

The Rim Gods

"And who," demanded Commodore Grimes, "will it be this time?" He added, "Or what?"

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure," simpered Miss Walton.

Grimes looked at his new secretary with some distaste. There was no denying that she was far more photogenic than her predecessor, and that she possessed a far sweeter personality. But sweetness and prettiness are not everything. He bit back a sarcastic rejoinder, looked again at the signal that the girl had just handed him. It was from a ship, a vessel with the unlikely name of Piety. And it was not a word in some alien language that could mean anything—the name of the originator of the message was Terran enough. Anglo-Terran at that. William Smith. And after that prosaic appellation there was his title—but that was odd. It was not the usual Master, Captain, Officer Commanding or whatever. It was, plainly and simply, Rector.

Piety. . . . Rector. . . . That ship's name, and that title of rank, had an archaic ring to them. Grimes had always been a student of naval history, and probably knew more about the vessels that had sailed Earth's oceans in the dim and distant past than anybody on the Rim Worlds and, come to that, the vast majority of people on the home planet itself. He remembered that most of the ancient sailing ships had been given religious names. He remembered, too, that rector had once been the shipmaster's official title.

So what was this ship coming out to the Rim, giving her ETA, details of last clearance, state of health on board and all the rest of it? Some cog, some caravel, some galleass? Grimes smiled at his own fancy. Nonetheless, strange ships, very strange ships, had drifted out to the Rim.

"Miss Walton . . ." he said.

"Yes, Commodore," she replied brightly.

"This Piety . . . see what details Lloyd's Register has on her."

"Very good, sir."

The Commodore—rugged, stocky, short, iron-gray hair over a deeply tanned and seamed face, ears that in spite of suggestions made by two wives and several mistresses still protruded—paced the polished floor of his office while the little blonde punched the buttons that would actuate the Port Forlorn robot librarian. Legally, he supposed, the impending arrival of the Piety was the port captain's pigeon. Grimes was Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners, the Confederacy's shipping line. But he was also the officer commanding the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve and, as such, was concerned with matters of security and defense. He wished that Sonya, his wife, were available so that he could talk things over with her. She, before her marriage to him, had held the rank of Commander in the Intelligence branch of the Interstellar Federation's Survey Service and, when it came to mysteries and secrets of any kind, displayed the aptitudes of a highly intelligent ferret. But Sonya, after declaring that another week on Lorn would have her climbing up the wallpaper, had taken off for a long

vacation—Waverley, Caribbea, Atlantia and points inward—by herself. She, when she returned, would be sorry to have missed whatever odd adventures the arrival of this queerly named ship presaged—and Grimes knew that there would be some. His premonitions were rarely, if ever, wrong.

He turned away from the banked screens and instruments that made his office look like an exceptionally well fitted spaceship's control room, walked to the wide window that took up an entire wall, which overlooked the port. It was a fine day—for Lorn. The almost perpetual overcast was thin enough to permit a hint of blue sky to show through, and the Lorn sun was a clearly defined disk rather than the usual fuzzy ball. There was almost no wind. Discharge of Rim Leopard, noted, seemed to be progressing satisfactorily. There was a blue flare of welding arcs about the little spacetug Rim Mamelute, presently undergoing her annual survey. And there, all by herself, was the ship that Grimes—to the annoyance of his wife—often referred to as his one true love, the old, battered Faraway Quest. She had been built how many (too many) years ago as a standard Epsilon Class tramp for the Interstellar Transport Commission. She had been converted into a survey ship for the Rim Worlds' government. In her, Grimes had made the first landings on the inhabited planets to the Galactic East, the worlds now referred to as the Eastern Circuit. In her he had made the first contact—but not a physical one—with the anti-matter systems to the Galactic West.

And would the arrival of the good ship Piety lead to her recommissioning? Grimes hoped so. He liked his job—it was interesting work, carrying both authority and responsibility—but he was often tired of being a deskborne commodore, and had always welcomed the chance to take the old Quest up and out into deep space again. As often in the past he had a hunch, a strong one. Something was cooking, and he would have a finger in the pie.

Miss Walton's childish treble broke into his thoughts. "Sir, I have the information on Piety. . . ."

"Yes?"

"She was built as Epsilon Crucis for the Interstellar Transport Commission fifty Terran standard years ago. She was purchased from them last year, Terran reckoning, by the Skarsten Theological Institute, whose address is listed as Nuevo Angeles on Francisco, otherwise known as Beta Puppis VI. . . ."

"I've visited Francisco," he told her. "A pleasant world, in many ways. But an odd one."

"Odd? How, sir?"

"I hope I'm not treading on any of your corns, Miss Walton, but the whole planet's no more than a breeding ground for fancy religions."

"I'm a Latter Day Reformed Methodist myself, sir," she told him severely. "And that's not fancy."

"Indeed it's not, Miss Walton." And I'm a cynical, more or less tolerant agnostic, he thought. He went on, "And does Lloyds condescend to tell us

the category in which this renamed Epsilon Crucis is now listed? A missionary ship, perhaps?"

"No, sir. A survey ship."

"Oh," was all that Grimes could say.

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Two days later Grimes watched, from his office window, Piety come in. Whatever else this Rector William Smith might or might not be he was a good ship handler. There was a nasty wind blowing across the spaceport, not quite a gale, but near enough to it; nonetheless the ship made a classic vertical descent, dropping to the exact center of the triangle formed by the berth-marker beacons. It was easy enough in theory, no more than the exact application of lateral thrust, no more than a sure and steady hand on the remote controls of the Inertial Drive. No more—and no less. Some people get the feel of ships; some never do.

This Piety was almost a twin to Grimes's own Faraway Quest. She was a newer (less old) ship, of course, but the design of the Epsilon Class tramps, those trusty workhorses of the Commission, had changed very little over the years. She sat there in her assigned berth, a gray, weathered spire, the bright scarlet beacons still blinking away just clear of the broad vanes of her tripod landing gear. From her stem a telescopic mast extended itself, and from the top of the metal staff a flag broke out, whipped to quivering rigidity by the wind. The Commodore picked up his binoculars through which to study it. It was not, as he had assumed it would be, the national ensign of Francisco, the golden crux anasta and crescent on a scarlet ground; even with the naked eye he could see that. This was a harshly uncompromising standard: a simple white cross on a black field. It must be, decided Grimes, the houseflag of the Skarsten Institute.

The after air lock door opened and the ramp extended from it, and to it drew up the beetle-like cars of the various port officials—port captain, customs, immigration, health. The boarding party got out of their vehicles and filed up the gangway, to where an officer was waiting to receive them. They vanished into the ship. Grimes idly wondered whether or not they would get a drink, and what the views of these Skarsten people were on alcohol. He remembered his own visit to Francisco, as a junior officer in the Federation's Survey Service, many years ago. Some of the religious sects had been rigidly abstemious, maintaining that alcohol was an invention of the devil. Others had held that wine symbolized the more beneficent aspects of the Almighty. But it was hardly a subject worthy of speculation. He would find out for himself when, after the arrival formalities were over, he paid his courtesy call on the ship's captain.

