

The Far Traveller came to Botany Bay, to Paddington, dropping down to the Bradman Oval—which sports arena, since the landing of the Survey Service's Discovery, had become a spaceport of sorts. Discovery was gone, to an unknown destination, taking with her the mutineers and the friends they had made in the newly rediscovered Lost Colony. The destroyer Vega, dispatched from Lindisfarne Base to apprehend the mutineers, was still in the Oval, still lying on her side, inoperative until such time as the salvage tugs should arrive to raise her to the perpendicular. Discovery, under the command of her rebellious first lieutenant, had toppled the other ship before making her escape.

John Grimes, lately captain of Discovery, was still on Botany Bay. He had no place else to go. He had resigned from the Survey Service, knowing full well that with the loss of his ship his famous luck had run out, that if he ever returned to Lindisfarne he would have to face a court martial and, almost certainly, would be held responsible for the seizure by mutineers of a valuable piece of Interstellar Federation property. And, in all likelihood, he would be held to blame for the quite considerable damage to Vega.

In some ways, however, he was still lucky. He had a job, one for which he was qualified professionally if not temperamentally. Botany Bay, as yet, owned no spaceships of its own. (The lost in space Lode Wallaby, bringing the original colonists, had crashed on landing and, in any case, the cranky lodejammers had been obsolete for generations.) Nonetheless, Botany Bay now needed a spaceport; since the news of Discovery's landing had been broadcast throughout the galaxy an influx of visitors from outside was to be expected. A spaceport needs a Port Captain. Even if Grimes had not been on more than friendly terms with Mavis, Mayor of Paddington and President of the Council of Mayors, he would have been the obvious choice.

Obvious—but not altogether popular. Vega's people were still on Botany Bay and all of them blamed Grimes for the wreck of their vessel and, come to that, Commander Delamere, the destroyer's captain, had always hated Grimes' guts. (It was mutual.) And there were the parents whose daughters had flown with the Discovery mutineers—and quite a few husbands whose wives had done likewise. Irately vociferous, too, were the cricket enthusiasts whose series of test matches had been disrupted by the cluttering up of the Oval with spaceships . . .

Only the prompt intervention of the local police had saved Grimes, on one occasion, from a severe beating up at the hands of a half dozen of Delamere's Marines. There had been no police handy when a husband whose wife had flown the coop with Discovery's bo's'n gave Grimes two black eyes. And he was becoming tired of the white-clad picketing cricketers outside his temporary office chanting, "Terry bastard go home!"

Then The Far Traveller came to Botany Bay.

She was not a big ship, but large for what she was, a deep space yacht. Her home port—Grimes had learned during the preliminary radio conversations with her master—was Port Bluewater, on El Dorado. That made sense. Only the filthy rich could afford space yachts—and El Dorado was the planet of the filthy rich. Grimes had been there once, as a junior officer in the cruiser Aries, and had been made to feel like a snotty-nosed

urchin from the wrong side of the tracks. He had been told, however, that he would be welcome to return—but only after he had made his first billion credits. He did not think it at all likely that he ever would return.

The Far Traveller dropped down through the clear, early morning sky, the irregular beat of her inertial drive increasing from an irritable mutter to an almost deafening clatter as she fell. The rays of the rising sun were reflected dazzlingly from her burnished hull. There was a peculiarly yellow quality to the mirrored light.

Grimes stood on the uppermost tier of the big grandstand watching her and, between times, casting an observant eye around his temporary domain. The triangle of scarlet beacons was there, well clear of the hapless Vega, the painfully bright flashers in vivid contrast to the dark green grass on which they stood. At the head of each of the tall flagstaffs around the Oval floated the flag of Botany Bay—blue, with red, white and blue superimposed crosses in the upper canton, a lopsided cruciform constellation of silver stars at the fly.

He was joined by the Deputy Port Captain. Skipper Wheeldon was not a spaceman—yet. He had been master of one of the big dirigibles that handled most of Botany Bay's airborne cargo and passenger trade. But he wanted to learn and already had a good grasp of spaceport procedure.

He said, "She's coming in nicely, sir."

Grimes grunted dubiously, "Mphm." He filled and lit his pipe. He said, speaking around the stem, "If I were that captain I'd be applying more lateral thrust. Can't he see that he's sagging to leeward? If he's not careful he'll be sitting down on top of Vega . . ."

It seemed almost as though the El Doradan shipmaster had overheard Grimes. The note of the inertial drive changed, the beat becoming more rapid, as the incoming ship added a lateral component to her controlled descent.

She was falling slowly now, very slowly, finally hovering a scant meter over the close-cropped grass. She dropped again, almost imperceptibly. Grimes wasn't sure that she was actually down until the inertial drive was shut off. The silence was almost immediately broken by the shouts of the picketing, bat-brandishing cricketers—kept clear of the landing area by slouch-hatted, khaki-clad police—shouting, "Terry, go home! Spacemen, go home!"

A telescopic mast extended from the needle prow of the golden ship. A flag broke out from its peak—dark purple and on it, in gold, the CR monogram. The Galactic Credit sign—and the flag of El Dorado.

"I suppose we'd better go down to roll out the red carpet," said Grimes.

Grimes stood at the foot of the slender golden tower that was The Far Traveller, waiting for the after airlock door to open, for the ramp to be extended. With him were Wheeldon, and Jock Tanner, the Paddington chief of police who, until things became properly organized, would be in charge of such matters as immigration and port health formalities. And there was Shirley Townsend, the Mayor's secretary. (Mavis herself was not present.

She had said, "I just might get up at sparrowfart to see a king or a queen or a president comin' in, but I'm damned if I'll put me-self out for a mere millionaire from Port Bluewater, El Ijorado." "Takin' their time," complained Tanner.

"Perhaps we should have gone round to the servants' entrance," said Grimes, half-seriously.

The outer door of the airlock slowly opened at last and, as it did so, the ramp extruded itself, a long metal tongue stretching out to lick the dew that still glittered on the grass. Like the shell-plating of the ship it was gold—or, thought Grimes, gold-plated. Either way it was ostentatious.

A man stood in the airlock chamber waiting to receive them. He was tall, and thin, and his gorgeous uniform, festoons of gold braid on dark purple, made him look like an animated totem pole. His lean face bore what seemed to be a permanently sour expression. Among the other gleaming encrustations on his sleeve Grimes could distinguish four gold hands. So this was the captain . . . And why should the captain be doing a job usually entrusted to, at best, a senior officer—the reception of port officials?

He looked down at the boarding party. He decided that Grimes—in a slightly modified airship captain's uniform, light blue, with four black bands on each epaulet, with a cap badge on which the silver dirigible had been turned through ninety degrees to make it look like a spaceship, was in charge. He said, "Will you come aboard, please? The Baroness d'Estang will receive you in her sitting room."

Grimes led the way up the ramp. "Grimes, Acting Port Captain," he said, extending his hand.

"Billinger, Master de jure but not de facto," replied the other with a wry grin.

Grimes wondered what was meant by this, but discreet inquiries could come later. He made the necessary introductions. Then Captain Billinger led the party into an elevator cage. He pushed no buttons—there were no buttons to push—merely said, "Her Excellency's quarters."

The locals were impressed. Grimes was not. Such things were common, enough on the worlds with which he was familiar. The ascent was smooth. They disembarked into a vestibule. A door before them slid silently open. Billinger led the way through it. He bowed to the tall, slim woman reclining on a chaise lounge and announced, "The port officials, Your Excellency."

"Thank you, Captain," she replied in a silvery voice, adding, "You may go."

Billinger bowed again, then went.

Grimes looked down at the Baroness, and she up at him. She was slim but rounded, the contours of her body revealed rather than hidden by the flimsy white translucency that enrobed her. There was a hint of pink-nippled breasts, of dark pubic shadow. Her cheekbones were high, her mouth wide and full, her chin not overly prominent but firm, her nose firmly arched. Her lustrous bronze hair was braided in the semblance of a coronet in which

flashed not-so-small diamonds. Even larger stones, in gold settings, depended from the lobes of her delicate ears.

She reminded Grimes of Goya's Maja—the draped version—although she had far longer legs. And the furnishings of her sitting room must be like—he thought—the furnishings of the boudoir in which that long ago and faraway Spanish aristocrat had posed for the artist. Certainly there was nothing about these surroundings that even remotely suggested a spaceship.

He was abruptly conscious of his not at all well-tailored uniform, of his far from handsome face, his prominent ears. He felt these flushing hotly, a sure sign of embarrassment.

She said, "Please sit down, Acting Port Captain—although I assume that the rank is de facto as well as de jure. And you, Deputy Port Captain. And you, City Constable. And, of course, Miss Townsend . . ."

