

In which Commodore Grimes (whose last appearance here was in "Grimes and the Odd Gods" June 1983) takes on a temporary job — shipping supplies to a prison satellite —with unusual consequences...

**Grimes and the Jailbirds**  
**BY**  
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"Have you ever, in the course of your long and distinguished career, been in jail, Commodore?" asked Kitty Kelly after she had adjusted the lenses and microphones of her recording equipment to her satisfaction.

"As a matter of fact I have," said Grimes. He made a major production of filling and lighting his pipe. "It was quite a few years ago, but I still remember the occasion vividly. It's not among my more pleasant memories...."

"I should imagine not," she concurred sympathetically. "What were you in for? Piracy? Smuggling? Gunrunning?"

"I wasn't in in the sense that you assume," he told her. "After all, there are more people in a jail than the convicts. The governor, the warders, the innocent bystanders...."

"Such as yourself?"

"Such as myself."

It was (he said) when I was owner-master of Little Sister. She was the flagship and the only ship of Far Traveler Couriers, the business title under which I operated. She was a deep-space pinnace, and I ran her single-handed, carrying small parcels of special cargo hither and yon, the occasional passenger. Oh, it was a living of sorts, quite a good living at times, although, at other times, my bank balance would be at a perilously low ebb.

Well, I'd carried a consignment of express mail from Davinia to Helmskirk — none of the major lines had anything making a direct run between the two planets — and I was now berthed at Port Helms waiting for something to turn up. The worst of it all was that Helmskirk is not the sort of world upon which to spend an enforced vacation — or, come to that, any sort of vacation. There is a distinct shortage of bright lights. The first settlers had all been members of a wowseryish religious sect misnamed the Children of Light — it was founded on Earth in the late twentieth century, Old Reckoning. Over the years their descendants had become more and more wowseryish.

The manufacture, vending, and consumption of alcoholic beverages were strictly prohibited. So was smoking — and by "smoking" I mean smoking anything. There were laws regulating the standards of dress — and not only in the streets of the cities and towns. Can you imagine a public bathing beach where people of both sexes — even children — are compelled to wear neck-to-ankle, skirted swimming costumes?

There were theaters, showing both live and recorded entertainment, but the plays presented were all of the improving variety, with virtue triumphant and vice defeated at the end of the last act. I admit that some of the clumsily contrived situations were quite funny, although not intentionally so. I found this out when I laughed as a stern father turned his frail, blonde daughter, who had been discovered smoking a smuggled cigarette, out into a raging snowstorm. Immediately after my outbreak of unseemly mirth, I was turned out myself, by two burly ushers. Oh, well, it wasn't snowing, and it was almost the end of the play, anyhow.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the local customs authorities had not done their best to make sure that visiting spacemen conformed to Helmskirikian standards whilst on the surface of their planet. They inspected my library of playmaster cassettes and seized anything that could be classed as pornographic — much of it the sort of entertainment that your maiden aunt, on most worlds, could watch without a blush. These tapes, they told me, would be kept under bond in the customs warehouse and returned to me just prior to my final lift-off from the Helmskirk System. They impounded the contents of my grog locker and even all my pipe tobacco. Fortunately, I can, when pushed to it, make an autochef do things

never intended by its manufacturer, and so it didn't take me long to replenish my stock of gin. And lettuce leaves from my hydroponics minifarm, dried and suitably treated, made a not-too-bad tobacco substitute.

Nonetheless, I'd have gotten the hell off Helmskirk as soon as the bags of express mail had been discharged if I'd had any definite place to go. But when you're tramping around, as I was, you put your affairs into the hands of an agent and wait hopefully for news of an advantageous charter.

So Messrs. Muggeridge, Whitelaw, and Nile were supposed to be keeping their ears to the ground on my behalf, and I was getting more and more bored, and every day doing my sums—or having the ship's computer do them for me — and trying to work out how long it would be before the profit made on my last voyage was completely eaten up by port charges and the like. For the lack of better entertainment I haunted the Port Helms municipal library — at least it was free — and embarked on a study course on the history of this dreary colony. Someday I shall write a book — *The Galactic Guide to Places to Stay Away From...*

The fiction in the library was not of the variety that is written to inflame the passions. It was all what, during the Victorian era on Earth, would have been called "improving." The factual works were of far greater interest. From them I learned that the incidence of crime — real crime, not such petty offenses as trying to grow your own tobacco or brew your own beer — on Helmskirk was surprisingly high. Cork a bottle of some fermenting mixture — and any human society is such a mixture — too tightly and the pressures will build up. There was an alarmingly high incidence of violent crime — armed robbery, assault, rape, murder.

I began to appreciate the necessity for Helmskirk's penal satellite, a smallish natural moon in a just under twenty-four-hour orbit about its primary. Not only was it a place of correction and/or punishment for the really bad bastards, but it also housed a large population of people who'd been caught playing cards for money, reading banned books, and similar heinous offenses. If I'd been so unfortunate as to have been born on Helmskirk, I thought, almost certainly I should have been acquainted with the maze of caverns and tunnels, artificial and natural, that honeycombed the ball of rock.

As the days wore on I'd settled into a regular routine. The morning I'd devote to minor maintenance jobs. Then I'd have lunch. Before leaving the ship after this meal, I'd make a telephone call to my agents to see if they'd anything for me. Then I'd stroll ashore to the library. It was a dreary walk through streets of drably functional buildings, but it was exercise. I'd try to keep myself amused until late afternoon, and then drop briefly into the agents' office on the way back to Little Sister.