He went back to his desk, busied himself with the paper work that made a habit of accumulating. An hour or so later he was interrupted by the buzzing of his telephone. "Grimes here!" he barked into the instrument. "Commodore Grimes," said a strange voice. It was a statement rather than a question. "This is William Smith, Commodore, Rector of Piety. I request an appointment."

"It will be my pleasure, er, Rector." Grimes glanced at his watch. It was almost time for his rather dreary coffee and sandwich lunch. It was not the sort of meal that one asked visitors to share. He said, "Shall we say 1400 hours, our time? In my office?"

"That will do very nicely, sir. Thank you."

"I am looking forward to meeting you," said Grimes, replacing the handset in its rest. And shall I send Miss Walton out for some sacramental wine? he asked himself.

* * *

William Smith was a tall man, thin, with almost all of his pale face hidden by a bushy black beard, from above which a great nose jutted like the beak of a bird of prey. His eyes under the thick, black brows were of a gray so pale as to be almost colorless, and they were cold, cold. A plain black uniform covered his spare frame, the buttons concealed by the fly front of the tunic, the four bands of black braid on the sleeves almost invisible against the cloth. There was a hint of white lace at his throat.

"I have been told, sir," he said, sitting rigidly in his chair, "that you are something of an expert on the queer conditions that prevail here, on the Rim."

"Perhaps, Rector," said Grimes, "you will tell me first the purpose of your visit here."

"Very well, sir." The man's baritone voice was as cold and as colorless as his eyes. "To begin with, we have the permission of your government, your Rim Worlds Confederacy, to conduct our pressing need of a new Revelation, a new Sinai. . . ."

"A survey, Rector? The Rim Worlds have been very well surveyed—even though I say it myself."

"Not our kind of survey. Commodore. I shall, as you would say, put you in the picture. We of the Skarsten Institute are Neo-Calvinists. We deplore the godlessness, the heresy that is ever more prevalent throughout the galaxy—yes, even upon our own planet. We feel that Mankind is in sore and pressing need of a new Revelation, a new Sinai. . . ."

"And you honestly believe that you will find your Sinai here, out on the Rim?"

"We believe that we shall find our Sinai. If not here, then elsewhere. Perhaps, even, beyond the confines of this galaxy."

"Indeed? But how can I help you, Rector?"

"You, we were told, know more about the odd distortions of the Continuum encountered here than anybody else on these planets."

"Such is fame." Grimes sighed and shrugged. "Very well, Rector, you asked for it. I'll tell you what little I know. To begin with, it is thought by many of our scientists that here, at the very edge of the expanding galaxy, the

fabric of time and space is stretched thin. We have long become used to the phenomena known as Rim Ghosts, disconcerting glimpses into alternative universes."

"I believe that you, sir, have personally made the transition into their universes."

"Yes. Once when the Federation's Survey Service requested our aid in the investigation of the Rim Ghost phenomena. No doubt your people have read the Survey Service report."

"We have."

"The second time was when we, the Confederacy, took our own steps to deal with what we decided was a very real menace—an alternative universe in which our worlds were ruled by particularly unpleasant mutants, with human beings in a state of slavery. And then there was Captain Listowel, who was master of the first experimental lightjammer. He tried to exceed the speed of light without cheating—as we do with our Mannschenn Drive—and experienced quite a few different time tracks."

"And tell me, sir, did you or this Captain Listowel ever feel that you were on the point of being granted the Ultimate Revelation?"

"Frankly, no, Rector. We had our bad moments—who in Space, or anywhere else, doesn't?—and anyone who has indulged in time track switching often wonders, as I do, about the reality, the permanence of both himself and the universe about him. For example, I have vague memories of ships that were equipped with only reaction drive for blast-offs and landings and short interplanetary hauls. Absurd, isn't it, but those memories are there. And my wife—I'm sorry you can't meet her, but she's off on a trip—seems to have changed. I have this half recollection of her when she first came out to the Rim, which is there in my mind alongside the real one—but what is real? She was working for the Federation's Intelligence Service then. Anyhow, in one memory she's small and blond, in one she's tall and blonde, and in one she's tall and red-headed, as she is today, Damn it—that's three memories!"

"Women have been known to change their hair styles and colorations, Commodore."

"Right. I wouldn't be at all surprised if she returns with her crowning glory a bright green! But that doesn't explain the coexistent memories."

"Perhaps not." Smith's voice was bitter as he went on. "But it seems such a waste of opportunities. To have been privileged to visit the many mansions of our Father's house, and to come back only with confused recollections of the color of a woman's hair!"

"And quite a few scars, Rector. Physical and psychological."

"No doubt." The man's voice was unpleasantly ironic. "But tell me, sir, what do you know of Kinsolving's Planet?"

"Not much. I suppose that we shall settle it if we're ever faced with a

population explosion, which is doubtful."

"I am referring, sir, to the man who appeared there, the Stone Age savage from the remote past."

"Yes, that was a queer business. Well before my time. Nothing like that has happened there in recent years, although there is still an uneasy, brooding atmosphere about that world that makes it undesirable as a piece of real estate. The original theory is that somehow the—the loneliness of the people out here on the Rim, hanging, as it were, by their fingernails over the abyss of the Ultimate Night, became focused on that one particular planet. Now the theory is that the fabric of Time and Space is stretched extremely thin there, and that anything or anybody is liable to fall through, either way. The rock paintings are still in the caves, but there haven't been any new ones and the paint is never wet anymore."

"The Stone Age savage," said Smith, "eventually became a Franciscan citizen, and a Neo-Calvinist. He died at a very ripe old age, and among his effects was the manuscript of his life story. His great-granddaughter presented it to the Institute. It was thought, at first, that it was a work of fiction, but the surviving relatives insisted that it was not. And then I, when I made a voyage to Earth, was able to obtain access to the Survey Service records."

"And so?" asked Grimes.

"So Kinsolving's Planet is to become our new Sinai," Smith told him.

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"You'd better go along, Grimes," Admiral Kravitz told him, "just to see fair play. Anyhow, it's all been arranged. You will be recalled to the active list—pay, etc., as per regulations—and ship out in this Piety of theirs as Rim Worlds' government observer."

"But why me, sir? If I were taking my own ship, if the old Quest were being recommissioned, with myself in command, it'd be different. But I don't like being a passenger."

"You'll not be a passenger, Grimes. Captain—sorry, Rector—Smith has indicated that he'll appreciate having you along as a sort of pilot. . . ."

"In a ship full of sky pilots—and myself a good agnostic!" He saw the bewildered expression on the Admiral's face and explained his choice of words. "In the old days, before there were any real sky pilots, seamen used to refer to ministers of religion as such."

"Did they, now? And what would those tarry-breeked ruffians of whom you're so fond have thought of a captain calling himself 'Rector'?"

"In the early days of sail they'd have thought nothing of it. It was the master's usual title."

"I doubt if anybody'll ever call you 'Bishop,' " remarked the Admiral. "Anyhow, you'll be aboard primarily to observe. And to report. In the unlikely event of anything occurring that will affect Rim Worlds' security you

are to take action."

