'd like the spare seat in Control when we shake the dust of Base off our tail vanes."

"I've already done so, Captain. It says that it'll be pleased to accept the invitation."

"It, Number One. It! Adam is a good Terran name."

Beadle actually smiled. "Technically speaking, Captain, one could not say that Mr. Adam is of Terran birth. But he is of Terran manufacture."

"And what does he eat?" asked Grimes, remembering the Commodore's veiled references to the passenger's diet. "A.C. or D.C.? Washed down with a noggin of light lubricating oil?"

"How did you guess, Captain?"

"The Old Man told me, in a roundabout sort of way. But . . . A passenger, not cargo . . . There must be some mistake."

"There's not, Captain. It's intelligent, all right, and it has a personality. I've checked its papers, and officially it's a citizen of the Interstellar Federation, with all rights, privileges and obligations."

"I suppose that our masters know best," said Grimes resignedly.

It was intelligent, and it had a personality, and Grimes found it quite impossible to think of Mr. Adam as "it." This robot was representative of a type of which Grimes had heard rumors, but it was the first one that he had ever seen. There were only a very few of them in all the worlds of the Federation—and most of that few were of Earth itself. To begin with, they were fantastically expensive. Secondly, their creators were scared of them, were plagued by nightmares in which they saw themselves as latter day Frankensteins. Intelligent robots were not a rarity—but intelligent robots with imagination, intuition, and initiative were. They had been developed mainly for research and exploration, and could survive in environments that would be almost immediately lethal to even the most heavily and elaborately armored man.

Mr. Adam sat in the spare chair in the control room. There was no need for him to sit, but he did so, in an astonishingly human posture. Perhaps, thought Grimes, he could sense that his hosts would feel more comfortable if something that looked like an attenuated knight in armor were not looming tall behind them, peering over their shoulders. His face was expressionless—it was a dull-gleaming ovoid with no features to be expressive with—but it seemed to Grimes that there was the faintest flicker of luminosity behind the eye lenses that could betoken interest. His voice,

when he spoke, came from a diaphragm set in his throat.

He was speaking now. "This has been very interesting, Captain. And now, I take it, we are on trajectory for Delacron." His voice was a pleasant enough baritone, not quite mechanical.

"Yes, Mr. Adam. That is the Delacron sun there, at three o'clock from the center of the cartwheel sight."

"And that odd distortion, of course, is the resultant of the temporal precession field of your Drive . . ." He hummed quietly to himself for a few seconds. "Interesting."

"You must have seen the same sort of thing on your way out to Lindisfarne from Earth."

"No, Captain. I was not a guest, ever, in the control room of the cruiser in which I was transported." The shrug of his gleaming, metal shoulders was almost human. "I . . . I don't think that Captain Grisby trusted me."

That, thought Grimes, was rather an odd way of putting it. But he knew Grisby, had served under him. Grisby, as a naval officer of an earlier age, on Earth's seas, would have pined for the good old days of sail, of wooden ships and iron men—and by "iron men" he would not have meant anything like this Mr. Adam . . .

"Yes," the robot went on musingly, "I find this not only interesting, but amazing . . ."

"How so?" asked Grimes.

"It could all be done—the lift off, the setting of trajectory, the delicate balance between acceleration and temporal precession—so much . . . faster by one like myself . . ."

You mean "better" rather than faster," thought Grimes, but you're too courteous to say it.

"And yet . . . and yet . . . You're flesh and blood creatures, Captain, evolved to suit the conditions of just one world out of all the billions of planets. Space is not your natural environment."

"We carry our environment around with us, Mr. Adam." Grimes noticed that the other officers in Control—Ensign von Tannenbaum, the Navigator, Ensign Beadle, the First Lieutenant, and Lieutenant Slovotny, the radio officer—were following the conversation closely and expectantly. He would have to be careful. Nonetheless, he had to keep his end up. He grinned. "And don't forget," he said, "that Man, himself, is a quite rugged, self-maintaining, self-reproducing, all-purpose robot."

"There are more ways than one of reproducing," said Mr. Adam quietly.

"I'll settle for the old-fashioned way!" broke in von Tannenbaum.

Grimes glared at the burly, flaxen-headed young man—but too late to stop Slovotny's laughter. Even Beadle smiled.

John Grimes allowed himself a severely rationed chuckle. Then: "The show's on the road, gentlemen. I'll leave her in your capable hands. Number One. Set Deep Space watches. Mr. Adam, it is usual at this juncture for me to invite any guests to my quarters for a drink and a yarn . . ."

