

Grimes Among The Gourmets

Commodore Grimes, although he hated to admit it even to himself, was coming to look forward to the visits paid by Kitty Kelly to his ship. Faraway Quest was immobilised at Port Fortinbras, on Elsinore, and would remain so until such time as her engineers were able to effect repairs to the old vessel's inertial drive. Originally an Epsilon Class star tramp, built for the Interstellar Transport Commission, she had been obsolescent when she entered the service of the Rim Worlds Confederacy. Her main propulsive machinery was hopelessly out of date and engineroom spares were not easily procurable. New eccentrics—but conforming to a long outmoded design—were being fabricated in Rim Runners' workshops in Port Forlorn, on Lorn. Nobody was busting a gut on the job. Meanwhile the venerable Quest, her future employment a matter of no great urgency, stayed put.

Shortly after the Rim Worlds survey ship's arrival at Port Fortinbras, Grimes had been interviewed by Kitty Kelly of Station Yorick. He had been inveigled into spinning her a yarn about one of his adventures during his younger days in the Federation Survey Service, which she had recorded. It had been broadcast on her Kitty's Korner tri-vi programme and Station Yorick's viewers had lapped it up. She had been told to wheedle more tall stories out of the crusty old spacedog. Grimes had not been at all displeased to learn that most of his crew now watched, and enjoyed, Kitty's Korner.

This day she had told him that she would, if it suited his convenience, be calling aboard at a later time than usual. He suggested that she take dinner with him before the recording session. She was pleased to accept the invitation.

Grimes's paymaster—who was also the ship's catering officer—was Miss Keiko Otaguro. Learning that the commodore would be dining with his guest in his day cabin she asked him if she could serve one of the traditional meals of her ancestral people. She told him that she had been for a ramble along the seashore and had collected various seaweeds that would be suitable for the menu that she had in mind. Grimes assented happily. He had always loved exotic foods. And, he thought and hoped, a sumptuous repast laid on especially for the beautiful, blue-eyed, black-haired Kitty Kelly might soften her attitude towards him. (He had already tried the "candy is dandy but liquor is quicker" approach but it hadn't worked.)

So Kitty Kelly was sitting in an easy chair in the commodore's day cabin, displaying her excellent legs. Grimes, seated facing her, was admiring the scenery. Both were sipping large pink gins.

She said, "I enjoy a meal aboard a ship now and again, even though autochefs tend to make everything taste the same."

"Not necessarily," he told her. "A lot depends upon how much imagination is employed in the programming and upon what spices are available. But the dinner that we shall be enjoying is not from the autochef. My paymaster prepared it with her own fair hands . . ."

There was a light tap at the door. Miss Otaguro entered the cabin, carrying a lacquered tray with bottles, glasses and tiny porcelain cups. She was

followed by two stewardesses with larger trays upon which the food had been set out. There was just enough room on the big coffee table for the meal and the drinks.

She uncapped a bottle of cold beer, poured into two glasses. Then, from a gracefully shaped porcelain bottle, she filled two of the little cups.

She said formally, "Dinner is served, Commodore-san."

He replied with equal formality, "Thank you, Paymaster-san," then added, "there's no need for you to play Mama-san, Keiko. We can help ourselves."

She smiled but there was a hint of disappointment in her voice as she said, "As you please, Commodore."

When she and the girls had left Grimes said, "She has very old-fashioned ideas about the proper place of women in the universe. But she's not a Rimworlder by birth. She was brought up on Mikasa . . ."

Kitty was looking at the meal laid out on her tray.

"But this is beautiful. . ." she whispered. "Like flowers . . . It looks too good, almost, to eat. . ."

"Keiko's specialty," he told her. "Only for very honoured guests."

He raised his saki cup in a silent toast. She raised hers, sipped. She made a grimace.

"But this is warm . . ."

"That's the way it should be served."

"Oh. I think I'll stick to beer. And didn't your Miss Keiko forget knives and forks?"

Grimes picked up his ivory chopsticks, used them to mix mustard with the soy sauce in a little bowl. He then picked up what looked like a pink and white and green blossom with the implements, dipped it in the sauce, brought it to his mouth. He chewed and swallowed appreciatively.