"Me—and what squad of Marines?"

"We could send a detachment of the Salvation Army with you," joked the Admiral.

"I doubt that they'd be allowed on board. As far as I can gather, these Neo-Calvinists are somewhat intolerant. Only on a world as tolerant as Francisco would they have been allowed to flourish."

"Intolerant, yes," agreed Kravitz. "But scrupulously honest. And moral."

"In short." said Grimes, "no redeeming vices."

"Piety lifts ship at 1800 hours tomorrow, Commodore Grimes," said the Admiral. "You will be aboard."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Grimes resignedly.

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Grimes had never enjoyed serving in a "taut ship" himself, and had never commanded one. Nonetheless, he respected those captains who were able to engender about themselves such a state of affairs. Piety, as was obvious from the moment that he set foot on the bottom of the ramp, was a taut ship. Everything was spotless. Every metal fitting and surface that was supposed to be polished boasted a mirror-like sheen. All the paintwork looked as though it was washed at least twice daily—which, in fact, it was. The atmosphere inside the hull bore none of the usual taints of cookery, tobacco smoke or—even though there was a mixed crew—women's perfume. But it was too chilly, and the acidity of some disinfectant made Grimes sneeze.

The junior officer who met him at the head of the ramp showed him into the elevator cage at the foot of the axial shaft. Grimes thanked him and assured the presumably young man—the full beard made it hard to determine his age—that he knew his way around this class of vessel. A captain, no matter what he calls himself or is called, is always accommodated as closely as possible to the center of control. The elevator worked smoothly, noiselessly, carrying the Commodore speedily up to the deck just below the control room. There, as in his own Faraway Quest, was the semi-circular suite of cabins. Over the door was a brass plate with the title RECTOR.

As Grimes approached this entrance it slid open. Smith stood there and said formally, "Welcome aboard, Commodore."

"Thank you, Rector."

"Will you come in, sir?"

There were other people in the day cabin: a tall, stout, white-headed and bearded man dressed in clothing that was very similar to Smith's uniform; a woman in a longsleeved, high-necked, ankle-length black dress, her hair completely covered by a frilly white cap. They looked at Grimes, obviously

disapproving of his gold-braided, brass-buttoned, beribboned finery. They did not get up.

"Commodore Grimes," said Smith. "Presbyter Cannan. Sister Lane."

Reluctantly the Presbyter extended his hand. Grimes took it. He was not surprised that it was cold. Sister Lane nodded slightly in his general direction.

Smith gestured stiffly toward a chair, sat down himself. Grimes lowered himself to his own seat incautiously. He should have known that it would be hard. He looked curiously at the two civilians. The Presbyter was an old edition of Rector Smith. The sister. . . ? She had him puzzled. She belonged to a type that been common enough on Francisco when he had been there—the Blossom People, they had called themselves. They preached and practiced a sort of hedonistic Zen, and claimed that their use of the wide range of drugs available to them put them in close communication with the Cosmic All. Prim she was, this Sister Lane, prim and proper in her form-concealing black, but the planes of her face were not harsh, and her unpainted lips were full, and there was a strange gentleness in her brown eyes. Properly dressed—or undressed—thought Grimes, she would be a very attractive woman. Suddenly it was important that he hear her voice.

He pulled his battered pipe out of his pocket, his tobacco pouch and lighter. He asked, addressing her, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

But it was the Presbyter who replied. "Certainly we mind, sir. As you should know, we are opposed to the use of any and all drugs."

"All drugs?" murmured the woman, with a sort of malicious sweetness. Her voice was almost a baritone, but it could never be mistaken for a male one.

"There are exceptions, Sister Lane," the old man told her harshly. "As you well know."

"As I well know," she concurred.

"I take it," said Grimes, "that nicotine is not among those exceptions."

"Unfortunately," she stated, "no."

"You may leave us, Sister," said Presbyter Cannan. "We have no further business to discuss with you."

"Thank you, sir." She got gracefully to her feet, made a curtsey to Cannan, walked out of the door. Her ugly clothing could not hide the fluid grace of her movements.

"Your Nursing Sister, Rector?" asked Grimes when she was gone.

"No," answered Cannan. And, Who's running this ship? thought Grimes irritably. But evidently the Presbyter piled on more grays than did the ship's lawful master.

Smith must have noticed the Commodore's expression. "Sister Lane, sir," he explained, "is a member of the Presbyter's staff, not of mine."

"Thank you, Rector." Grimes rewarded him with what was intended to be a friendly smile. "I'm afraid that it will take me some time to get your ranks and ratings sorted out."

"I have no doubt," said Cannan, "that it must be confusing to one who relies upon gaudy fripperies for his authority rather than inner grace."

"Your baggage must be aboard and stowed by now, Commodore," Smith said hastily. He turned to his spiritual superior. "May I suggest, sir, that you and your people retire to your quarters? Liftoff"—he glanced at his watch—"will be in fifteen minutes."

"Very well, Rector." The old man got up, towering over the two spacemen. Smith got up. Grimes remained seated until Smith returned from seeing the Presbyterian out.

He said, "I'd better be getting below myself. If you could have somebody show me to my stateroom, Rector."

"I was hoping, Commodore, that you would be coming up to Control for the lift-off."

"Thank you, Rector Smith. It will be my pleasure."

Smith led the way out of his quarters, up the short ladder that brought the two men to the control room. Grimes looked about him. The layout was a standard one: acceleration chairs before which were banks of instruments, screens, meters, chart tank, mass proximity indicator, Carlotti Beacon direction finder. All seemed to be in perfect order, and much of the equipment was new. Evidently the Skarsten Theological Institute did not believe in spoiling the ship for a ha'porth of tar.

The Rector indicated a chair, into which Grimes strapped himself, then took his own seat. The officers were already at their stations. All those bearded men, thought the Commodore, looked too much alike, and their black-on-black insignia of rank made it hard to tell who was what. But this wasn't his ship, and she had managed to come all the way out from Francisco without mishap.

The departure routine went smoothly enough, with the usual messages exchanged between control room and spaceport control tower. The Inertial Drive started up, and there was that brief second of weightlessness before the gentle acceleration made itself felt. The ship lifted easily, falling upward to the cloud ceiling. Briefly Grimes was able to look out through the viewports at Port Forlorn and at the dreary countryside spread out around the city like a map. And then there was nothing but gray mist outside—mist that suddenly became a pearly, luminescent white and then vanished. Overhead was a steely sun glaring out of a black sky, its light harsh even though the ports were polarized.

There was free fall for a little while, and then the gyroscopes swung the ship's head to the target star. The Inertial Drive came on again, its irregular throbbing beat a bass background for the thin, high keening of the Mannschenn Drive. Ahead, save for the iridescent spiral that was the target sun, there was only blackness. Lorn was to starboard—a vast, writhing

planetary amoeba that was falling astern, that was shrinking rapidly. And out to port was the Galactic Lens, distorted by the temporal precession field of the Drive to a Klein flask blown by a drunken glass-blower.