"How did you . . .?" began Shirley. (It came out sounding like "'Ow did yer . . .?")

"I heard, and watched, the introductions;" said the Baroness, waving a slim, long hand towards what looked like an ordinary, although ornately gold-framed, mirror.

The City Constable fidgeted on a spindly-legged chair that looked as though it were about to collapse, at any moment, under his weight. He said, "If you'll excuse me, Baroness, I'll go an' see the skipper about the port formalities . . ."

"They will be handled here," said the Baroness firmly.' She did not actually finish the sentence with my man, but the unspoken words hung in the faintly scented air. She went on, "I have never left business to underlings." She clapped her hands. A man, dressed in old-fashioned servant's livery, white frilled shirt and scarlet, brass-buttoned waistcoat over black knee breeches, white stockings and black shoes, entered silently. A man? He was, Grimes realized, one of those humanoid serving robots that he had become familiar with during his stay on El Dorado, years ago. He—it?—was carrying folders of documents—clearances, crew and passenger lists, store lists, declarations, manifests. Without hesitation he handed the papers to the police officer.

"And now," asked the Baroness, "will you take refreshment? I know that, by your time, it is early in the day—but I have never known Spumante Vitelli to come amiss at any hour of the clock."

"Spumante Vitelli?" asked Shirley Townsend. "Sounds like an emetic . . ."

"It's an El Doradan wine," said Grimes hastily. "From Count Vitelli's vineyards."

"You know El Dorado, Port Captain?" asked the Baroness, polite but condescending surprise in her voice.

"I've been there," said Grimes. "Some years ago."

"But this is a Lost Colony. You have had no space travel since the founders

made their chance landing."

"Commander Grimes is out of the Federation's Survey Service," said Jock Tanner.

"Indeed?" The pencil-thin eyebrows arched over the dark, violet eyes.
"Indeed? Commander Grimes? There was—I recall—a Lieutenant Grimes . . ."
."

"There was," said Grimes. Then—the memories were flooding back—"Do you know the Princess Marlene von Stolzberg, Your Excellency?"

The Baroness laughed. "Slightly, Port Captain or Commander or whatever you are. She's too much of the Hausfrau, fat and dowdy, for my taste."

"Hausfrau?" echoed Grimes bewilderedly. "But . . ."

"Many women change, and not at all for the better, when they become mothers . . ." She went on maliciously, "And what about the father? As I recall it, there was a scandal. You, and Marlene, and that mad old Duchess, and poor Henri . . . It's a small universe, John Grimes, but I never did meet you on El Dorado and I never dreamed that I should meet you here . . ."

The robot servitor was back, bearing a golden (of course) tray on which was a golden icebucket with a magnum of the Spumante, gold-rimmed crystal goblets. He poured, serving his mistress first. Glasses were raised in salute, sipped from.

"Not a bad drop o' plonk," said Shirley, with deliberate coarseness.

The City Constable, doing his best to create a diversion, put his glass down on the richly carpeted deck, picked up the papers. "John," he said, "you know more about these things than I do . . . This clearance from Tallifer . . . Shouldn't it be signed by the Chief Medical Officer?"

"Not necessarily," said Grimes, putting his own glass down and getting up from his chair, walking across to the police officer. "But I think we'd better get Shirley—she's used to wading through bumf—to make sure that everything has been signed by a responsible official."

"Orl right," grumbled the girl. "Orl right." She drained her glass, belched delicately; joined Grimes and Tanner. The hapless Wheeldon, out of his depth and floundering, was left to make polite conversation with the Baroness.

Shortly thereafter The Far Traveller was granted her Inward Clearance and the boarding party trooped down the golden gangway to the honest turf of Botany Bay.

"You do have posh friends, John," said Shirley Townsend as soon as they were down the ramp.

"I didn't have any friends on El Dorado," said Grimes, not altogether truthfully and with a note of bitterness in his voice.

Captain Billinger was relaxing. He did not look happy, but his long face had

lost some of the lines of strain. He had changed from his fancy dress into more or, less sober civilian attire—a bright orange shirt worn over poisonously green slacks. He was sitting with Grimes at a table in the saloon bar of the Red Kangaroo.

He gulped beer noisily. "Boy," he said, "boy, oh boy, am I glad to get off that rich bitch's toy ship!"

"But you're rich yourself, surely," said Grimes. "You must be, to be an El Doradan . . ."

"Ha! Me an El Doradan! That'd be the Sunny Friday! No, Captain, I'm just a poor but reasonably honest Dog Star Line second mate. Beagle happened to be on Electra when her ladyship was there to pick up her super-duper yacht. Seems that she came there on an El Doradan ship—they do have ships, you know, and a few playboy spacemen to man 'em—and assumed that she'd be allowed to lift off in her own fully automated vessel without having a qualified master on board. But Lloyds'—may the Odd Gods of the galaxy rot their socks!—got into the act. No duly certificated master astronaut on the Register, no insurance coverage. Money talks—and it seems that more than just a couple or three Dog Star Line shares are held by El Doradans. Anyhow, the Old Man got a Carlottigram from Head Office—I'd like to know what it said!—and, almost at once, called me up to his sanctum and turned on the hard sell. Not that there was any need for it. The offer of a master's job at well over our Award rates for masters ... Only a yacht-master, it's true—but master nonetheless and damn' well paid. Like a mug, I jumped at it. Little did I know . . ." He finished his beer and waved two fingers at the near-naked, plumply attractive blonde waitress to order more.

"So you don't like it, Captain," said Grimes.

"You can say that again, Captain. And again. A rich bitch in a solid gold spaceship ..."

"Gold plated, surely," interjected Grimes.

"No. Gold. G-O-L-D."

"But gold's not a structural material."

"It is after those eggheads on Electra have finished with it. They rearrange the molecules. Or the atoms. Or something."

"Truly fantastic," commented Grimes.

"The whole bloody ship's fantastic. A miracle of automation or an automated miracle. A human captain's just a figurehead. You saw the landing yesterday?"

"Of course. After all, I am the Port Captain. There was something a bit . . . odd about it. I can guess now what it must have been. The ship was coming down by herself and making a balls of it—and then you had to take over."

Billinger glared at Grimes. "Ha. Ha bloody ha! For your information—I was

bringing her down. At first. Yes, I know damn' well that there was drift. I was showing off, see. At the last possible moment I was going to make a spectacular lateral hedge-hop and sit down bang in the middle of the beacons. And then She had to stick her tits in. 'Take your ape's paws off the controls,' she told me. 'The computer may not be as old as you—but it knows more about ship handling than you'll ever learn in your entire, misspent life!' "

The waitress brought two fresh pots of beer. Grimes could tell by the way she looked at Billinger that she liked him. (She would know, of course, who he was—and would be assuming that he was, as captain of a solid gold spaceship, rich.)

"Thank you, dear," said Billinger. He leered up at her and she simpered down at him. She took the banknote—of far too large a denomination—that he handed her, began to fumble in the sporran that was, apart from high-heeled sandals, her only clothing, for the change.

"That will be all right," said Billinger grandly.

Throwing money around like a drunken spaceman, thought Grimes.

"And what are you doing tonight after you close, my dear?" went on Billinger.

"If you wait around, sir, you'll find out," she promised, her simper replaced by a definitely encouraging smile.

She left the table reluctantly, her firm buttocks seeming to beckon as she moved away.

"I believe I'm on to something there," murmured Billinger. "I do. I really do. And I deserve it. I've been too long cooped up in that space-going trinket box with that rich bitch flaunting the body beautiful all over the whole damned ship—and making it quite plain that there was nothing doing. You can look but you can't touch—that's her ladyship!"

Grimes remembered his own experiences on El Dorado. He asked, however, "What exactly is she doing out here?"

"Research. Or so she says. Her thesis for a doctorate in some damn science or other. Social evolution in the Lost Colonies. Not that she'll find much to interest her here. Not kinky enough. Mind you, this'd be a fine world for an honest working stiff like me . . ." He stiffened abruptly. "Talk of the devil, look who's here . . ."

"Of two devils . . ." said Grimes. She swept into the crowded barroom, the gleaming length of her darkly tanned legs displayed to advantage by a skirt that was little more than a wide belt of gold mesh, topped by a blouse of the same material that was practically all décolletage. Her dark-gleaming hair was still arranged in a jewel-studded coronet. She was escorted—by no less a person than Commander Delamere. Handsome Frankie was dressed for the occasion in mess full dress, spotless white linen, black and gold, a minor constellation of tinkling miniatures depending from rainbow ribbons on the left breast of his superbly cut jacket. They were no more than Good

Attendance medals, Grimes knew—but they looked impressive.

The handsome couple paused briefly at the table at which Grimes and Billinger were seated.