She watched him, tried to follow suit. She did not manage too badly. Then her lips twisted in revulsion. She swallowed with an effort.

"Raw fish!" she exclaimed.

"Of course. With boiled rice, and seaweed . . ."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't eat this. It looks pretty but it tastes like what it really is."

"But it's sushi. . ."

"I don't give a damn what it's called."

It was just as well that materials for making snacks were to hand in Grimes's refrigerator. With any luck at all Miss Otoguro would never know

that the feast which she had so lovingly prepared had been devoured by only one person. (And even if she ever did find out all that would really matter to her was that the commodore had enjoyed it.)

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The stewardesses had cleared away the debris of the meal and Kitty Kelly set up her recorder, one lens trained on Grimes, the other upon herself.

"Carry on drinking saki," she ordered. "That bottle and the tiny cup will look interesting . . . Now—and I promise you that this isn't for broadcasting unless you agree—isn't it true that your nickname when you were in the Federation Survey Service was Gutsy Grimes?"

His prominent ears flushed. "Yes, it is true. I admit that I've always liked my tucker. But I'm a gourmet rather than a gourmand. The meal that we've just enjoyed is proof of that."

"That you've just enjoyed, you mean."

"All right. I enjoyed it."

"Do you always enjoy exotic foods?"

"Almost always."

"Can you recall any occasion in your long career upon which exotic foods played a big part, Commodore?"

Grimes grinned. He put down his saki cup, picked up his pipe, slowly filled and lit it. He said, through the acrid, wreathing cloud, "As a matter of fact I can . . ."

"It was (he said) when I was captain of the Survey Service's census ship Seeker. I'd been given a sort of roving commission, checking up on human colonies in the Argo sector. Also I'd been told to show the flag on one or two inhabited planets with whose people, even though they weren't human, strictly speaking, the Federation wanted to keep on friendly terms. Spheres of influence and all that. Even though the Interstellar Federation was—and still is—the Big Boy, other, smaller spacefaring powers wanted to be Big Boys too. The Duchy of Waldegren, for example. The Empire of Waverley . . ."

"And now," she interrupted him, "the Rim Worlds Confederacy."

"We," he said stiffly, "have no Imperial ambitions."

"Spoken like a true Rimworlder, even though you were once a Terrie."

All right, all right, so I was a Terrie then (he went on). I held the rank of lieutenant commander in the Federation Survey Service. I was captain of FSS Seeker, one of the census ships. I was counting noses and, at the same time, showing the flag. I'd been ordered to do this latter on Werrississa, the home planet of a non-human civilisation.

Not that the Werrississians are all that non-human. There are, in fact,

some far-fetched theories to the effect that Werrississa was colonised from Earth by some pre-Atlantean culture. The resemblances between them and us do seem to be too close to be accounted for by parallel evolution—but, given enough time, evolution can come up with anything. And, although sexual intercourse is possible between humans and Werrississians, such unions are always sterile.

What do they look like, you ask? To begin with, they're tall, the adults, male and female, running to two metres and up. They're slender, although their women are subtly rounded in the right places. They're wide-mouthed but thin-lipped. Their noses tend to be aquiline. Their eyes are huge, like those of some nocturnal mammals on Earth and other worlds. Hair colouring? From black through brown through gold to silver, but that silver is no indicator of age. Long, slender hands and feet, four digitated.

Clothing? Except for occasions when working gear is required, translucent, ankle-length robes, usually white, are worn by both sexes. Sandals tend—or tended when I was there—to be ornate. Both sexes wear jewellery—rings, ear-clips, bracelets, anklets.

They regard outsiders—rightly so, in many cases—as uncultured barbarians. They set great value on face. They attach great importance to etiquette. Their highest art form is cookery.

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"For you," she said, "a paradise."

"It would not have been for you," he told her, "after the way in which you turned up your nose at that excellent dinner." "Do they like their food raw too?" she asked.

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Seeker being a survey ship proper rather than a warship (he went on) she carried quite an assortment of scientists. Men dressed as spacemen, as the saying goes. Women dressed as spacewomen. Commissioned ranks, of course. One of them was Dr.—or Commander—Maggie Lazenby. She outranked me, although I was still the captain. She was my tame ethologist. She was supposed to be able to tell me what made alien people tick.