Grimes wondered, as he had wondered before, if anybody would ever come up with another simile. But this one was so apt.

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Grimes didn't like this ship.

She was beautifully kept, efficiently run, and with her cargo spaces converted to passenger accommodation she comfortably housed her crew and all the personnel from the Skarsten Institute. But she was . . . cold. She was cold, and she was too quiet. There was none of the often ribald laughter, none of the snatches of light music that lent warmth to the atmosphere of a normal vessel. There were, he noted, playmasters in all the recreation rooms; but when he examined the spools of the machine in the senior officers' mess he found that they consisted entirely of recordings of sermons and the gloomier hymns. The library was as bad. And, socially, there was complete segregation of the sexes. Deaconesses and sisters were berthed aft, and between them and the male crew and passengers were the storerooms and the "farm."

The food was not bad, but it was plain, unimaginative. And there was nothing to drink but water, and even that had a flat taste. The conversation at table was as boring as the provender. Too, Grimes was annoyed to find out that the Rector did not sit at the head of the board in the senior officers' mess; that place of honor was reserved for the Presbyter. And he talked, almost non-stop, about the Institute's internal politics, with the ship's captain interjecting an occasional quiet affirmative as required. The chief officer, surgeon and purser gobbled their meals in silence, as did Grimes, very much the outsider at the foot of the table. They were served by a young stewardess who would have been pretty in anything but that ugly, all-concealing black, who seemed to hold the domineering old man—but nobody else—in awe.

After the evening meal Grimes made his excuses and retired to his cabin. It was little more than a dogbox, and was a comedown after his suite aboard the Quest. He was pleased that he had brought his own reading matter with him, and pleased that he had exercised the forethought to make provision for his other little comforts. Before doing anything else, he filled and lit his pipe and then, moving slowly and easily through the blue haze of his own creation, unclipped the larger of his cases from its rack, pulled it out and opened it. He was lifting out the shirts that had acted as shock-proof packing for certain breakables when he heard a light tap at his door. He groaned. A passenger is bound by ship's regulations as much as is any crew member. But he was damned if he was going to put out his pipe. "Come in," he called.

She came in. She pulled the ugly white cap off her lustrous brown hair, tossed it on to the bunk. Then she turned back to the door, snapped on the spring lock. She tested its security, smiled, then flopped down into the one chair that the cabin possessed.

Grimes looked at her, with raised eyebrows. "Yes, Sister Lane?" he asked.

"Got a smoke, spaceman?" she growled.

"There are some cigars . . ."he began doubtfully.

"I didn't expect pot. Although if you have any . . . ?"

"I haven't." Then Grimes said virtuously, "In any case, such drugs are banned on the Rim Worlds."

"Are they? But what about the cigar you promised me?"

Grimes got a box of panatellas out of his case, opened it, offered it to her. She took one, accepted his proffered light. She inhaled luxuriously. She said, "All I need now is a drink."

"I can supply that."

"Good on you, Admiral!"

There was the bottle of absolute alcohol, and there was the case with its ranked phials of essences. "Scotch?" asked Grimes. "Rum? Brandy? Or . . . ?"

"Scotch will do."

The Commodore measured alcohol into the two glasses over the washbasin, added to each a drop of essence, topped up with cold water from the tap. She murmured, "Here's mud in your eye," and gulped from hers as soon as he handed it to her.

"Sister Lane," said Grimes doubtfully.

"You can call me Clarisse."

"Clarisse. . . . Should you be doing this?"

"Don't tell me that you're a wowser, like all those Bible-punchers."

"I'm not. But this is not my ship. . . ."

"And it's not mine, either."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, dearie. And if you ply me with liquor, I might just tell it to you." She sighed and stretched. "You've no idea what a relief it is to enjoy a drink and a talk and a smoke with somebody who's more or less human."

"Thank you," said Grimes stiffly.

She laughed. "Don't be offended, duckie." She put up her hands, pulled her hair back and away from her face. "Look at my ears."

Grimes looked. They were normal enough organs—save for the fact that were pointed, and were tufted with hair at the tips.

"I'm only more or less human myself," she told him. "More rather than less, perhaps. You know about the man Raul, the caveman, the Stone Age savage, who was pulled, somehow, from the remote past on Kinsolving's Planet to what was then the present. He was my great-grandfather."

"He was humanoid," said Grimes. "Not human."

"Human-schuman!" she mocked. "There is such a thing as parallel evolution, you know. And old Raul was made something of a pet by the scientists back on Earth, and when he evinced the desire to father a family the finest genetic engineers in the Galaxy were pressed into service. No, not the way that you're thinking. Commodore. You've got a low mind."

"Sorry."

"I should think so. Just for that, you can pour me another drink."

And Grimes asked himself if his liquor ration would last out until his return to Lorn.

"What are you doing here?" he asked bluntly. "In this ship?"

"At this very moment I'm breaking at least ninety-nine percent of the regulations laid down by the Presbyter and enforced by the Rector. But I know what you mean." Her voice deepened so that it was like Grimes's own. "What is a nasty girl like you doing in a nice place like this?"

"I wouldn't call you nasty," said Grimes.

"Thank you, sir. Then stand by for the story of my life, complete and unexpurgated. I'll start off with dear old great-granddaddy, the Noble Savage: He was an artist, you know, in his proper place and time, one of those specialists who practiced a form of sympathetic magic. He would paint or draw pictures of various animals, and the actual beasts would be drawn to the spot, there to be slaughtered by the hunters. He said that it worked, too. I can remember, when I was a little girl, that he'd put on demonstrations. He'd draw a picture of, say, the cat—and within seconds pussy would be in the room. Oh, yes—and he was a telepath, a very powerful transceiver.

"After many years on Earth, where he was latterly an instructor at the Rhine Institute, he emigrated, with his wife and children, to Francisco, where he was psionic radio officer in charge of the Port Diego Signal Station. It was there that he got religion. And with all the religions to choose from, he had to become a Neo-Calvinist! His family was converted with him—and I often wonder how much part his undeniable psychic powers played in their conversion! And the wives of his sons had to become converts, and the husbands of his daughters—yea, even unto the third and fourth generations."

She grinned. "One member of the fourth generation kicked over the traces. Me. From the Neo-Calvinists to the Blossom People was a logical step. Like most new converts I overdid things. Drinks, drugs, promiscuity—the works. The Neo-Calvinists picked me up, literally, from the gutter and nursed me back to health in their sanatorium—and, at the same time, made it quite

clear that if I was predestined to go to Hell I should go there. And then, when they checked up on great-grandfather's autobiographical papers, they realized that I was predestined for something really important—especially since I, alone of his descendants, possess something of his powers."

"You mean that you can . . . ?"

There was a violent knocking on the door, and a voice shouting, "Open up! Open up, I say!"

"They know I'm here," muttered Clarisse sullenly. She got out of her chair, operated the sliding panel herself.

Rector Smith was standing outside, and with him was a tall, gaunt woman. She stared at Sister Lane in horror and snarled, "Cover your nakedness, you shameless hussy!"