"Ah, Mr. Grimes . . ." said Delamere nastily.

"Captain Grimes," corrected Grimes.

"A civilian, courtesy title," sneered Delamere. "A Port Captain."

He made it sound at least three grades lower than Spaceman, Fourth Class. (Grimes himself, come to that, had always held Port Captains in low esteem—but that was before he became one himself.)

"Perhaps we should not have come here, Francis," said the Baroness.

"Why shouldn't you?" asked Grimes. "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard." He knew that he was being childish but was deriving a perverse pleasure from the exchange.

"Come, Francis," she said imperiously. "I think I see a vacant table over there. A very good night to you, Port Captain. And to you . . . Captain Billinger? Of course. I did not recognize you out of your lively."

She glided away. She was the sort of woman who would look and move like an aristocrat no matter what she was or was not wearing. Delamere, a fatuous smirk on his too regularly featured face, followed.

Billinger scowled. "It's all very well for you, Captain," he complained, "but I have to work for that bitch."

"My nose fair bleeds for you," said Grimes unfeelingly.

So Delamere was a fast worker. And Delamere, as Grimes well knew, was the most notorious womanizer in the entire Survey Service. And he used women. His engagement to the very plain daughter of the Admiral commanding Lindisfarne Base had brought him undeserved promotions. But Delamere and this El Doradan Baroness? That was certainly intriguing. Who would be using whom? Grimes, back in his quarters in the Mayoral Palace, lay awake in the wide bed pondering matters; in spite of the large quantities of beer he had consumed he was not sleepy. He was rather sorry that Mavis, the Mayor, had not come to him, as she usually did. Apart from anything else he would have liked to talk things over with her.

Delamere and the Baroness . . . The Baroness and Delamere . . . He wished them joy of each other.

He wished Billinger and the little blonde waitress joy of each other as well.

But a vague premonition kept nagging at him. Something was cooking. He wished that he knew what it was.

Two mornings later he found out.

Billinger stormed into his office atop the grandstand just as he was sitting

down to his elevenses, tea freshly brewed by Shirley who, by now, was working for him as much as for the Mayor.

"This is too much!" yelled The Far Traveller's captain.

"Calm down, calm down," soothed Grimes. "Take a pew. Have a cuppa. And a scone."

"Calm down, you say? How would you feel? I was engaged as a yachtmaster, not a tugmaster. I should have been consulted. But she, as usual, has gone over my head!"

"What is all this?" asked Grimes.

"You mean you don't know either, Captain?"

"No. Sit down, have some tea and tell me all about it. Shirley—a cup for Captain Billinger, please."

"She," said Billinger after a tranquilizing sip, "is rolling in money—but that doesn't stop her from grabbing every chance to make more of the filthy stuff. She has signed a contract with your pal Delamere, engaging to raise Vega to lift-off position. She just happened to mention it to me, casual-like."

"You're not a tugmaster," said Grimes, "and a space yacht is certainly not a tug. Looks to me as though she's bitten off more than she—or you—can chew."

"Maybe not," said Billinger slowly. "Maybe not. She's a powerful little bitch—The Far Traveller, I mean. She's engines in her that wouldn't be out of place in a battleship. But I should have been consulted."

"So should I," said Grimes. "So should I. After all, this is my spaceport, such as it is . . ." And then, more to himself than to the other, a cheerful note creeping into his voice, "But Frankie won't be too popular signing away a large hunk of the taxpayers' money when the Survey Service's own tugs are well on the way here."

"They're not," said Billinger. "It seems that there's some indefinite delay. Delamere got a Carlottigram about it. Or so she mentioned." "And so Frankie keeps his jets clear," murmured Grimes in a disappointed voice. "He would."

And how would this affect him? he wondered. Vega lying helpless on her side was one thing, Vega restored to the perpendicular, to the lift-off position, would be an altogether different and definitely dangerous kettle of fish. Even should her drives, inertial and reaction, require adjustments or repairs she would be able to deploy her quite considerable weaponry—her cannon, missile launchers and lasers. The city of Paddington would lie at her mercy.

And then?

An ultimatum to the Mayor of Paddington?

Deliver the deserter, ex-Commander Grimes, to Federation's Survey Service custody, so that he may be carried to Lindisfarne Base to stand trial?

Hardly. Handsome Frankie wouldn't dare. Botany Bay was almost in the backyard of the Empire of Waverley and, thanks to certain of Discovery's technicians, now possessed its own deep space radio equipment, the Carlotti communications and direction finding system. A squeal to the Emperor—who had been getting uppish of late—and Imperial Navy cruisers would be hot-footing it to this sector of space. There would be all the makings of a nasty interstellar incident. And, in any case, H.I.M.S. Robert Bruce was already en route to Botany Bay to show the thistle flag.

But what was Billinger saying?

". . . interesting problem. It wouldn't be so bad if she'd let me handle it. But not her. It'll either be that bloody computer or that popinjay of an F.S.S. commander, or the pair of 'em working in collusion. With her sticking her tits into everything."

"And, of course," said Grimes, just to cheer him up, "you, as master, will be legally responsible if anything goes wrong."

"Don't I know it. For two pins I'd resign. I'd be quite happy waiting here for another ship to come along. After all, I've a pile of credits due in back pay. But I suppose I'd better get back to my noble vessel to see what's been cooked up in my absence."

"I'll come with you," said Grimes.

The pair of them stood in the Baroness' boudoir. She did not ask them to sit down. She, herself, was not reclining decoratively on her chaise longue but seated at a sectitaire, a gracefully designed desk—excellent reproduction or genuine antique?—with rich ormolu decoration. That desk, thought Grimes, was almost certainly a reproduction. His mind was a repository of scraps of useless knowledge and he remembered that the original ormolu had been brass imitating gold. Only the genuine metal would do for the Baroness. She looked up from the papers before her. A pair of heavy, old-fashioned spectacles, black framed, went oddly with her flimsy gown, but suited her. She said, "Captain Billinger, I believe that you, as master, are required to sign the contract. I, as owner, have already signed."

Sulkily Billinger went to stand by the ornate desk, produced a stylus from a breast pocket of his gaudy uniform, and bent to scribble his name.

"And Port Captain Grimes . . . I understand that I should ask your permission to engage in . . . to wage? . . . within the spaceport limits."

"That is so, Your Excellency," said Grimes.

"I assume that the permission is granted."

Grimes was tempted to say no, but decided against it. Commander Delamere represented the Survey Service, and the Baroness d'Estang represented El Dorado, with its vast wealth and influence. It is futile to fart

against thunder.

He said, "Yes."

"Good. No doubt you gentlemen feel that you are entitled to be apprised as to what has been arranged between Commander Delamere and myself. The commander will supply the tow wires from his stores. It will be necessary to pierce The Far Voyager's hull about the stern to secure the towing lugs. I understand that the welding of steel on to gold is impracticable—and, of course, the . . . modified gold that was used to build the ship on Electra is not obtainable here. Commander Delamere assures me, however, that his artificers will be able to make good the hull after the job has been completed. All dust and shavings will be carefully collected and melted down to plug the holes." She turned in her chair to address Billinger. "All relevant data has been fed into the computer." She permitted herself a smile. "You will be pleased to learn, Captain, that it does not feel itself competent to undertake what is, in effect, salvage work. The programmers back on Electra did not envisage any circumstances such as those that have arisen now." She looked positively happy. "The guarantee has not yet expired, so I shall be entitled to considerable redress from Electronics and Astronautics, Incorporated." She paused, looked quizzically at Grimes, the spectacles making her look like a severe schoolmistress. "Commander Delamere did suggest that he assume temporary command of my ship during the operation, but I decided not to avail myself of his kind offer."

She's shrewd, thought Grimes. She's got him weighed up.

She turned again to Billinger. "You are the master, Captain. I am paying you a handsome salary. I expect you to begin earning it. And I am sure that Port Captain Grimes will be willing to oversee the entire operation from the ground end."

"I shall be pleased to, Your Excellency," said Grimes.

"After all," she told him, "this is your spaceport, even though it is normally used for archaic Australian rites. Thank you, gentlemen."

They were dismissed.

"I don't like it, John," said Mavis.

The Mayor of Paddington, the President of the Council of Mayors of Botany Bay, was sprawled in an easy chair in Grimes' sitting room, looking at him solemnly over the rim of a mug of beer. She was a big woman, big but firm-bodied, older than him but still sexually attractive. She was wearing a gaudy sarong that displayed her deeply tanned, sturdy legs and arms and shoulders. Her gleaming, almost white hair made a startling contrast to the darkness of her face, as did the pale gray eyes, the serious eyes. Of late she'd been too much the mother and too little the lover for Grimes' taste.