Shortly after we set down at the spaceport just outside Wistererri City she gave me a good talking to. She was good at that. "These are people," she said, "who were civilised while we were still living in caves."

"So how come," I asked, "that they'd only gotten as far as the airship when we made our first landings on this world in our interstellar vessels?"

"Civilisation and advanced technology," she told me, "do not necessarily go together. But these," she continued, "are a very civilised people. Perhaps too civilised. There's a certain rigidity, and too great a tendency to regard all outworlders as uncultured barbarians. In matters of dress, for example. We tend to be casual—even in uniform unless it's some sort of state occasion. Short-sleeved shirts, shorts—and for women very short skirts.

Luckily you received the local dignitaries in full dress, with all your officers, including myself, attired likewise. But I couldn't help noticing the horror with which the City Governor and his entourage regarded the stewardesses who brought in the refreshments . . ."

"They were correctly and respectably dressed," I said.

"By our standards. And on my home world nudity wouldn't have caused so much as a raised eyebrow." (Maggie came from Arcadia, where naturism is the accepted way of life.) "But I'm not running around naked here. And you and your crew are not going to run around half naked when you go ashore. Arms and knees, female as well as male, must, repeat must, be covered."

"But it's summer. It's hot."

"A good sweat will get some of your fat off," she said.

So . . . When in Rome, and all that. But I didn't like it. My crew didn't like it, even after I'd explained the reason for my order. But it wasn't too bad for the women. Maggie went into a huddle with the paymaster—oddly enough she was, like Miss Otoguro, in this ship, of Japanese origin—and between the pair of them they cooked up a shoregoing rig based on the traditional kimono, made up from extremely lightweight material. Miss Hayashi looked very attractive in hers. Maggie looked odd at first—to my eyes, anyhow—but I had to admit that it suited her; the green, silky cloth matched her eyes and was an agreeable contrast to her red hair . . .

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"You seem to have had quite a crush on this Maggie," commented Miss Kelly.

"Mphm. Yes."

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So there was shore leave. The male personnel suffered; even the nights were uncomfortably warm and nowhere was there air-conditioning. The ladies, in their filmy but all-concealing dresses, flourished. For daytime excursions Yoshie Hayashi issued parasols and also, for all occasions, paper fans. Oh, we could have used the parasols, and the fans too, but neither, somehow, seemed masculine. And we sweated. By the Odd Gods of the Galaxy, how we sweated! Official banquets are bad enough at any time but they're absolute purgatory when you're wrestling with unfamiliar eating irons and literally stewing inside a dress uniform.

"The eating irons?"

You've seen me using chopsticks—but the Werrississians use a sort of single chopstick. They come in three varieties. There's what is, in effect, just a sharp-pointed skewer, quite good for spearing chunks of meat or whatever. Then there's a long handled affair with a sort of small, shallow spoon on the end of it. You can eat a bowl of soup with the thing, but it's a long process and, if you hold it properly, unless you have a very steady hand most of the fluid food finishes up in your lap. And the last one's a real

beauty. At the end of it is an auger with a left-handed thread. And it's used only for a very special dish.

You didn't like Keiko's sushi. It's just as well that she didn't prepare sashimi for us. It's also raw fish, but even more so, if you know what I mean. You don't? Well, the fish is only stunned, not killed, before being prepared. While you're picking the bite-sized pieces off the skeleton it comes back to life and twitches its fins and looks at you . . . I came quite to like it while I was stationed on Mikasa Base for a while; the junior officers' mess, where I took most of my meals, specialised in a traditionally Japanese cuisine. So, having eaten and enjoyed sashimi, I was quite able to cope with leeleeoosa. It's a sort of thick worm. Alive and wriggling. The skin's rather tough and rubbery but it tends to dissolve when you chew it, this process being initiated by the sauce, mildly acid in flavour, into which you dip it.

So you have these . . . worms swimming around in a bowl of tepid water. You select your next victim. You jab, then twist left-handed. You dip in the sauce, bring it to your mouth and chew. The flavour? Not bad. Rather like rare steak, with a touch of garlic.