Clarisse shrugged, picked up the ugly cap from where it was lying on the bunk, adjusted it over her hair, tucking all loose strands out of sight.

"Will you deal with Sister Lane, Deaconess?" asked Smith.

"That I shall, Rector."

"Miss Lane and I were merely enjoying a friendly talk," said Grimes.

"A friendly talk!" The Deaconess' voice dripped scorn. "Smoking! Wine-bibbing! You—you gilded popinjay!"

Smith had picked up the bottle of alcohol, his obvious intention being to empty it into the washbasin. "Hold it!"

Smith hesitated. Unhurriedly Grimes took the bottle from his hand, restoppered it, put it in the rack over the basin.

Then the Rector started to bluster. "Sir. I must remind you that you are a guest aboard my ship. A passenger. You are obliged to comply with ship's regulations."

"Sir," replied Grimes coldly, "I have signed no articles of agreement, and no ticket with the back covered with small print has been issued to me. I am surprised that a shipmaster should have been so neglectful of the essential legalities, and were you in the employ of the company of which I am astronomical superintendent I should find it my duty to reprimand you."

"Not only a gilded popinjay," observed the Deaconess harshly, "but a space lawyer."

"Yes, madam, a space lawyer—as any master astronaut should be." He was warming up nicely. "But I must remind you, both of you, that I do have legal standing aboard this vessel. I am here in my capacity as official observer for the Rim Worlds Confederacy. Furthermore, I was called back to active duty in the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, with the rank of Commodore."

"Meaningless titles," sneered the Deaconess. "A Commodore without a fleet!"

"Perhaps, madam. Perhaps. But I must remind you that we are proceeding through Rim Worlds' territorial space. And I must make it plain that any interference with my own personal liberties—and the infliction by yourselves of any harsh punishment on Miss Lane—will mean that Piety will be intercepted and seized by one of our warships." He thought, I hope the bluff isn't called.

Called it was.

"And just how, Mr. Commodore Grimes, do you propose to call a warship to your aid?" asked the woman.

"Easily, Deaconess, easily," said Clarisse Lane. "Have you forgotten that I am a telepath—and a good one? While this ship was on Lorn I made contact with Mr. Mayhew, Senior Psionic Radio Officer of the Rim World Navy. Even though we never met physically we became close friends. He is an old friend and shipmate of the Commodore, and asked me to keep in touch to let him know if Commodore Grimes was in any danger."

"And you will tell him, of course," said Grimes, "if you are subjected to any harm, or even discomfort."

"He will know," she said quietly.

"Yes," agreed Grimes. "He will know."

He was familiar with telepaths, was Grimes, having commenced his spacefaring career before the Carlotti direction finding and communications systems began to replace the psionic radio officers with its space- and time-twisting beamed radiations. He was familiar with telepaths, and knew how it was with them when, infrequently, one of them found a member of the opposite sex with the same talents attractive. Until this happened—and it rarely did—they would lavish all their affection on the disembodied canine brains that they used as amplifiers.

Rector Smith was the first to weaken. He muttered, "Very well, Commodore."

"And is this harlot to go unpunished?" flared the Deaconess.

"That's right, she is," Grimes told her.

She glared at him—and Grimes glared back. He regretted deeply that this was not his ship, that he had no authority aboard her.

"Rector Smith . . ." she appealed.

"I'm sorry, Deaconess," Smith told her. "But you have heard what these people have told us."

"And you will allow them to flout your authority?"

"It is better than causing the success of our mission to be jeopardized." He stiffened. "Furthermore, I order you not to lay hands upon Sister Lane, and not to order any of the other sisters to do so."

"And I suppose she's to be free to visit this—this vile seducer any time that she sees fit."

"No," said Smith at last. "No. That I will not sanction. Commodore Grimes claims that I cannot give orders to him, but my authority is still absolute insofar as all other persons aboard this vessel are concerned. Sister Lane will not be ill-treated, but she will be confined to the women's quarters until such time as her services are required."

"The Presbyter shall hear of this," said the woman.

"Indeed he shall. I shall be making my own report to him. Meanwhile, he is not, repeat not, to be disturbed." He added, "And those are his orders."

"Very well, then," snapped the Deaconess. And to Clarisse Lane, "Come."

"It was a good try, Commodore," said the girl, looking back wistfully at her unfinished drink, her still smoldering cigar. "It was a good try, but it could have been a better one, as far as I'm concerned. Good night."

It was a good try, thought Grimes. Period. He had gone as far as he could go without undermining the Master's—the Rector's—authority too much. As for the girl, he was sure that she would not, now, be maltreated, and it would do her no harm to revert to the abstemious routine of this aptly named ship.

"Good night," he said.

"May I have a word with you, sir?" asked Smith when the two women were gone.

"Surely. Stick around, Rector. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

Smith looked, but did not voice, his disapproval of the figure of speech. He shut the door, snapped the lock on. Then, with a penknife taken from his pocket, he made a little adjustment to one of the securing screws of the mirror over the washbasin.

"Bugged?" asked Grimes interestedly.

"Of course—as is every compartment in the ship. But there are speakers and screens in only two cabins—my own and the Presbyter's. His Reverence, I know, took sleeping pills before retiring, but he might awaken."

"I suppose the ladies' showers are bugged, too?" asked Grimes.

A dull flush covered what little of the Rector's face was not hidden by his beard. He growled. "That, sir, is none of your business."

"And what, sir, is your business with me?"

"I feel, Commodore Grimes, that you should know how important that unhappy woman is to the success of our mission; then, perhaps, you will be less inclined, should the opportunity present itself again, to pander to her whims." Smith cleared his throat; then he went on. "This business upsets

me, sir. You will know, as you, yourself, were once a shipmaster, how unpleasant it is to have to assert your authority."

"And talking," said Grimes, who had his telepath moments, "is thirsty work."

"If you would be so kind, sir," said Smith, after a long moment of hesitation. "I believe that brandy has always been regarded as a medicine."

Grimes sighed, and mixed fresh drinks. He motioned Smith to the single chair, sat down on the bunk. He thought of shocking the other man with one of the more obscene toasts, but merely said, "Down the hatch." The Rector said, "I needed that."

"Another, Rector Smith?"

"No, thank you, sir."

You want me to twist your arm, you sanctimonious bastard, thought Grimes, but I'm not going to do it. He put the bottle of alcohol and the little case of essences away. "And now," he said, "about Miss Lane. . . ."

"Yes, Sister Lane. As she has told you, she was one of us. But she backslid, and consorted with the fornicators and wine-bibbers who call themselves the Blossom People. But even this was in accordance with the Divine scheme of things. Whilst consorting with those—those pagans she became accustomed to the use and the abuse—but surely the use is also abuse!—of the psychedelic drugs. Already she possessed considerable psychic powers, but those vile potions enhanced them.

"You will realize, sir, that it would have been out of the question for any of our own Elect to imperil his immortal soul by tampering with such powerful, unseen and unseeable forces, but—"

"But," said Grimes, "Clarisse Lane has already demonstrated that she is damned, so you don't mind using her as your cat's-paw."