He said, "We have to get that bloody Vega off your cricket pitch sometime."

She said, "That's as maybe—but I wouldn't trust your cobber Delamere as far as I could throw him."

"No cobber of mine," said Grimes. "He never was, and never will be." He laughed. "Anyhow, you could throw him quite a fair way."

She laughed. "An' wouldn't I like to! Into one o' those stinkin' pools out at the sewage farm."

Grimes said, "He'd never dare to use his guns to demand that you turn me over to him. He knows damn well that if he sparked off an incident his Survey Service career would be blasted as surely as mine had been."

She did not need to be a telepath to sense his mood. She said softly, "That Service of yours has been more of a mistress—and a mother—to you than I have ever been, ever could be . . ."

"No . . ." he said at last.

"Don't lie to me, John. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. I'm just an old bag who's been around for so long that emotionally I'm mostly scar tissue . . ." She lit one of the cigars made from the mutated tobacco plants of Botany Bay, deeply inhaled the fragrant, aphrodisiac smoke. Grimes, whether or not he wanted to, got his share of the potent fumes. In his eyes she became more and more attractive, Junoesque. The sarong slipped to reveal her big, firm, brown-gleaming breasts. He got up from his own chair, took a step towards her.

But she hadn't finished talking. Raising a hand to fend him off she said, "And it's not only the Service. It's space itself. I've been through this sorta thing before. My late husband was a seaman—an' he thought more o' the sea an' his blasted ships than he ever did o' me. An' the airship skippers are as bad, their wives tell me. Sea, air an' space . . . The great mistresses with whom we mere, mortal women can never compete ..."

"You don't have ter tell me, John, but you're . . . pinin'. It's a spacegoin' command you really want, not the captaincy of a cricket pitch that just happens ter be cluttered up with spaceships. I wish I could help—but it'll be years before we have any spaceships of our own. An' I wish I could get you off Botany Bay—for your sake, not mine; I hear things an' hear of things. That Delamere was sayin'—never mind who to—`The Survey Service has a long arm—an' if that bastard Grimes thinks he's safe here, he's got another thing comin' . . ."

"Delamere . . ." said Grimes contemptuously.

"He's a weak man, perhaps," said Mavis, "but he's vain. An' cunning. An' dangerous."

"He couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag," said Grimes.

"He has men—an' he'll soon have a ship—to do his fightin' for him," Mavis told him.

"Let's forget about him, shall we?" suggested Grimes.

He dropped the last of his clothing to the floor, fell thankfully into Mavis' ample embrace. For a time—if only for a short time—he forgot space and ships and, even, the nagging premonition of some fresh disaster yet to

come.

Grimes stood with Wheeldon on the close-cropped grass of the Oval—the groundsmen were still carrying out their duties although no one knew when, if ever, play would be resumed—a scant five meters from the recumbent hulk of Vega. She was no more than a huge metal tube, pointed at one end and with vanes at the other. It did not seem possible that she would ever fly, ever had flown. Like a giant submarine, improbably beached on grassland, she seemed—a submarine devoid of conning tower and control surfaces. Grimes remembered a visit he had paid to one of the shipbuilding yards on Atlantia, where he, and other Survey Service officers, had witnessed the launching of one of the big underseas oil tankers. And this operation, of which he was in charge, would be a launching of sorts . . .

Forward of the crippled destroyer stood The Far Traveller, a fragile-seeming golden tower, a gleaming spire supported by the flying buttresses that were her stern vanes. Between each of these there was a steel lug, the dull gray of the base metal contrasting with the rich, burnished yellow of the yacht's shell plating. Grimes had inspected these fittings and, reluctantly, had admitted that Delamere's artificers had made a good job. To each of the three lugs was shackled a length of wire rope, silvery metal cordage that, in spite of its apparent flimsiness, was certified to have a safe working load in the many thousands of tons. It, like the Baroness; yacht, was a product of Electra, whose metallurgists specialized in the rearrangement of molecular structures. It was hellishly expensive—but when it came to the supply of stores and equipment to its ships the Survey Service had its moments of profligacy. That wire must have been in Vega's storerooms for years. Nobody had dreamed that it would ever be used.

Lugs had been welded to the destroyer's skin just abaft the circular transparencies of the control room viewports. To each of these a length of wire was shackled. All three tow wires were still slack, and would be so until The Far Traveller took the strain. Grimes didn't like the setup. The problem would be to maintain an equal stress on all parts. He would have liked to have installed self-tensioning winches in either the yacht or the destroyer but, although such devices were in common use by Botany Bay's shipping, none available were capable of handling the enormous strains that would be inevitable in an operation of this kind. As it was, he must do his damndest to ensure that at least two of the wires were taking the weight at all times, and that there were no kinks. He could visualize all too clearly what would happen if there were—a broken end whipping through the air with all the viciousness of a striking snake, decapitating—or worse—anybody unlucky enough to be in the way. And he, Grimes, would be one such. He had to direct things from a position where he could see at once if anything were going wrong. Delamere and the Baroness and all Vega's crew, with the exception of one engineer officer, were watching from the stands, from a safe distance. And Mavis, with her entourage, was also getting a grandstand view . . .

He stood there, hatless in the warm sunshine but wearing a headset with throat microphone. It was a good day for the job, he thought, almost windless. Nothing should go wrong. But if everything went right—there was that nagging premonition back again—then things could start going wrong. For him. Heads you win, tails I lose . . . ? _Maybe.

He said to Wheeldon, "Better get up to the stands. If one of those wires parts it won't be healthy around here."

"Not on your sweet Nelly," said the Deputy Port Captain. "I'm supposed to be your apprentice. I want to see how this job is done."

"As you please," said Grimes. He spoke quietly, "Port Captain to The Far Traveller. Stand by to begin."

"Standing by," came Billinger's voice.

"Port Captain to Vega. Stand by."

"Standing by," replied the engineer in the destroyer's inertial drive room.

Ships, thought Grimes, should be fitted with inertial drive units developing enough lateral thrust to cope with this sort of situation. But I'll use whatever thrust that engineer can give me ...

"Port Captain to The Far Traveller. Lift off . . ."

The yacht's inertial drive started up, cacophonous in the still air. She lifted slowly. The wire cables started to come clear of the grass.

"Hold her at that, Billinger. Hold her. Now ... Cant her, cant her ... Just five degrees short of the maximum safe angle . . ."

The Far Traveller was not only a floating tower, hanging twenty meters clear of the ground, but was becoming a leaning tower, toppling slowly and deliberately until her long axis was at an angle of forty degrees from the vertical. Billinger should have no trouble in holding her in that position. In a normal vessel anxious officers or petty officers would be sweating over their controls; in the fully automated yacht servo-mechanisms would be doing all the work.

"Port Captain to Vega . . . Maximum lateral thrust, directed down ..."

The destroyer came to life, snarling, protesting. The racket from the two ships was deafening.

"Lift her, Billinger, lift her . . . Maintain your angle . . ."

The Far Traveller lifted. The cables—or two of them—tautened. They . . . thrummed, an ominous note audible even above the hammering of the inertial drive units. But the sharp stem' of Vega was coming clear of the grass, a patch of dead, crushed yellow showing in sharp contrast to the living green.

"Thirty-five degrees, Billinger directed ..."

The change in the yacht's attitude was almost imperceptible, but the threatening song of the bar-taut wires was louder.

"Increase your thrust if you can, Vega!"

"I'll bugger the innie if I do that . . ."

"It's not my innie!" growled Grimes. "Increase your thrust!"

More yellow was showing under the ship.

"Billinger—thirty degrees . . . Twenty-five ... And roll her, roll her to port ... Just a touch ... Hold it!"

For a moment it seemed that all the weight would be on one cable only, but now two had the strain once more.

"Twenty degrees, Billinger . . ."

Vega was lifting nicely, coming up from the long depression that she had made with her inert tonnage. Grimes noticed wormlike things squirming among the dead grass stems—but this was no time for the study of natural history. He was trying to estimate the angle made by the destroyer's long axis with the ground. Soon he would be able to tell the engineer to apply fore-and-aft thrust . . .

"Ten degrees, Billinger . . ."

Then it happened. One of the taut wires snapped, about halfway along its length. The broken ends whipped viciously—the upper one harmlessly but the lower one slashing down to the grass close to where Grimes was standing. It missed him. He hardly noticed it.

"Billinger, roll to starboard! Roll!" He had to get the weight back on to two wires instead of only one. "Hold her! And lift her, lift!"

Would the cables hold?

"Vega, fore-and-aft thrust! Now!"