Fortunately I'd been able to get in some practice before the first official dinner at which leeleeoosa was served. Maggie had done her homework before we came to Werrississa. She, like me, enjoyed exotic foods. The ship's artificers, acting on her instructions, had run up a few sets of working tools. Of course, we weren't able to test our skills on real live and wriggling leeleeoosa until after we'd set down and Miss Hayashi had been able to do some shopping. But we'd sort of trained on sukiyaki, the strips of meat bobbing around in boiling water made a fair substitute for the real thing. It was the lefthanded thread on the skewer that took the most getting used to.

Then HIMS William Wallace, one of the big ships of the Navy of the Empire of Waverley, dropped in. Her classification was more or less—more rather than less—of our Constellation Class battle cruisers. Her commanding officer was Captain Sir Hamish McDiarmid, Knight of the Order of the Golden Thistle &c, &c and &c. Like me, he was showing the flag. His flag. He had a far bigger ship to wear it on. But she was a warship, not a survey ship. She was long on specialists in the martial arts but short on scientists. Ethologists especially. Nonetheless, I was to discover later, he had done some research into local lore before inflicting his presence on the Werrississians.

But national pride influenced him. The kilt, in a variety of tartans, is worn throughout the Empire on all occasions, by both men and women, with uniform and with civilian clothing. Longish, heavy kilts are for winter, short, lightweight kilts are for summer. Traditionally nothing is worn under these garments—all well and good when they're long and heavy but liable to offend the prudish when they're short and light.

Not that the Werrississians were prudish. It was just that, as far as they were concerned, there were things that are done and things that just definitely aren't done. They were prepared to tolerate outworlders and their odd ways but they didn't have to like them when such odd ways were

offensive. I was grateful to Maggie for her good advice. Here was (comparatively) little, lightly armed Seeker whose people were happily conforming, and there was the huge William Wallace whose men strode arrogantly along the avenues of the city flaunting their bare knees—and more on a breezy day. They realised that the natives liked us while thinking that they were something that the cat had dragged in in an off moment. They resented this. They openly jeered at our women in their long gowns, carrying their parasols, calling them Madam Butterfly. I heard that they were referring to me as Lieutenant Pinkerton . . .

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"Who were they, when they were up and dressed? " asked Kitty.

"Two characters in an opera who were dressed more or less as we were dressed," said Grimes. "Very unsuitably—as far as Pinkerton was concerned—for the climate."

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But, as I said, Sir Hamish had done some research before his landing on Werrississa. I learned later that he had earned quite a reputation as a gourmet. He had even been known to sneer at the Waverley national dish, the haggis. He had, as I had done, insisted that all his people familiarise themselves with local dishes and eating implements. They even carried their own working tools with them, tucked into their sporrans, when they went ashore. It was reported to me by some of my officers, who had dined in the same restaurants, that the William Wallace personnel were quite skilful with these, even with the skirroo, the implement used when eating leeleeoosa. Yet it wasn't enough. They might eat like civilised people but they dressed like barbarians. We both ate and dressed properly.

And yet we were all members of the same race, whereas the Werrississians, for all their similarities, weren't. There had to be some fraternisation between the two crews. I invited Sir Hamish to take lunch with me aboard Seeker—and, unlike some people whom I will not name, he thoroughly enjoyed his sushi. He told me that he was planning a dinner aboard William Wallace for local dignitaries and would be pleased if I would attend together with three of my senior officers. I was happy to accept the invitation. Then—we'd had quite a few drinks and were getting quite matey—I asked him if he'd be serving haggis, piped in the traditional way. He wasn't offended. He laughed and said, "Not likely, Grimes. I ken well that you people are putting on a big act o' being civilised while we're just hairy-kneed barbarians. But I'll demonstrate that, when it comes to civilised living, we're as good as anybody. It'll be a Werrississian menu, prepared by my chefs . . ."

"Dress?" I asked.

"Formal, o' course. Ye'll be wearin' your dinner uniforms. We'll be wearin' ours. An' we'll be cooler than you'll be—from the waist down, anyhow. My private dining room will have to conform to local ideas of comfort, temperaturewise . . ."