"You put it very concisely, sir," agreed Smith.

"I could say more, but I won't. I just might lose my temper. But go on."

"Sister Lane is not entirely human. She is descended from that Raul, the Stone Age savage who was brought to Earth from Kinsolving's Planet. Many factors were involved in his appearance. It could be that the very fabric of the Continuum is worn thin, here on the Rim, and that lines of force, or fault lines, intersect at that world. It could be, as the Rhine Institute claimed at the time, that the loneliness and the fear of all the dwellers on the colonized Rim Worlds are somehow focused on Kinsolving. Be that as it may, it happened. And it happened too that, in the fullness of time, this Raul was accepted into the bosom of our Church.

"Raul, as you may know, was more than a mere telepath. Much more. He was a wizard, one of those who, in his own age, drew animals to the hunters' spears by limning their likenesses on rock."

Grimes interrupted. "Doesn't the Bible say, somewhere, that thou shalt not

suffer a witch to live?"

"Yes. It is so written. But we did not know of the full extent of Raul's talents when he was admitted into our Fold. We did not know of them until after his death, when his papers came into our possession."

"But what are you playing at?" demanded Grimes. "Just what you are playing at in our back garden?" He had the bottle out again, and the little phial of cognac-flavored essence, and was mixing two more drinks. He held out one of them, the stronger, to Smith, who absentmindedly took it and raised it to his lips.

The Rector said, "Sir, I do not approve of your choice of words. Life is not a game. Life, death and the hereafter are not a game. We are not playing. We are working. Is it not written. 'Work, for the night is coming?' And you, sir, and I, as spacemen, know that the night is coming—the inevitable heat death of the Universe. . . ." He gulped more of his drink.

"You should visit Darsha some time," said Grimes, "and their Tower of Darkness. You should see the huge clock that is the symbol of their God." He added softly, "The clock is running down."

"Yes, the clock is running down, the sands of time are running out. And there is much to be done, so much to be done. . . ."

"Such as?"

"To reestablish the eternal verities. To build a new Sinai, to see the Commandments graven afresh on imperishable stone. And then, perhaps, the heathen, the idolators, will take heed and tremble. And then, surely, the rule of Jehovah will come again, before the End."

Grimes said reasonably enough, "But you people believe in predestination, don't you? Either we're damned or we aren't, and nothing we do makes any difference."

"I have learned by bitter experience," Smith told him, "that it is impossible to argue with a heretic—especially one who is foredoomed to eternal damnation. But even you must see that if the Commandments are given anew to Man then we, the Elect, shall be elevated to our rightful place in the Universe."

"Then God save us all," said Grimes.

Smith looked at him suspiciously, but went on. "It is perhaps necessary that there should be a sacrifice, and, if that be so, the Lord has already delivered her into our hands. No, sir, do not look at me like that. We shall not kill her, neither by knife nor fire shall we slay her. But, inevitably, she will be the plaything of supernal powers when she, on the planet of her ancestral origin, her inherited talents intensified by drugs, calls to Jehovah, the true God, the God of the Old Testament, to make Himself known again to sinful men."

There were flecks of white froth on Smith's beard around his lips, a dribble of saliva down the hair on his chin. His eyes were glaring and bloodshot.

Grimes thought, in vino veritas. He said, with a gentleness he did not feel, actuated only by self-interest, "Don't you think that you've had enough, Rector? Isn't it time that we both turned in?"

"Eh, what? When'm ready. But you understand now that you must not interfere. You must not interfere."

"I understand," said Grimes, thinking, Too much and, not enough. He found a tube of tablets in his suitcase, shook one into the palm of his hand. "Here," he said, offering it. "You'd better take this."

"Wha's it for?"

"It'll sweeten the breath and sober you up. It'll be too bad for you if the Presbyterian sees the state you're in." And too bad for me, he thought.

" 'M not drunk."

"Of course not. Just a little—unsteady."

"Don't really need . . . But jus' to oblige, y'un-derstan'."

Smith swallowed the tablet, his Adam's apple working convulsively. Grimes handed him a glass of cold water to wash it down. It acted almost immediately. The bearded man shuddered, then got steadily to his feet. He glared at Grimes, but it was no longer a fanatical glare. "Good night, sir," he snapped.

"Good night, Rector," Grimes replied.

When he was alone he thought of playing back the record of the evening's conversations, but thought better of it. For all he knew, Smith might be able to switch the hidden microphone and scanner back on from his own quarters—and the less he knew of the tiny device hidden in the starboard epaulet of his white mess jacket, the better.

He got out of his clothes and into his bunk, switched off the light; but, unusually for him, his sleep was uneasy and nightmare-ridden. He supposed that it was Clarisse Lane's fault that she played a leading part in most of the dreams.

* * *

The voyage wore on, and on, and even as the ever-precussing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive tumbled and receded down the dark infinities, so did the good ship Piety fall through the twisted Continuum. On one hand was the warped convoluted Galactic Lens and ahead, a pulsating spiral of iridescent light against the ultimate darkness, was the Kinsolving sun.

And this ship, unlike other ships of Grimes's wide experience, was no little man-made oasis of light and warmth in the vast, empty desert of the night. She was cold, cold, and her atmosphere carried always the faint acidity of disinfectant, and men and women talked in grave, low voices and did not mingle, and never was there the merest hint of laughter.

Clarisse Lane was not being maltreated—Grimes made sure of that—and

was even allowed to meet the Commodore for a daily conversation, but always heavily chaperoned. She was the only telepath in the ship, which, while the interstellar drive was in operation, depended entirely upon the Carlotti equipment for deep space communication. But the Rector and the Presbyter did not doubt that she was in constant touch with Mayhew back at Port Forlorn—and Grimes did not doubt it either. She told him much during their meetings—things about which she could not possibly have known if there had not been a continual interchange of signals. Some of this intelligence was confirmed by messages addressed to Grimes and received, in the normal way, by the ship's electronic radio officer.

So they were obliged to be careful, these Neo-Calvinists. The chosen instrument for their experiment in practical theology was now also an agent for the Rim Worlds Confederacy. "But what does it matter?" Smith said to Grimes on one of the rare occasions that he spoke at length to him. "What does it matter? Perhaps it was ordained this way. Your friend Mayhew will be the witness to the truth, a witness who is not one of us. He will see through her eyes, hear with her ears, feel with every fiber of her being. The Word propagated by ourselves alone would be scoffed at. But there will be credence given it when it is propagated by an unbeliever."

"If anything happens," said Grimes.

But he couldn't argue with these people, and they couldn't argue with him. There was just no meeting of minds. He remembered a theory that he had once heard advanced by a ship's doctor. "Long ago," the man had said, "very long ago, there was a mutation. It wasn't a physically obvious one, but as a result of it Homo Sapiens was divided into two separate species: Homo credulens, those capable of blind faith in the unprovable, and Homo incredulens, those who aren't. The vast majority of people are, of course, hybrids."