The destroyer, her sharp bows pointing upwards and rising all the time, surged ahead. Two of her stern vanes gouged long, ugly furrows in the grass. There should-have been an officer in her control room to take charge of her during these final stages of the operation—but Delamere, when this point had been raised, had insisted that this - would not be necessary. (The obvious man for the job, of course, would have been Vega's commanding officer—and Frankie, as Grimes well knew, was always concerned for the safety of his own skin.)

Vega lifted, lifted, coming closer and closer to the vertical. Two of her vanes were already in contact with the ground, the third was almost so. Grimes looked up to the taut cables. He could see bright strands of wire protruding from one of them. It would be a matter of seconds only before it parted, as had the first one.

"Vega! Full lateral thrust! Now!" "The innie's flat out!"

Damn all engineers! thought Grimes. At crucial moments their precious machinery was always of greater importance to them than the ship.

"Double maximum thrust—or you've had it!"

The officer must have realized that this was an emergency. The destroyer's

inertial drive not only hammered, but . . . howled. The ship shuddered and teetered and then, suddenly, lifted her forward end, so rapidly that for an instant the cables hung slack. But Billinger quickly took the weight again and gave one last mighty jerk. The stranded cable parted but the remaining wire held. The broken end slashed down to the grass on the other side of the destroyer from Grimes.

Vega came to the perpendicular and stood there, rocking slightly on her vanes.

"Billerger—'vast towing! Vega—cut inertial drive!"

"It's cut itself . . ." said Vega's engineer smugly.

And then, only then, was Grimes able to look down to see what the end of the first snapped cable had done. He stared, and swallowed, and vomited, where he stood, all over his shoes. But it didn't much matter. His footwear and lower legs were already bespattered with blood and tatters of flesh. The flying wire had cut the unfortunate Deputy Wheeldon—not very neatly—in two.

So Captain. Billinger gingerly brought The Far Traveller down to a landing, careful not to get the yacht's stern foul of the two remaining tow wires. So Commander Delamere, at the head of his crew, his spacemen and marines, marched down from the grandstand and across the field and resumed possession of his ship. So the ambulance drove up to collect what was left of the Deputy Port Captain while Grimes stood there, staring down at the bloodied grass, retching miserably.

To him came Mavis, and Shirley and, surprisingly, the Baroness.

Mavis whispered, "It could have happened to you . . ."

Grimes said, "It should have happened to me, Mavis. I was in charge."

The Baroness said, "I shall arrange for more than adequate compensation to be paid to the Deputy Port Captain's relatives."

"Money!" flared Mavis. "It's all that you and your kind ever think of! If 'you hadn't grabbed the chance o' makin' a few dollars on the side by usin' your precious yacht as a tugboat this would never have happened!"

The Baroness said, "I'm' sorry. Believe me, I'm sorry . . ."

"Look!" cried Shirley, pointing upwards.

They looked. Ports had opened along Vega's sleek sides, in the plating of turrets and sponsons. The snouts of weapons, cannon and laser projectors, protruded, hunting, like the questing antennae of some giant insect.

"Here it comes," said Mavis glumly. "The ultimatum. Give us Grimes, or else . . ." She stiffened. "But I'm not givin' you to those Terry bastards!"

Yet there was no ultimatum, no vastly amplified voice roaring over the sports arena. The guns ceased their restless motion but remained visible.

"Just Frankie making sure that everything's in working order," said Grimes at last.

"Leave him to play with his toys," said Mavis. "Come home and get cleaned up." She turned to the El Doradan. "Comin' with us, Baroness?" The tone of her voice made it obvious that she did not expect the invitation to be accepted.

"No, thank you, Your Ladyship. I must go aboard my yacht to see what must be done to make her seaworthy again."

"C'm'on," said Mavis to Grimes and Shirley.

They walked slowly towards the main gates. All at once they were surrounded by a mob—men clad in white flannel with absurd little caps on their heads, with gaudily colored belts supporting their trousers, brandishing cricket bats.

"Terry bastard go home! Terry bastard go home!"

I've got no home to go to, thought Grimes.

"Bury the bastard in the holes he dug in our cricket pitch!" yelled somebody.

"Buryin's too good!" yelled somebody else. "Cut 'im in two, same as he did Skipper Wheeldon!"

"It was an accident!" shouted Mavis. "Now, away with yer! Let us through!"

"I'm chocker takin' orders from you, you fat cow!" growled a man who seemed to be the ringleader, a hairy, uncouth brute against whom Grimes, in any circumstances, would have taken an instant dislike. "An' as it's too long ter wait for the next election- . . ."

He raised his bat.

From Vega came a heavy rattle of automatic fire. The sky between the ship and the mob was bright with tracers. Had the aim not been deliberately high there would have been sudden death on the ground. Again the guns fired, and again—and Grimes and the two women found themselves standing safe and unmolested while the cricketers bolted for cover. Three bats and a half dozen or so caps littered the heavily trampled grass.

"An' now what?" asked Mavis in a shaken voice.

"Just Frankie, as a good little Survey Service commander, rallying to the support of the civil authority," said Grimes at last. Then—"But where were your police?"

"That big, bearded bastard," muttered Mavis, "just happens to be a senior sergeant ..."

Then Tanner, with a squad of uniformed men, arrived belatedly to escort the mayoral party to the palace. The City Constable was not as apologetic as he should have been.

The next day was a heavy one for Grimes.

There were, as yet, no Lloyd's Surveyors on Botany Bay; nonetheless The Far Traveller was required to have a fresh Certificate of Spaceworthiness issued to her before she could lift from the surface of the planet. Of course, the Baroness could depart without such documentation if she so wished—but without it her ship would not be covered by the underwriters. And she was, for all her title and some what decadent elegance, a shrewd businesswoman.

She called Grimes to her presence. A robot servitor ushered him into the lady's boudoir where she, flimsily dressed as usual, was seated at her beautiful, fragile seeming, pseudo-antique desk. She was wearing the heavy-rimmed spectacles again, studying a thick, important looking book.

"Ah, good morning, Acting Port Captain ... Now, this matter of insurance. As you know, Commander Delamere's artificers were obliged to pierce my hull to fit the towing lugs. This morning they are making the damage good, as required by the contract. After the repairs have been completed a survey must be carried out."

"By whom, Your Excellency?" asked Grimes.

"By you, of course, Port Captain. You will receive the usual fee."

"But I'm not a, surveyor . . ."

"You are the Port Captain." A slim index finger with a long, gold-enameled nail stabbed down at the open pages. "Listen. On planets where Lloyd's maintain neither offices, agents nor surveyors Lloyd's Certificates may be endorsed or issued by such planetary officials as are deemed competent by the Corporation to carry out such functions. Port Captains, Port Engineers, etc ... Commanding officers of vessels or bases of the Interstellar Federation's Survey Service . . ." She smiled briefly. "I have no intention of paying a surveyor's fee to your friend Commander Delamere. In any case, as his people are doing the repairs he is ruled out." She read more. "Commanding officers of vessels or bases of the Imperial Navy of Waverley ... No. I'm not going to wait around until that Waverley cruiser—Robert Bruce, isn't it?—condescends to drop in sometime. So . . ."

"So I'm it," said Grimes.

"Elegantly expressed, Acting Port Captain. But I suggest that you take Captain Billinger into consultation, and that both of you accept guidance from the computer. After all, it is the ship's brain. It is the ship—just as your intelligence is you—and is fully capable of self-diagnosis."

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. He wanted to pull his vile pipe out of his pocket, to fill it and light it, but knew that to ask permission to do so would bring a rebuff. He said, "So you need a Lloyd's Surveyor as much—or as little—as you need a Captain."

She said, "I need neither. But Lloyd's of London says that I must have both. So may I suggest that you get on with your surveying?"

Bitch, thought Grimes. Rich bitch. Rich, spoiled bitch. He said, "Very well, Your Excellency," bowed stiffly and left.

The humanoid robot in butler's livery led him to the elevator. The upward ride was such a short one that it would have been less trouble to have used the spiral staircase that ornately entwined the axial shaft. Billinger was waiting in his own quarters for Grimes.

The yachtmaster was not uncomfortably housed. The keynote was one of masculine luxury—deep armchairs upholstered in genuine black leather, a low, glass-topped coffee table standing on sturdy ebony legs, bookshelves all along one bulkhead, well-stocked with volumes in gilt and leather bindings, an ebony liquor cabinet, a huge playmaster encased in paneling of the same expensive wood. Holograms glowed on the other bulkheads, bright windows looking out on seascapes and mountainscapes and, inevitably, a beach scene on Arcadia with the inevitable sun-bronzed naked blonde in the foreground.

"She does you well, Captain," commented Grimes.

"Careful, Captain," said Billinger. "Big Brother—or Big Sister?— is watching. And listening." He gestured towards the playmaster, the screen of which seemed to be dead. "Coffee?"