I was rather sorry then that I couldn't back out, but it was too late. Later,

when I passed the word around, nobody was keen to accompany me. At last Maggie said that she'd come to hold my hand. The other two victims were MacMorris, my chief engineer, and Marlene Deveson, one of the scientists. A geologist, as a matter of fact. Not that it matters.

Then the Big Day came round. Or the Big Night. We met in the air-conditioned comfort of my day cabin for a drink before walking the short distance to Sir Hamish's ship. We were all tarted up in our best mess dress, tropical. It would still be too hot for comfort with the white bum-freezer over the starched white shirt, the long, black trousers. The two ladies were slightly better off, with high-collared, epauletted, long-sleeved shirts only on top of their ankle-length black skirts. At least they were not required to wear jackets. Maggie looked good, as she always did, no matter what she was or wasn't wearing. Marlene looked a mess. She was a short girl, fat rather than plump. Her round face was already sweaty. Her hair, greasily black, was a tangle. Two of her shirt buttons had come undone.

We allowed ourselves one small whisky each. Sir Hamish would be serving Scotch and it wouldn't do to mix drinks. Then Maggie made a check of Marlene's appearance, frowned, took her into my bathroom to make repairs and adjustments. When they came out shirt buttons had been done up and hair combed and brushed into a semblance of order.

We took the elevator down to the airlock, walked slowly down the ramp. William Wallace was a great, dark, turreted tower in ominous silhouette against the city lights. (Sir Hamish did not believe on wasting money on floodlighting, even when he was showing the Thistle Flag.) It was a hot night. I'd started perspiring already. I had little doubt that the others were doing likewise. We made our way slowly across the apron. The heat of the day was beating up from the concrete.

We climbed the ramp to William Wallace's after airlock. The Imperial Marine on duty—white, sleeveless shirt over a kilt with black and red tartan, sturdy legs in calf-length boots—saluted smartly. I replied. Inside the chamber we were received by a junior officer, clad as was the Marine but with black and gold tartan and gold-braided shoulder boards on his shirt. More saluting. We were ushered into the elevator, carried swiftly up to Sir Hamish's suite.

He received us personally. He looked very distinguished. From the waist up he was dressed as I was—although he had more gold braid on his epaulettes than I did, more brightly ribboned miniature medals on the left breast of his mess jacket. And he was wearing a kilt, of course, summer weight and length, in the Imperial Navy's black and gold tartan. His long socks were black, with gold at the turnover. There were gold buckles on his highly polished black shoes.

And he, I was pleased to see, was feeling the heat too. His craggy face under the closely cropped white hair was flushed and shining with perspiration. But he was jovial enough.

He exclaimed, "Come in, come in! This is Liberty Hall. Ye can spit on the mat an' call the haggis a bastard!"

"Are ye givin' us haggis, then, sir?" asked MacMorris eagerly.

"No. 'twas just an expression of your captain's that I modified to suit my ship. We don't carry tabbies in the Waverley Navy."

Both Maggie and Marlene gave him dirty looks.

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"Tabbies?" asked Kitty Kelly.

"In the old days of passenger carrying surface ships on Earth they used to call stewardesses that. Today all female spacegoing personnel, regardless of rank or department, are called tabbies. But not to their faces."

"I should hope not."

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We were the first guests to arrive. We were taken into Sir Hamish's sitting room—he had quarters that would have made a Survey Service admiral green with envy—introduced to his senior officers, plied with excellent Scotch. Then the young officer who had received us on board ushered in the native guests. There were six of them, three male and three female. They looked pale wraiths. They accepted drinks from the mini-kilted mess steward although they regarded his hairy knees with distaste. Rather pointedly they made polite conversation only with those of us from Seeker, we were properly dressed even though our hosts were not. Their command of standard English was quite good.

A skirling of bagpipes came over the intercom. I assumed that it was the mess call. I was right. Sir Hamish led the way into his dining room. The long table, with its surface of gleaming tiles, each with a different tartan design, was already set. Sir Hamish's artificers had done him proud, were doing us all proud. At each place were the native eating utensils in polished bronze—slup, splik and skirroo. There were the bronze wine flasks, the cups made from the same alloy. There were place cards, with names both in English and the flowing Werrississian script.