Grimes had said, "And I suppose that all the pure Homo incredulens stock is either atheist or agnostic."

"Not so." The doctor had laughed. "Not so. Agnostic—yes. But don't forget that the atheist, like the theist, makes a definite statement for which he can produce no proof whatsoever."

An atheist would have been far less unhappy aboard this ship than a tolerant agnostic like Grimes.

But even the longest, unhappiest voyage comes to an end. A good planetfall was made—whatever they believed, Piety's people were excellent navigators—and, the Mannschenn Drive switched off, the Inertial Drive ticking over just enough to produce minimal gravitational field, the ship was falling in orbit about the lonely world, the blue and green mottled sphere hanging there against the blackness.

The old charts—or copies of them—were out, and Grimes was called up to the control room. "Yes," he told Smith, stabbing a finger down on the paper, "that's where the spaceport was. Probably even now the apron's not too overgrown for a safe landing. Captain Spence, when he came down in Epsilon Eridani, reported creepers over everything, but nothing heavy."

"It is a hundred and fifty standard years since he was here," said Smith. "At least. I would suggest one of the beaches."

"Risky," Grimes told him. "They shelve very steeply and according to our records violent storms are more frequent than otherwise." He turned to the big screen upon which a magnification of the planet was appearing. "There, just to the east of the sunrise terminator. That's the major continent—Farland, it was called—where the capital city and the spaceport were situated. You see that river, with the S bend? Step up the magnification somebody. . . ."

Now there was only the glowing picture of the island continent, filling all the screen, and that expanded, so that there was only the sprawling, silvery S, and toward the middle of it, on either bank, a straggle of buildings was visible.

"The spaceport should be about ten miles to the west," said Grimes.

"Yes," agreed Smith, taking a long pointer to the screen. "I think that's it."

"Then make it Landing Stations, Rector," ordered Presbyterian Cannan.

"Sir," demurred Smith, "you cannot put a big ship down as though she were a dinghy."

"Lord, oh Lord," almost prayed the Presbyterian. "To have come so far, and then to be plagued by the dilatoriness of spacemen!"

I wish that this were my control room, thought Grimes.

But Piety's crew worked well and efficiently, and in a very short space of time the intercom speakers were blating strings of orders: "Secure all for landing stations!" "All idlers to their quarters!" and the like. Gyroscopes hummed and whined and the ship tilted relative to the planet until its surface was directly beneath her, and the first of the sounding rockets, standard equipment for a survey expedition but not for landing on a world with spaceport control functioning, were fixed.

Parachutes blossomed in the upper atmosphere and the flares, each emitting a great steamer of smoke, ignited. Somebody was singing. It was the Presbyterian.

"Let the fiery, cloudy pillar

Guide me all my journey through. . . ."

Even Grimes was touched by the spirit of the occasion. What if this crazy, this impious (for so he was beginning to think of it) experiment did work? What would happen? What would be unleashed upon the worlds of men? Who was it—the Gnostics?—who had said that the God of the Old Testament was the Devil of the New? He shivered as he sat in his acceleration chair.

She was dropping steadily, was Piety, following the first of her flares. But there was drift down there—perhaps a gale in the upper atmosphere, or a jet stream. The Inertial Drive generators grumbled suddenly as Smith

applied lateral thrust. Down she dropped, and down, almost falling free, but under the full control of her captain. On the target screen, right in the center, highly magnified, the cluster of ruins that had been a spaceport was clearly visible, tilting like tombstones in a deserted graveyard, ghastly in the blue light of the rising sun.

Down she dropped, plunging through the wisps of cirrus, and there was a slight but appreciable rise of temperature as skin friction heated the metal of her hull. Smith slowed the rate of descent. The Presbyterian started muttering irritably to himself.

There was no longer need for magnification on the screen. The great rectangle of the landing field was clearly visible, the vegetation that covered it lighter in color—eau de Nile against the surrounding indigo—than the brush outside the area. The last of the flares to have been fired was still burning there, its column of smoke rising almost vertically. The growth among which it had fallen was slowly smoldering.

Grimes looked at Smith. The man was concentrating hard. Beads of perspiration were forming on his upper cheeks, running down into his beard. But this was more important than an ordinary landing. So much hinged upon it. And, perhaps, malign (or benign) forces might be gathering their strength to upset the ship before her massive tripod landing gear reached the safety of the planetary surface.

But she was down.

There was the gentlest of shocks, the faintest of creakings, the softest sighing of shock-absorbers. She was down, and the Inertial Drive generators muttered to themselves and then were quiet. She was down, and the souging of the fans seemed to make the silence all the more silent.

Presbyter Cannan broke it. He turned in his chair to address Grimes. "Commodore," he asked as he pointed toward a distant peak, a black, truncated cone against the blue sky, "Commodore Grimes, what is the name of that mountain?"

"I . . . I don't know, sir."

"I know." The old man's voice was triumphant. "It is Sinai."

* * *

Had this been any other ship there would have been a period of relaxation. There were wild pigs and rabbits to hunt, descendants of the livestock abandoned by the original colonists. There were the famous caves, with their rock paintings, to visit. But the animals, their fear of Man long forgotten, came out of the undergrowth to stare curiously at the vessel and at the humans who busied themselves around her, opening side ports to allow the egress of the three pinnacles, already stocked with what would be required for the final stages of the expedition. And nobody was remotely interested in the caves.

Grimes managed to see Clarisse Lane. The ship was almost deserted now,

so he was able to make his way down into the women's quarters without being challenged and stopped. He found her little cabin, hardly more than a cell. She was not locked in, not restrained in any way. She was sitting in her chair, a somber figure in her black dress, staring into nothingness. Her full lips moved almost imperceptibly as she vocalized her thoughts.

With a sudden start she realized that Grimes was standing before her. She whispered, "I—I was talking to Ken."

"To Mayhew?"

"Yes."

Saying goodbye, he thought. He said, "Clarisse, you don't have to go through with this."

"I am going through with it, Commodore."

"You don't have to," he insisted. "You're in touch with Mayhew. And he'll be in touch with Rim Sword. The Admiral told me that she'd be standing by in this sector. She's probably on her way here now. We can stall off those fanatics until she comes in."

She said, "I'm going through with it."

"But why? Why?"

"Because I want to."

"But you're not really one of them."

"I'm not."

"Sister Lane!" It was the Deaconess. "You asked for a few moments of privacy—and now I find you with this—this lecher! But come. The boat is waiting."

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

"You will not," snapped the woman. "A place has been reserved for you in the pinnacle carrying the Presbyter and the Rector. They had decided that it is meet that an infidel shall witness the handing down of the Law."

Clarisse Lane followed the Deaconess from the cabin. Grimes trailed along behind them. They went down to the main air lock, down the ramp to the overgrown apron, stumbling over the tough, straggling vines on their way to the boats. The sun was dropping fast to the western horizon. There was a hint of chill, a smell of dusk in the still air. There was the scent of growing things, and a faint hint of corruption.