"Please."

Almost immediately a girl, a stewardess, came in, bearing a tray—a golden tray, of course, with golden cream jug and sugar bowl, gold-chased china. And the girl—the robot, rather—was also golden, wearing a short-skirted black uniform over a perfectly proportioned body that gleamed metallicly.

She set the tray on the table and poured. "Sugar, sir?" she asked. "Cream?"

The mechanical quality of her voice was barely discernible.

"Quite a work of art," remarked Grimes when she was gone.

"I'd sooner have something less good-looking in soft plastic," said

Billinger coarsely. "But I've been making up for lost time on this world! Too bloody right—as the natives say—I have!"

"Big Sister . . ." murmured Grimes, looking meaningfully towards the playmaster.

"So what?" demanded Billinger belligerently. "I'm human. And it took humans to handle the raising of Vega, not the bastard offspring of an electronic calculator and a library bank!"

"The first time, Captain Billinger," said a cold, mechanical yet somehow feminine voice from the playmaster. "But should a set of similar circumstances arise in the future I shall be quite capable of handling operations myself."

"Big Sister?" asked Grimes.

"In person," growled Billinger. "Singing and dancing."

"For your information, gentlemen," went on the voice, "the artificers from the destroyer have commenced work upon my stern. I would have preferred to carry out the repairs with my own robots, but the owner maintained that Commander Delamere must adhere to the terms of the contract. Be assured, however, that I am keeping the artificers under close observation and will not tolerate any shoddy workmanship."

"Even so," said Grimes, "we had better go down to see what's happening."

"That will not be necessary, Acting Port Captain. I shall not lift from this planet unless I am completely satisfied as to my space-worthiness."

"I shall be signing the certificate, not you," said Grimes harshly.

He drained his cup—he would have liked more of that excellent coffee but this uppity robot was spoiling his enjoyment of it—put it back on the table with a clatter, got to his feet.

"Are you coming, Billinger?" he asked.

"Yes," said the yachtmaster.

The two men made their way to the axial shaft, to the waiting elevator, and made a swift descent to the after airlock.

Vega's technicians were working under one of the destroyer's engineer lieutenants. This officer turned his head as Grimes and Billinger came down the ramp, straightened up reluctantly and accorded them a surly salute. He knew Grimes, of course, and like all of Vega's personnel blamed him for what had happened to that ship. He did not know Billinger, nor did he want to.

Grimes watched the artificers at work. Scaffolding had been erected under The Far Traveller's stern, a light but strong framework of aluminum rods and plates. Power cables snaked over the grass from the destroyer to the equipment in use. That seemed odd. Surely it would have been less trouble to use the output of the yacht's generators for the drilling, cutting and welding. He said as much, addressing Billinger.

The engineer overheard. He said bitterly, "She would never allow it . . ."

"The Baroness?" asked Grimes.

"No. Not her. It's not her voice that's doing all the yapping. Some Other female . . ." He raised his own voice an octave in not very Convincing mimicry. " 'Why should I supply the power to repair the damage that you have done to me? Why should I wear out my generators . . .?' " He paused. "And that's not the worst of it. She hasn't actually come near us, but she must have spy eyes planted, and concealed speakers. Nag, nag, nag nag . . ."

The voice came from nowhere, everywhere. Grimes had heard it before, in Billinger's cabin. "Careful, you men. Careful. I'm not some dirty great battleship that you're patching up. I take some pride in my appearance,

even if you take none in yours. I shall expect that scratch filled and then buffed to a mirror finish."

"Who the hell is she?" demanded the lieutenant.

"Big Sister," Billinger told him, his voice smug and almost happy.

"She sounds more like some wives I've heard."

"Not mine," said Billinger. "Not mine. Not that I've ever had one. And when I do she'll not be like that."

"They never are," said the other philosophically, "until after you've married them . . ."

"Captain Billinger, may I suggest that you abandon this futile conversation and take some interest in the repairs? And Mr. Verity, please supervise the activities of those ham-handed apes of yours. I distinctly said that each plug must be machined to a tolerance of one micro-millimeter or less. I will not accept ugly cracks filled in with clumsy welding."

"It's all very well," said the engineer hotly, "but we don't have a supply of that fancy gold your ship is made of. We could use ordinary gold—but you say that that won't do."

"And what happened to the metal your men drilled out?"

"There were losses. There are always losses."

And how many of Vega's mechanics, wondered Grimes, will be giving pretty little trinkets to their girlfriends back on Lindisfarne?

"Very well," said The Far Traveller's voice, "I shall supply you with gold. Please wait at the foot of the ramp."

The men waited. A female figure appeared in the after airlock chamber then walked gracefully down the gangway. It was Billinger's robot stewardess. The artificers whistled until, suddenly, they realized that she was not human. But one of them muttered, "Be a bleedin' shame to melt her down . . ."

She was carrying a golden tray, and on it a teapot of the same metal, a milk jug and a sugar bowl. Wordlessly she handed these to one of the spacemen.

"My tea service!" exclaimed Billinger.

"Nothing aboard me is yours, Captain," said Big Sister. "As long as you are employed you have the use of certain equipment."

"What is all this?" asked the engineer.

"Just do as she says`," muttered Billinger. "Melt down my teapot and make it snappy. Otherwise she'll be having the buttons and braid off my uniform . . ."

Grimes wandered away. The atmosphere around the stern of the yacht was

becoming heavily charged with acrimony and he was, essentially, a man of peace. He carefully did not walk too close to the towering Vega. He had no reason to like that ship and certainly her captain did not like him. He sensed that he was being watched. He looked up but saw nothing but the reflection of the morning sun from the control room view ports—but he could imagine Delamere there, observing his every move through high-powered binoculars.

"Port Captain! Hey, Port Captain!"

Grimes sighed. There was a group of pestilential cricketers under the destroyer's quarter. What were the police doing? They were supposed to be keeping the field clear of demonstrators. But these men, he saw with some relief, were carrying neither bats nor placards, although they were clad in the inevitable white and were wearing the absurd little caps on their heads. He walked slowly to where they were standing.

"Wotcher doin' about this, Port Captain?" asked their leader. It was the man whom Mavis had identified as a police sergeant.

This was the two deep furrows that had been gouged in the turf by the stern vanes of the destroyer during the lifting operation.

Grimes looked at the ugly wounds in the skin of the planet. They were minor ravines rather than mere trenches. The sportsmen looked at him.

He said, "These will have to be filled . . ."

"Who by, Port Captain? Tell us that."

"The official groundsmen, I suppose . . ."

"Not bloody likely. You Terries did it. You can bloody well undo it. An' the sooner the better."

"The sooner they're off this world the better," growled one of the other men.

"Mphm," grunted Grimes. He was beginning to think that the sooner he was off this world the better. He was the outsider who, by his coming, had jolted Botany Bay out of its comfortable rut. He had friends, good friends, the Mayor and those in her immediate entourage—and that was resented. This same resentment might well cost Mavis the next election.

"Wotcher doin' about it?" demanded again the bearded policeman.

"I'll see Commander Delamere," promised Grimes, "and ask him to put his crew to work filling these . . . holes."

"Ask him, Port Captain? You'll bloody tell him."

"All right," said Grimes. "I'll tell him."

He turned, walked away from the glowering men. He paused briefly at the foot of Vega's ramp, looked up at the smartly uniformed Marine on gangway duty in the airlock. The man looked down at him. His expression was

hostile. I'd better not go aboard that ship, thought Grimes. I'll call Vega from my office. He carried on to the grandstand, made his way up the steps to what was grandiosely labeled SPACEPORT ADMINISTRATION.

He accepted the cup of tea that Shirley poured for him, went to the telephone, punched the number that had been allotted to Vega. The screen lit up and the face of a bored looking junior officer appeared. "FSS Vega."

"Port Captain here. Could I speak to Commander Delamere?"

"I'll put you through to the control room, sir."

The screen flickered, went blank, lit up again. Delamere's face looked out from it. "Yes, Grimes?"

"What do you want? Make it snappy; I'm busy."

"The local cricket club is concerned about the damage to their field."

"And what am I supposed to do about it?"

"Send some men down with shovels to fill the holes your stern vanes cut in the turf."

"My men are spacemen, not gardeners."

"Even so, the damage has to be made good, Delamere."

"Not by me it won't be, Grimes. You're supposed to be the Port Captain and this bloody Oval is supposed to be a spaceport. Its maintenance is your concern, not mine."

"Maintaining friendly relations with the natives of any world is the concern of any Survey Service Commanding Officer. And you can do just that by sending your crew down to fill those holes."

"You did that damage Grimes, by your mishandling of the raising. If it's beneath your dignity to take a shovel in your own hands I suggest that you ask your new girlfriend to lend you a few of her robots."