Sir Hamish took the head of the table, of course, with a local lady on his right and her "social function husband" on his left. (The Werrississians have a multiplicity of wives and husbands—mates for all occasions.) I sat below the native woman and Maggie below the man. Then another native couple, then Marlene and MacMorris, then the last Werrississian pair. Below them was the covey of Imperial Navy commanders—(E), (N), (C), (S) and (G)—all looking rather peeved at having to sit below the salt.

Sir Hamish's mess waiters were well trained, efficient. They were drilled in local customs. First they poured each of us a goblet of the sweet, sticky wine—it was, as it should have been, at room temperature but I'd have preferred it chilled—and there was a round of toasts. We toasted the Emperor James XIV of Waverley, whose gold-framed, purple-draped portrait was on the bulkhead behind Sir Hamish's chair. The gentlemen toasted the ladies. The ladies toasted the gentlemen. We all toasted our host. By this time it was necessary to bring in a fresh supply of the bronze flasks. Unluckily it was still the same sickly but potent tippie. I looked rather anxiously at MacMorris. He didn't have a very good head for drinks and was

liable after only one too many to insist on dancing a Highland fling. But I needn't have worried about him. He was a Scot more than he was a Terran and it was obvious that he, aboard a warship owned by the only essentially Scottish spacefaring power, was determined to be on his very best behaviour. It was an effort but he was capable of making it. The toasting over, he was taking merely token sips from his cup.

I looked at Marlene. I knew little about her drinking capacity and behaviour. What I saw worried me. She was downing goblet after goblet of the wine as fast as the steward could refill them. Her hair was becoming unfixed. The black, floppy bow at the neck of her shirt was now lopsided. One button on the front of the garment was undone.

The first course came in.

I've forgotten its native name but it was, essentially, bite-sized cubes of meat, fish, vegetables and other things coated in a savoury batter and deep fried. For these we used the spliks, the long, sharp skewers. The Werrississian guests made complimentary noises and, as was their custom, ate rapidly, their implements clicking on the china plates with their thistle pattern. Sir Hamish and his officers ate almost as fast and so did we Seeker people—with the exception of Marlene. It seemed to me that about half of her meal was going on to the table and the other half on to her lap, and from there to the deck. I was very sorry that Maggie wasn't sitting beside me instead of opposite. Had I been next to her I could have whispered to her, begged her to do something, anything, about her fellow scientific officer before she disgraced us.

The table was cleared but the spliks were left for use on the next course. This consisted of cubes of a melon-like fruit rolled in a sort of aromatic sugar. To my great relief Marlene seemed to have regained control of herself and succeeded in putting at least seventy five percent of the sweet morsels into her broad mouth, although by this time her lipstick was smeared badly.

Plates and spliks were removed by the attentive stewards. Goblets—where necessary—were refilled. I looked imploringly at Sir Hamish; surely he must realise that Marlene had had enough to drink, more than enough. He looked at me. There was a sardonic expression on his craggy face that I didn't like at all. I looked at Maggie. She knew what was passing through my mind. I could read her expression. It said, What can I do about it?

Plashish was next—a sort of clear soup, with shreds of something like cheese floating in it, served in shallow bowls. We all plied our slups, the long-handled spoons, holding them as we had been taught, by the very end of the shaft. All? No, there was one exception. Marlene, of course. She did try, I admit, but gave it up as a bad job. Then she lifted the bowl to her mouth, with two hands, and lapped from it . . .

The William Wallace people were trying to look even more shocked than their native guests but I knew that the bastards were glorying in the discomfiture of the Sassenachs. Us. And Sir Hamish—may the Odd Gods of the Galaxy rot his cotton socks!—was looking insufferably smug. He had shown the Werrississians that even though the representatives of Waverley

insisted on wearing their own native dress they could comport themselves at table far more decently than the minions of Terra. And the Werrississians? They were gravely embarrassed. Their complexions had faded from the usual pale cream to an ashy grey. They were obviously avoiding looking at Marlene.