Mr. Adam laughed. "Like yourself, Captain, I feel the occasional need for a lubricant. But I do not make a ritual of its application. I shall, however, be very pleased to talk with you while you drink."

"I'll lead the way," said Grimes resignedly.

In a small ship passengers can make their contribution to the quiet pleasures of the voyage, or they can be a pain in the neck. Mr. Adam, at first, seemed pathetically eager to prove that he could be a good shipmate. He could talk—and he did talk, on anything and everything. Mr. Beadle remarked about him that he must have swallowed an encyclopedia. Mr. McCloud, the Engineering Officer, corrected this statement, saying that he must have been built around one. And Mr. Adam could listen. That was worse than his talking—one always had the impression of invisible wheels whirring inside that featureless head, of information either being discarded as valueless or added to the robot's data bank. He could play chess (of course)—and on the rare occasions that he lost a game it was strongly suspected that he had done so out of politeness. It was the same with any card game.

Grimes sent for Spooky Deane, the psionic communications officer. He had the bottle and the glasses ready when the tall, fragile young man seeped in through the doorway of his day cabin, looking like a wisp of ectoplasm decked out in Survey Service uniform. He sat down when invited, accepted the tumbler of neat gin that his captain poured for him.

"Here's looking up your kilt," toasted Grimes coarsely.

"A physical violation of privacy, Captain," murmured Deane. "I see nothing objectionable in that."

"And just what are you hinting at, Mr. Deane?"

"I know, Captain, that you are about to ask me to break the Rhine Institute's Privacy Oath. And this knowledge has nothing to do with my being a telepath. Every time that we carry passengers it's the same. You always want me to pry into their minds to see what makes them tick."

"Only when I feel that the safety of the ship might be at stake." Grimes refilled Deane's glass, the contents of which had somehow vanished. "You are . . . frightened of our passenger?" Grimes frowned. "Frightened" was a strong word. And yet mankind has always feared the robot, the automaton, the artificial man. A premonitory dread? Or was the robot only a symbol of the machines—the mindless machines—that with every passing year were becoming more and more dominant in human affairs?

Deane said quietly, "Mr. Adam is not a mindless machine."

Grimes glared at him. He almost snarled, "How the hell do you know what I'm thinking?"—then thought better of it. Not that it made any difference.

The telepath went on, "Mr. Adam has a mind, as well as a brain."

"That's what I was wondering."

"Yes. He broadcasts, Captain, as all of you do. The trouble is that I haven't quite got his . . . frequency."

"Any . . . hostility towards us? Towards humans?"

Deane extended his empty glass. Grimes refilled it. The telepath sipped daintily, then said, "I . . . I don't think so, but, as I've already told you, his mind is not human. Is it contempt he feels? No . . . Not quite. Pity? Yes, it could be. A sort of amused affection? Yes . . ."

"The sort of feelings that we'd have towards—say—a dog capable of coherent speech?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

"I could be wrong, Captain. I most probably am. This is the first time that I've eavesdropped on a non-organic mind. There seems to be a strong sense of . . . mission . . ."

"Mission?"

"Yes. It reminds me of that priest we carried a few trips back—the one who was going out to convert the heathen Tarvarkens . . ."

"A dirty business," commented Grimes. "Wean the natives away from their own, quite satisfactory local gods so that they stop lobbing missiles at the trading post, which was established without their consent anyhow . . ."

"Father Cleary didn't look at it that way."

"Good for him. I wonder what happened to the poor bastard?"

"Should you be talking like this, Captain?"

"I shouldn't. But with you it doesn't matter. You know what I'm thinking, anyhow. But this Mr. Adam, Spooky. A missionary? It doesn't make sense."

"That's just the feeling I get."

Grimes ignored this. "Or, perhaps, it does make sense. The robots of Mr. Adam's class are designed to be able to go where Man himself cannot go. In our own planetary system, for example, they've carried out explorations on Mercury, Jupiter, and Saturn. A robot missionary on Tarvark would have made sense, being impervious to poisoned arrows, spears, and the like. But on Delacron, an Earth colony? No."

"But I still get that feeling," insisted Deane.

"There are feelings and feelings," Grimes told him. "Don't forget that this is non-organic mind that you're prying into. Perhaps you don't know the code, the language . . ."

"Codes and languages don't matter to a telepath." Deane contrived to make his empty glass obvious. Grimes refilled it. "Don't forget, Captain, that there are machines on Delacron, intelligent machines. Not a very high order of intelligence, I admit, but . . . And you must have heard of the squabble between Delacron and its nearest neighbor, Muldoon . . ."