"My new girlfriend? I thought she. . ."

Delamere scowled. "Then think again! You're welcome to her, Grimes!"

The screen went blank.

Grimes found himself laughing. So at last there was a woman who was impervious to Delamere's charm. And Delamere, being Delamere, would automatically blame Grimes for his lack of success. Meanwhile, what was the legal situation regarding the damage to the turf?

Grimes stopped laughing. It looked very much as though he would be left alone holding the baby.

So the day went, a long succession of annoyances and frustrations. He succeeded in obtaining another audience with the Baroness—his new girlfriend, indeed!—and requested her assistance to fill the trenches. She

refused. "My dear Port Captain, my robots are programmed to be personal servants and, to a very limited degree, spacemen, not laborers. Would you use your toothbrush to . . . scrub a deck?"

If it were the only tool available, thought Grimes, he might have to do just that.

He returned to his office, called Mavis. She was short with him. She said, "I know I'm the Mayor, John, but the damage to the cricket pitch is your responsibility. You'll just have to do the best you can."

Finally he went back to The Far Traveller. The work had been completed but he thought that he had better go through the motions of -being a surveyor, even though it was almost impossible to see where the golden hull had been patched, even though Big Sister had expressed her grudging satisfaction. He told the engineer lieutenant not to dismantle the staging until he had completed his inspection. He tapped all around the repair work with a borrowed hammer, not at all sure what he was looking or listening for. He told the engineer to send to the destroyer for a can of vactest and to have the black, viscous paste smeared over where the plugs had been inserted. Big Sister complained (she would) saying that this was not necessary, that she was quite happy with the making good of the damage and that she objected to having this filthy muck spread over her skin. Grimes said that he would be signing the certificate and that he would not do so until he was happy.

Sulkily, Big Sister pressurized the after compartment. Not the smallest air bubble marred the gleaming skin of vactest. The artificers cleaned the gummy mess off the shell plating, began to take down the scaffolding. Grimes went aboard the ship to endorse the Lloyd's Certificate of Space-worthiness. The Baroness was almost affable, asking him to have a drink. Billinger was conspicuous by his absence.

She said, looking at him over the rim of her glass of Spumante, "This is a boring world, Captain Grimes. I know that Captain Billinger does not find it so, but there is nothing for me here."

Grimes could not resist the temptation. "Not even Commander Delamere?" he asked.

Surprisingly she took no offense. She even laughed. "Commander Delamere may think that he is God's own gift to womankind, but I do not share that opinion. But you, Captain . . . You, with your background . . . Don't you find Botany Bay just a little boring?"

"No," said Grimes loyally. (The Baroness must surely know about Mavis and himself.) "No . . ." he repeated after a pause. (And whom was he, trying to convince?)

"Thank you, Port Captain," said the Baroness. It was clearly a dismissal.

"Thank you, Your Excellency," said Grimes.

He was escorted from the boudoir by the robot butler, taken down to the after airlock. It was already dusk, he noted. The sun was down and the sky

was overcast but the breeze, what little there was of it, was pleasantly warm. -He debated with himself whether or not to go up to his office to call a cab, then decided against it. It was a pleasant walk from the Oval to the mayor's palace, most of it through the winding streets of Paddington City that, by night especially, held a special glamour, a gaslit magic that was an evocation of that other Paddington, the deliberately archaic colony in the heart of bustling, sprawling Sydney on distant Earth.

Somehow Grimes wanted to see it all once more, to savor it. Perhaps it was a premonition, but there was the conviction that sooner or later, sooner rather than later, he would be moving on.

He walked across the short grass to the main gates of the Oval. He turned to look at the two ships, both of them now floodlit—the somehow menacing metal tower that was the destroyer, a missile of dull steel aimed at the dark sky, the much smaller golden spire—slender, graceful—that was the yacht. They would be gone soon, both of them—Delamere's engineers must, by now, have Vega's main and auxiliary machinery back in full working order and the Baroness had intimated that she had found little to interest her on Botany Bay.

They would be gone soon—and Grimes found himself wishing that he were going with them. But that was out of the question. Aboard Vega he would be hauled back to Lindisfarne Base to face a court martial, and he could not visualize himself aboard The Far Traveller, with her rich bitch owner and that obnoxious electronic intelligence which Billinger had so aptly named Big Sister.

He resumed his walk, pausing once to stare up at a big dirigible that sailed overhead, coming in to the airport, its red and green navigation lights and its rows of cabin lights bright against the darkness.

He strolled along Jersey Road, admiring the rows of terrace houses with their beautiful cast aluminum lacework ornamenting pillars and balconies, the verdant explosions of native shrubs, dark behind intricate white metal railings, in the front gardens. He ignored the ground car—even though this was the only traffic he had seen since leaving the spaceport—that came up slowly from behind him, its headlights throwing a long shadow before him on to the footpath.

He heard a voice say, "There's the bastard! Get him!"

He felt excruciating but mercifully brief pain as the paralyzing beam of a stungun hit him and was unconscious before he had finished falling to the ground.

He opened his eyes slowly, shut them again hastily. He was lying on his back, he realized, on some hard surface, staring directly into a bright, harsh light.

He heard a vaguely familiar voice say, "He's coming round now, sir."

He heard a too familiar voice reply, "Just as well, Doctor. They'll want him alive back at Base so they can crucify him."

Commander Delamere, and his ship's surgeon . . .

He moved his head so that he would not be looking directly at the light, opened his eyes again. Delamere's face swam into view. The man was gloating.

"Welcome aboard, Grimes," he said. "But this is not—for you—Liberty Hall. There's no mat to spit on and if you call my ship's cat a bastard I'll put you on bread and water for the entire passage."

Grimes eased himself to a sitting posture, looked around. He was in a small compartment which, obviously, was not the ship's brig, being utterly bare of furniture. A storeroom? What did it matter? Delamere and the doctor were looking down at him. Behind them stood two Marines, their side arms drawn and ready.

He demanded, "What the hell do you think you're playing at? Kidnapping is a crime on any planet, and I'll see that you pay the penalty."

"Kidnapping, Grimes? You're still a Terran citizen, and this ship is Terran territory. Furthermore, your arrest was carried out with the assistance of certain local police officers." He smirked. "Mind you, I doubt if Her Ladyship the Mayor would approve—but she'll be told that you were last seen going down to the beach for a refreshing swim after a hard day at the spaceport." He laughed. "You might think that you're the little friend to all the universe, but there are plenty of people who hate your guts."

"And you're one of them," said Grimes resignedly.

"However did you guess?" asked Delamere sardonically.

"I must be psychic," Grimes said.

"Save your cheap humor for the court martial, Grimes."

"If there is one, Delamere. If you get me back to Lindisfarne. But the Mayor will know that I'm missing. She'll have this ship searched ..."

Delamere laughed. "Her policemen have already boarded. They weren't very interested. We showed them through all the accommodations, including the cells. They did see a couple of storerooms—but not, of course, this one. Even if they had got as far as the outer door the radiation warning sign would have kept them out."

"Is this place hot?" asked Grimes, suddenly apprehensive.

"You'll find out soon enough," said Delamere.

But Handsome Frankie, thought Grimes with relief, would never risk his own precious skin and gonads in a radioactive environment.

Delamere looked at his watch. "I shall be lifting off in a half hour. It's a pity that I have not been able to obtain the necessary clearance from the Acting Port Captain, but in the circumstances ..."

Grimes said nothing. There was nothing that he could say. He would not

plead even if there were the remotest chance that Delamere would listen to him. He would save his breath for the court martial. He would need it then.

But what was that muffled noise coming from the alleyway outside the storeroom? Shouting, a hoarse scream, the sound of heavy blows . . . Could it be ... ? Could it be the police attempting a rescue? Or—and this would be a beautiful irony—yet another mutiny, this one aboard Vega?

He remarked sweetly, "Sounds as though you're having trouble, Frankie."

Delamere snapped to the Marines, "You, Petty and Slim! Go out and tell those men to pipe down!"

"But the prisoner, sir," objected one of them.

Grimes watched indecision battling with half-decisions on Delamere's face. The commander had no desire to walk out into the middle of a free fight, but he had to find out what was happening. On the other hand, he had no desire to be left alone with Grimes, even though his prisoner was unarmed and not yet recovered from the stungun blast.

There was a brief rattle of small arms fire, another hoarse scream. The Marines hastily checked their pistols—stunguns, as it happened—but seemed in no greater a hurry to go out than Delamere himself.

And then the door bulged inward—bulged until the plating ruptured, until a vertical, jagged-edged split appeared. Two slim, golden hands inserted themselves into the opening, took a grip and pulled apart from each other. The tortured metal screamed, so loudly as almost to drown the crackling discharges from the Marines' stun-guns.