Smith beckoned to Grimes from the open door of the leading pinnacle. He made his way slowly toward it, walking carefully. He clambered up the retractable steps into the crowded cabin that stank of perspiration and damp, heavy clothing. He found a seat, wedged between two junior officers.

The door hissed shut. The Inertial Drive generator throbbed and snarled. Grimes could not see out of the ports, but he knew that the boat was airborne, was moving. There was no conversation in the cabin, but a metallic male voice reported from the speaker on the pilot's console, "Number Two following." After a pause a harsh female voice said, "Number Three following."

How long the flight lasted Grimes did not know; he was unable to raise his arm to look at his watch. But it seemed a long time, and it seemed a long time that they sat there after they had landed, waiting for the other boats to come down. But at last the door opened and a thin, icy wind whined through the aperture. The Presbyterian was out first, then Smith, and eventually Grimes, in the middle of a huddle of officers and civilians.

The plateau was smooth, windswept, an expanse of bare rock. To one side of it were the three pinnacles, and in front of them the men were drawn up in orderly ranks, with only the Presbyterian standing apart. In the middle of the circular area were the women, a ragged huddle of somber black.

Grimes's attention was caught by a blue spark far below, not far from the still gleaming, serpentine river. Had Rim Sword landed? No. It was only the control room windows of Piety reflecting the last rays of the setting sun.

There was a subdued murmuring as the women walked to stand to one side of the men. No, not all the women. Two remained in the center of the plateau. One was the Deaconess, tall and forbidding. The other was the Clarisse Lane. They had stripped her. She was wearing only a kilt cut roughly from the hide of some animal, clothing like that which had been worn by her ancestresses on this very planet. She was shivering and was hugging her full breasts to try to keep out the cold.

Stark, incongruous, an easel stood there, supporting a frame square of black canvas, and there was a battery-powered floodlight to illuminate it. At its foot were pots of pigment, and brushes. Raul, the forefather of this girl, had called animals with his paintings. What would she call? What could she call?

"Drink!" said the Deaconess, her voice rang clear over the thin whine of the bitter wind. "Drink!" She was holding out a glass of something. Clarisse took it, drained it.

Suddenly the sun was gone, and there was only the glare of the floodlight. Overhead was the almost empty black sky, and low to the east was an arc of misty luminescence that was the slowly rising Galactic Lens. The wind seemed to be coming straight from intergalactic space.

The Deaconess stalked over the rocky surface to take her stand beside the Presbyterian, leaving the girl alone. Hesitantly Clarisse stooped to the pots and brushes, selected one of the latter, dipped it into paint, straightened, stood before the easel.

She stiffened into immobility, seemed to be waiting for something.

They were singing, then, the black-clad men and women drawn up in their stiff ranks before the pinnacles. They were singing. "Cwn Rhonda," it was,

and even Grimes, who had always loved that old Welsh hymn tune, found it hard to refrain from joining in. They were singing, the rumbling basses, the baritones, the high tenors and the shrill sopranos.

Guide, me, oh Thou great Jehovah,

Pilgrim through this barren land!

I am weak, but Thou art mighty.

Hold me with Thy powerful hand!

They were singing, and the girl was painting. With deft, sure strokes she was depicting on the black canvas the figure of a god, white-bearded, white-robed, wrathful. She was painting, and the men and women were singing, and the air was full of unbearable tension and the wind was now howling, tugging at their clothing, buffeting them. But the easel in its circle of harsh light stood steady and the girl worked on. . . .

There was the dreadful crack of lightning close at hand, too close at hand, the crack and the dazzle, and the pungency of ozone, and the long, long streamer of blue fire licking out from above their heads and culminating on the plain far below, at the spaceport.

There was the burgeoning fireball where the ship had been.

There was the dreadful laughter, booming above the frenzy of the wind, and the metallic crash and clatter as the pinnacles, lifted and rolled over the rim of the plateau, plunged to destruction down the steep, rocky mountain slope.

And They were there—the robust, white-bearded deity, a lightning bolt clutched and ready in his right hand, and the naked, seductively smiling goddess, and the other naked one with her bow and her leashed hounds, and she in the white robes, carrying a book, with the owl perched on her shoulder. The lame smith was there, with his hammer, and the sea-god, with his trident, and he with the red beard and the helmet and the body armor and the sword.

Somebody screamed, and at least a score of the men and women had fallen to their knees. But the Presbyterian stood his ground.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "Who are you?"

"Little man," the great voice replied, "we were, we are and we always shall be."

Grimes realized that he was laughing uncontrollably and saying, over and over to himself, "Not Sinai, but Olympus! Not Sinai, but Olympus!"

There was another supernal clap of thunder and the dark came sweeping back.

* * *

They sat around in miserable little groups on the bare mountaintop.

The Presbyter was gone, nobody knew where or how, and the Deaconess, and Smith, and perhaps a dozen of the others. It had been a long night, and a cold one, but the sun had risen at last, bringing some warmth with it.

Grimes, in shirt and trousers, stood with Clarrise Lane, who was wrapped in his jacket.

"But what happened?" he was asking. "What happened? What did you do?"

She said, "I . . . I don't know. I suppose that I do have some sort of power. And I suppose that I am, at heart, one of the Blossom People. Our religious beliefs are a sort of vague pantheism. . . . And, after all, the Father of the Gods is very similar in His attributes to the patriarchal gods of later religions. . . ." She looked at the sky. "It's lucky that I'm a telepath as well as being . . . whatever it is that I am. Rim Sword will be here very shortly. I hope it's soon. I have a feeling that when some of our fanatical friends recover they'll be blaming me for everything."

"When they recover," said Grimes. "It will take me along time." He added, "But I don't think you'd better return to Francisco with them."

"Ken," she told him, "has already got the formalities under way that will make me a Rim Worlds citizen."

"The obvious one?"

"Yes."

"And are you going to get married in church?" he asked. "It should be interesting."

"Not if I can help it," she told him.

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And so, in due course, Grimes kissed the bride and, at the reception, toasted the newlyweds in imported champagne. He did not stay long after that. He was too much the odd man out—almost all the other guests were married couples, and such few women as were unattached made little or no appeal to him. He was missing Sonya, still away on her galactic cruise. Somehow he missed her less at home, lonely though it was without her. There was still so much of her in the comfortable apartment: her books, the pictures that she had chosen, the furniture that had been specially designed to her taste.

Having left the party early, he was at his office, at the spaceport, bright and early the following morning. He received, personally, the urgent Carlottigram from Rim Griffon, on Tharn. He smiled as he read it. He had been deskbound for too long, and his recent voyage in the oddly named Piety had aggravated rather than assuaged the itching of his feet. Captain Timms, one of the Rim Runners' senior masters, was due back from annual leave within a few days and, at the moment, there was no appointment open for him. So Timms could keep the chair warm while Grimes took passage to Tharn; the scheduled departure date of Rim Dragon for that planet fitted in very nicely with his plans.

"Miss Walton," he said happily to the rather vapid little blonde secretary, "this is going to be a busy morning. Telephoning first, and then correspondence every which way. . . . To begin with, get me the General Manager. . . ."