The plashish course was over. The leeleeoosa was (were?) brought in—the deep bowls of lukewarm water in which the meaty worms were swimming, the smaller bowls of sauce. I daren't look at Marlene to see how she was managing. I was having my own troubles, anyhow. So was Maggie. So was MacMorris. We'd practised enough with skirmos—both aboard Seeker and in restaurants ashore—but somehow our acquired skill seemed to have deserted us. We'd stab, and make contact with our prey, and twist—yet every time our intended victims would wriggle free. But Sir Hamish and his people were eating as expertly as the Werrississian guests . . .

It was Maggie first who twigged what was wrong. She stared at me across the table. She raised her left hand with forefinger extended, made a circular motion. I finally realised what she was driving at. The skirroos at our places, those long, bronze augers, had right-handed threads. I impaled one of the tasty worms without trouble then, dipped it in the sauce, brought it up to my mouth, chewed. I felt that I'd earned it. MacMorris, as befitting an engineer, had made the discovery himself. He was eating fast and happily.

I looked down and across the table at Marlene. She was having her troubles. I tried to catch her attention but she was concentrating too hard on her bowl of leeleeoosa. She had her skirroo in both hands. She brought it down like a harpoon. She must have driven the point through the tough, rubbery skin of a worm by sheer force. She lifted it out of the bowl. She didn't bother to dip it in the sauce but brought the wriggling thing straight up to her open mouth. If it had made the distance it wouldn't have mattered, but . . . It slipped off the end of the skirroo. It fell on to Marlene's ample bosom. It found the gap in her shirt front where the gilt button had come undone. It squirmed into the opening.

Marlene screamed. She jumped to her feet, oversetting her leeleeoosa bowl. There were worms everywhere. Maggie guessed her intentions but did not reach her in time to stop her from ripping off her shirt. She was wearing nothing under it. Her breasts were her best feature, but they were big. It seemed as though somebody had launched a couple of Shaara blimps into Sir Hamish's dining room.

The Waverley officers stared appreciatively. The Werrississians, male and female, covered their eyes with both hands. Sir Hamish got to his feet, glared at me—but I knew that this was a histrionic display put on for the benefit of his native guests.

"Commander Grimes," he said, "you and your officers have abused my hospitality and gravely embarrassed my other guests. You will please leave my ship. I shall be vastly obliged if you never set foot aboard her again."

"Sir Hamish," I said to him, "none of this would have happened if our places had been set with the correctly left-hand-threaded skirroos."

He said, "I thought that I was doing you a favour. All my people have found it far easier to use right-handed skirroos of our own manufacture."

And so we slunk off William Wallace in disgrace, what little dignity remaining to us dissipated by the tussle that we had with Marlene to stop her from stripping completely; she was convinced that one of the spilled worms had wriggled from the floor up her leg.

Back aboard Seeker we almost literally threw the fat, drunken girl into her cabin. MacMorris—whose mind was reeling under the shock of having been thrown off a Scottish ship—went to his quarters to sulk and to console himself with whisky.

Maggie came up to my flat to console me. We held a post mortem on the disastrous evening. We'd thought that we, playing along with the local prudery regarding dress while the Waverley crew flaunted their short kilts, had made ourselves the most favoured aliens. But Sir Hamish had turned the tables on us. Of course, Marlene's strip act had been an unexpected bonus to him.

So that was that. I had to carry the can back, of course—after all, I was the captain. My popularity rating with the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty sank to what I thought must be an all time low.

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"If you had the sense to stick to civilised food," said Kitty Kelly, "that sort of thing would never happen . . . But I don't know much about the Galaxy outside the Shakespearian Sector. This Werri-whatever-it-is . . . I suppose that it's now well and truly inside the Waverley sphere of influence."

Grimes laughed. "As a matter of fact it isn't. I heard that after we'd left Sir Hamish and his senior officers were invited to a very genteel garden party thrown by no less a dignitary than the Grand Coordinator. It was a windy day. They should have had sense enough to wear their winter weight kilts . . ."

"It was the Shaara, of all people, who got a foothold (talonhold?) on Werrississa. After all, you don't expect a really alien alien to have the same nudity taboos, the same table manners, as you do. We humans are so like the Werrississians that every difference was exaggerated."

"Just as differences between members of the same species are," she said. "Some like raw fish and seaweed. Some don't."