A woman stepped through the ragged gap, a gleaming, golden woman clad in a skimpy, ship stewardess' uniform. She stretched a long, shapely arm, took the weapon from the unresisting hand of one of the Marines, squeezed. A lump of twisted, useless metal dropped with a clatter to the deck, emitted a final coruscation of sparks and a brief acidity of blue fumes. The other Marine went on firing at her, then threw the useless stungun into her face. She brushed it aside before it reached its target as though she were swatting a fly.

Another woman followed her, this one clad as a lady's maid—black-stockinged, short-skirted, with white frilly apron and white frilly cap. She could have been a twin to the first one. Perhaps she was—they came from the same robot factory on Electra.

Delamere was remarkably quick on the uptake. "Piracy!" he yelled. "Action stations! Repel boarders!"

"You've two of them right here," said Grimes happily. "Why don't you start repelling them?"

The stewardess spoke. Her voice was the cold voice of Big Sister. She said, "Commander Delamere, you have illegally brought Port Captain Grimes aboard your vessel and are illegally detaining him. I demand that he be released at once."

"And I demand that you get off my ship!" blustered Delamere. He was frightened and making a futile noise to hide the fact.

The stewardess brushed Delamere aside, with such force that he fetched up against the bulkhead with a bone-shaking thud. She reached down, gripped Grimes' shoulder and jerked him to his feet. He did not think that his collarbone was broken but couldn't be sure.

"Come," she said. "Or shall I carry you?"

"I'll walk," said Grimes hastily.

"Grimes!" shouted Delamere. "You're making things worse for yourself! Aiding and abetting pirates!" Then, to the Marines, "Grab him!"

They tried to obey the order but without enthusiasm. The lady's maid just pushed them, one hand to each of them, and they fell to the deck.

"Doctor," ordered Delamere, "Stop them!"

"I'm a noncombatant, Captain," said the medical officer.

There were more of the robots in the alleyway, a half dozen of them, male but sexless, naked, brightly golden. They formed up around Grimes and his two rescuers, marched towards the axial shaft. The deck trembled under the impact of their heavy, metal feet. And there were injured men in the alleyway, some unconscious, some groaning and stirring feebly. There was blood underfoot and spattered on the bulkheads. There were broken weapons that the automata kicked contemptuously aside.

Somebody was firing from a safe distance—not a laser weapon but some large caliber projectile pistol. (Whoever it was had more sense than to burn holes through his own ship from the inside—or, perhaps, had just grabbed the first firearm available.) Bullets ricocheted from bulkheads and deckhead, whistled through the air. There was the spang of impact—metal on metal—as one hit the stewardess on the nape of her neck. She neither staggered nor faltered and there was not so much as a dent to mark the place.

They pressed on, with Grimes' feet hardly touching the deck as he was supported by the two robot women. There was an officer ahead of them, guarding the access to the spiral staircase that would take them down to the after airlock. Holding a heavy pistol in both hands he pumped shot after shot at the raiders and then, suddenly realizing the futility of it, turned and ran.

Down the stairway they clattered. The inner door of the airlock was closed. The two leading robots just leaned on it and it burst open. The outer door was closed, and required the combined strength of three of the mechanical men to force it. The ramp had been retracted and it was all of ten meters from the airlock to the ground. Two by two the robots jumped, sinking calf-deep into the turf as they landed.

"Jump!" ordered the stewardess who, with the lady's maid, had remained with Grimes.

He hesitated. It was a long way down and he could break an ankle, or worse.

"Jump!" she repeated.

Still he hesitated.

He cried out in protest as she picked him up, cradled him briefly in her incredibly strong arms, then tossed him gently outward. He fell helplessly and then six pairs of hands caught him, cushioned the impact, lowered him to the ground. He saw the two female robots jump, their short skirts flaring upward to waist height. He remembered, irrelevantly, Captain Billinger's expressed preference for something in soft plastic rather than hard metal . . .

They marched across the field to The Far Traveller. Somebody in Vega's control room—Delamere?—had gotten his paws on to the firing console of the destroyer's main armament. Somebody, heedless of the consequences, was running amok with a laser cannon—somebody, fortunately, who would find it hard to hit the side of a barn even if he were inside it.

Well to the right a circle of damp grass exploded into steam and incandescence—and then the beam slashed ahead of them. Per haps it was not poor shooting but a warning shot across the bows. The lady's maid reached into a pocket of her apron, pulled out a small cylinder, held it well above her head. It hissed loudly, emitting a cloud of dense white smoke. The vapor glowed as the laser beam impinged upon it and under the vaporous umbrella the air was suddenly unbearably—but not lethally—hot. And then the induced fluorescence blinked off. They were too close to the yacht, and even Delamere—or especially Delamerewould realize the far-reaching consequences if a vessel belonging to a citizen of El Dorado were fired upon by an Interstellar Federation's warship.

They tramped up the golden ramp, into the after airlock. Supported by the two female robots Grimes was taken to the Baroness' boudoir. She was waiting for him there, together with Mavis, Shirley, Jock Tanner and Captain Billinger. The yachtmaster was not in uniform.

"You have to leave us, John," said Mavis regretfully.

"But . . ." objected Grimes over the cold drink that had been thrust into his hand by the Mayor.

"I can't guarantee your safety," she said.

"Neither-can I," said Tanner. He grinned rather unpleasantly. "And Mavis, here, has to think about the next elections."

"Your Excellency," said the robot butler, entering the room, "There is a Commander Delamere at the after airlock, with a party of armed men. I refused him admission, of course."

"Of course. And if he refuses to leave see to it that the general purpose robots escort him back to his own ship."

"Very good, Your Excellency."

The Baroness looked at Grimes. She said, "You are very lucky. The ship's brain—the entity referred to by Captain Billinger as Big Sister—saw you being taken aboard Commander Delamere's vessel. So, when Her Ladyship here appealed to me for aid I decided to give it. After all, we on El Dorado—or some of us—feel that we are obliged to you."

"Your Excellency . . ." It was the robot butler back . . . "Commander Delamere claims that our gp robots did considerable damage to his vessel."

"The gp robots?" murmured Grimes. "And that pair of brass Amazons."

"Golden Amazons," the Baroness corrected him coldly. Then, to the servitor, "Tell Commander Delamere he may sue if he wishes—but that I shall bring a counter-suit. He fired upon valuable property—six gp robots and two specialist robots—both with small arms and with a laser cannon. He should consider himself fortunate that no extensive damage was done to the expensive automatons."

What about damage to me? Grimes asked himself.

"See to it that we are not disturbed again," said the Baroness to the butler. "And now, Acting Port Captain Grimes . . . What are we to do with you? Her Ladyship asked me to give you passage off Botany Bay—but The Far Traveller has no accommodation for passengers. However . . . It so happens that Captain Billinger has resigned, and that I have accepted his resignation . . . Billinger looked quite happy. "And, although the post is a sinecure, Lloyd's of London insists that I must carry a human master on the Register. As Acting Chief of Customs the City Constable will enter your name on the document."

"I've already done so," said Tanner.

"You know where the master's quarters are," said Billinger. "I've already cleared my gear out. Sorry that there's no time for a proper hand-over, but the ship herself—Big Sister—will tell you all that you need to know about her."

"I'm sorry, John," said Mavis. "Really sorry. But you can't stay here. And this is the best way for you. You'll be far happier back in space."

Shall I? wondered Grimes. In this ship?

She got to her feet. Grimes rose to his. She put out her arms and pulled him to her, kissed him, long and warmly. But there was some thing missing. Tanner escorted her to the door, turning briefly to give an offhand wave. Mayor and City Constable, thought Grimes. A rather obvious combination.

"Good-bye, John," said Shirley. She, too, kissed him. "Don't worry about Mavis. She'll make out—and Jock Tanner's moving back in." She laughed, but not maliciously. "If you're ever back on Botany Bay, look me up."

And then she was gone.

"Very touching," said the Baroness. And was that a faint note of envy in her

voice?

"Good-bye, Your Excellency," said Billinger. "It has been a pleasure ...

"Don't lie to me, Captain."

"Good-bye, Captain Grimes. Do as Big Sister says and you'll not go wrong."

"Good-bye, Captain Billinger."

Grimes nursed his drink. He heard Big Sister say—stating a fact and not giving an order—"All visitors ashore."

"Well, Captain," asked the Baroness, "aren't you going up to your control room?"

"The control room? But . . ."

He realized suddenly that the inertial drive was in operation, that the ship was lifting. Almost in panic he got to his feet.

"Do riot worry," said the Baroness. "She has her orders. She will manage quite well without you.

What have I gotten myself into now? Grimes wondered.