Grimes had heard of it. Roughly midway between the two planetary systems was a sun with only one world in close orbit about it—and that solitary planet was a fantastic treasure house of radioactive ores. Both Delacron and Muldoon had laid claim to it. Delacron wanted the rare metals for its own industries, the less highly industrialized Muldoon wanted them for export to other worlds of the Federation.

And Mr. Adam? Where did he come into it? Officially, according to his papers, he was a programmer, on loan from the Federation's Grand Council to the Government of Delacron. A programmer . . . A teacher of machines . . . An intelligent machine to teach other intelligent machines . . . To teach other intelligent machines what?

And who had programmed him—or had he just, as it were, happened?

A familiar pattern—vague, indistinct, but nonetheless there—was beginning to emerge. It had all been done before, this shipping of revolutionaries into the places in which they could do the most harm by governments absolutely unsympathetic towards their aspirations . . .

"Even if Mr. Adam had a beard," said Deane, "he wouldn't look much like Lenin . . ."

And Grimes wondered if the driver who brought that train into the Finland Station knew what he was doing.

Grimes was just the engine driver, and Mr. Adams was the passenger, and Grimes was tied down as much by the Regulations of his Service as was that long ago railwayman by the tracks upon which his locomotive ran. Grimes was blessed—or cursed—with both imagination and a conscience, and a conscience is too expensive a luxury for a junior officer. Those who can afford such a luxury all too often decide that they can do quite nicely without it.

Grimes actually wished that in some way Mr. Adam was endangering the ship. Then he, Grimes, could take action, drastic action if necessary. But the robot was less trouble than the average human passenger. There were no complaints about monotonous food, stale air and all the rest of it. About the only thing that could be said against him was that he was far too good a chess player, but just about the time that Grimes was trying to find excuses for not playing with him he made what appeared to be a genuine friendship, and preferred the company of Mr. McCloud to that of any the other officers.

"Of course, Captain," said Beadle, "they belong to the same clan."

"What the hell do you mean, Number One?"

Deadpan, Beadle replied, "The Clan MacHinery."

Grimes groaned, then, with reluctance, laughed. He said, "It makes sense. A machine will have more in common with our Engineering Officer than the rest of us. Their shop talk must be fascinating." He tried to initiate McCloud's accent. "An' tell me, Mr. Adam, whit sorr't o' lubricant d'ye use on yon ankle joint?"

Beadle, having made his own joke, was not visibly amused. "Something suitable for heavy duty I should imagine, Captain."

"Mphm. Well, if Mac keeps him happy, he's out of our hair for the rest of the trip."

"He'll keep Mac happy, too, Captain. He's always moaning that he should have an assistant."

"Set a thief to catch a thief," cracked Grimes. "Set a machine to . . . to . . ."

"Work a machine?" suggested Beadle.

Those words would do, thought Grimes, but after the First Lieutenant had left him he began to consider the implications of what had been discussed. McCloud was a good engineer—but the better the engineer, the worse the psychological shortcomings. The Machine had been developed to be Man's slave—but ever since the twentieth century a peculiar breed of Man had proliferated that was all too ready and willing to become the Machine's servants, far too prone to sacrifice human values on the altar of Efficiency. Instead of machines being modified to suit their operators, men were being modified to suit the machines. And McCloud? He would have been happier in industry than in the Survey Service, with its emphasis on officer-like qualities and all the rest of it. As it was, he was far too prone to regard the ship merely as the platform that carried his precious engines.

Grimes sighed. He didn't like what he was going to do. It was all very well to snoop on passengers, on outsiders—but to pry into the minds of his own people was not gentlemanly.

He got out the gin bottle and called for Mr. Deane.

"Yes, Captain?" asked the telepath.

"You know what I want you for, Spooky."

"Of course. But I don't like it."

"Neither do I." Grimes poured the drinks, handed the larger one to Deane. The psionic communications officer sipped in an absurdly genteel manner, the little finger of his right hand extended. The level of the transparent fluid in his glass sank rapidly.

Deane said, his speech ever so slightly slurred, "And you think that the safety of the ship is jeopardized?"

"I do." Grimes poured more gin—but not for himself.

"If I have your assurance, Captain, that such is the case . . ."

"You have."

Deanne was silent for a few seconds, looking through rather than at Grimes, staring at something . . . elsewhere. Then: "They're in the computer room. Mr. Adam and the Chief. I can't pick up Adam's thoughts—but I feel a sense of . . . rightness? But I can get into Mac's mind . . ." On his almost featureless visage the grimace of extreme distaste was startling. "I . . . I don't understand . . ."

"You don't understand what, Spooky?"

"How a man, a human being, can regard a hunk of animated ironmongery with such reverence . . ."

"You're not a very good psychologist, Spooky, but go on."

"I . . . I'm looking at Adam through Mac's eyes. He's bigger, somehow, and he seems to be self-luminous, and there's a sort of circle of golden light around his head . . ."

"That's the way that Mac sees him?"

"Yes. And his voice. Adam's voice. It's not the way that we hear it. It's more like the beat of some great engine . . . And he's saying, 'You believe, and you will serve.' And Mac has just answered, 'Yes, Master. I believe, and I will serve.' "

"What are they doing!" demanded Grimes urgently.

"Mac's opening up the computer. The memory bank, I think it is. He's turned to look at Adam again, and a panel over Adam's chest is sliding away and down, and there's some sort of storage bin in there, with rows and rows of pigeonholes. Adam has taken something out of one of them . . . A ball of greyish metal or plastic, with connections all over its surface. He's telling Mac where to put it in the memory bank, and how to hook it up . . ."

Grimes, his glass clattering unheeded to the deck, was out of his chair, pausing briefly at his desk to fling open a drawer and to take from it his .50 automatic. He snapped at Deane, "Get on the intercom. Tell every officer off duty to come to the computer room, armed if possible." He ran through the door out into the alleyway, then fell rather than clambered down the ladder to the next deck, and to the next one, and the next. At some stage of his descent he twisted his ankle, painfully, but kept on going.

The door to the computer room was locked, from the inside—but Grimes, as Captain, carried always on his person the ship's master key. With his left hand—the pistol was in his right—he inserted the convoluted sliver of metal into the slot, twisted it. The panel slid open.

McCloud and Adam stared at him, at the weapon in his hand. He stared back. He allowed his gaze to wander, but briefly. The cover plate had been replaced over the memory bank—but surely that heavily insulated cable leading to and through it was something that had been added, was an additional supply of power, too much power, to the ship's electronic bookkeeper.



McCloud smiled—a vague sort of smile, yet somehow exalted, that looked odd on his rough-hewn features. He said, "You and your kind are finished, Captain. You'd better tell the dinosaurs, Neanderthal Man, the dodo, the great auk, and all the others to move over to make room for you."

"Mr. McCloud," ordered Grimes, his voice (not without effort on his part) steady, "switch off the computer, then undo whatever it is that you have done."

It was Adam who replied. "I am sorry, genuinely sorry, Mr. Grimes, but it is too late. As Mr. McCloud implied, you are on the point of becoming extinct."

Grimes was conscious of the others behind him in the alleyway. "Mr. Beadle?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Take Mr. Slovetny with you down to the engine room. Cut off all power to this section of the ship."

"You can try," said Mr. Adam. "But you will not be allowed. I give notice now; I am the Master."

"You are the Master," echoed McCloud.

"Mutiny," stated Grimes.

"Mutiny?" repeated Adam, iron and irony in his voice. He stepped towards the Captain, one long, metallic arm upraised.

Grimes fired. He might as well have been using a pea-shooter. He fired again, and again. The bullets splashed like pellets of wet clay on the robot's armor. He realized that it was too late for him to turn and run; he awaited the crushing impact of the steel fist that would end everything.

There was a voice saying, "No . . . No . . ."

Was it his own? Dimly, he realized that it was not.

There was the voice saying, "No!"

Surprisingly Adam hesitated—but only for a second. Again he advanced—and then, seemingly from the computer itself, arced a crackling discharge, a dreadful, blinding lightning. Grimes, in the fleeting instant before his eyelids snapped shut, saw the automaton standing there, arms outstretched rigidly from his sides, black amid the electric fire that played about his body. Then, as he toppled to the deck, there was a metallic crash.

When, at long last, Grimes regained his eyesight he looked around the computer room. McCloud was unharmed—physically. The engineer was huddled in a corner, his arms over his head, in a fetal position. The computer, to judge from the wisps of smoke still trickling from cracks in its panels, was a total write-off. And Adam, literally welded to the deck, still in that attitude of crucifixion, was dead.

Dead . . . thought Grimes numbly. Dead . . . Had he ever been alive, in the real sense of the word?

But the ship, he knew, had been briefly alive, had been aware, conscious, after that machine which would be God had kindled the spark of life in her electronic brain. And a ship, unlike other machines, always has personality, a pseudo-life derived from her crew, from the men who live and work, hope and dream within her metal body.

This vessel had known her brief minutes of full awareness, but her old virtues had persisted, among them loyalty to her rightful captain.

Grimes wondered if he would dare to put all this in the report that he would have to make. It would be a pity not to give credit where credit was due.