Then the routine was disrupted.

As I entered the premises, old Mr. Muggeridge looked up accusingly from his desk, saying, "We've been trying to get hold of you, Captain."

I said, "I wasn't far away. I was in the municipal library."

"Hmph. I never took you for a studious type. Well, anyway, I've a time charter for you. A matter of six local weeks, minimum."

"Where to?" I asked hopefully.

"It will not be taking you outside the Helmskirk System," he told me rather spitefully. "The prison tender, the Jerry Falwell, has broken down. I am not acquainted with all the technical details, but I understand that the trouble is with its inertial drive unit. The authorities have offered you employment until such time as the tender is back in operation."

I went through the charter party carefully, looking for any clauses that might be turned to my disadvantage. But Muggeridge, Whitelaw, and Nile had been looking after my interests. After all, why shouldn't they? The more I got, the more their rake-off would be.

So I signed in the places indicated and learned that I was to load various items of stores for the prison the following morning, lifting off as soon as these were on board and stowed to my satisfaction. Oh, well, it was a job and would keep me solvent until something better turned up.

It was a job, but it wasn't one that I much cared for. I classed it as being on a regular run from nowhere to nowhere. The atmosphere of Helmskirk I had found oppressive; that of the penal satellite

was even more so. The voyage out took a little over two days, during which time I should have been able to enjoy my favorite playmaster cassettes if the customs officers had seen fit to release them. But rules were rules, and I was not leaving the Helmskirk System. And the moon, which was called Sheol, was very much part of it.

On my first visit I did not endear myself to the prison governor. I'd jockeyed Little Sister into a large air lock set into the satellite's surface and then left my control room for the main cabin. I opened the air lock doors and then sat down to await whatever boarders there would be — somebody with the inevitable papers to sign, a working party to discharge my cargo, and so on and so forth. I was not expecting the ruler of this tiny world to pay a call in person.

He strode into the ship, a tall man in dark gray civilian clothes, long-nosed, sour-featured, followed by an entourage of black-uniformed warders. "Come in, come in!" I called. "This is Liberty Hall. You can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard!"

He said, "I do not see any cat. Where is the animal? The importation of any livestock into Sheol is strictly contrary to regulations."

I said, "It was only a figure of speech."

"And a remarkably foul-mouthed one." He sat down uninvited. "I am the governor of this colony, Mr. Grimes. During each of your visits here you will observe the regulations, a copy of which will be provided you. You will be allowed, should time permit, to make the occasional conducted tour of Sheol so that you may become aware of the superiority of our penal system to that on other worlds. There will, however, be no fraternization between yourself and any of our inmates. There will be no attempt by you to smuggle in any small luxuries. One of the officers of the Jerry Falwell made such an attempt some months back. He is now among our ... guests, serving a long sentence."

"What did he try to smuggle in?" I asked.

"It is none of your business, Mr. Grimes. But I will tell you. It was cigarettes that he had illegally obtained from a visiting star tramp. And I will tell you what he hoped to receive in exchange. Mood opals. And the penalty for smuggling out mood opals is even greater than that for smuggling in cigarettes."

"What are mood opals?" asked Kitty.

"Don't you know? They were, for a while, very popular and very expensive precious stones on Earth and other planets, especially the Shaara worlds. The Shaara loved them. They weren't opals, although they looked rather like them. But they were much fierier, and the colors shifted, according, it was said, to the mood of the wearer, although probably it was due to no more than changes in temperature and atmospheric humidity. They were found only on — or in, rather — Sheol. They were actually coprolites, fossilized excrement, all that remained of some weird, rock-eating creatures that inhabited Sheol and became extinct ages before the colonization of Helmskirk. The mood opals became one of Helmskirk's major moneymaking exports. They were never worn by anybody on Helmskirk itself, such frivolity as personal jewelry being illegal."

"How come," asked Kitty, "that we've never seen mood opals here? Most Terran fads drift out to this part of the Galaxy eventually."

"There aren't any mood opals anymore," Grimes told her. "It seems that the polishing process, which removed the outer crust, exposed the jewels to the atmosphere and to radiation of all I kinds. After a few years of such exposure, the once-precious stones would crumble into worthless dust."

Well (he went on), that was my first visit to Sheol. Naturally it sparked my interest in the mood opal trade. I suggested to my agents that they try to organize for me the shipment of the next parcel of precious stones to wherever it was they were going. But the Interstellar Transport Commission had that trade tied up. Every six months one of their Epsilon-class freighters would make a very slight deviation during her voyage from Waverly to Earth, and it was on Earth — in Australia, in fact — where the opal polishers plied their trade. I pointed out that it was only a short hop, relatively speaking, from Helmskirk to Baroom, the nearest Shaara colony world, Surely, I said, the Shaara could polish their own mood opals. But it was no-go. They always had been polished in some place called Coober Peedy, and they always would be polished in Coober Peedy, and that was that.

Meanwhile, I made friends among the warders on Sheol. Some of them were almost human. Their close association with the quote, criminal, unquote classes had rubbed off much of the arrogant sanctimoniousness so prevalent on the primary. There was one — Don Smith was his name — whom I even trusted with one of my guilty secrets. He would share morning coffee, generously spiked with the rum that I had persuaded the autochef to produce, with me. When there was any delay between the discharge of the cargo I had brought and the loading of the mood opals that I should be taking back, he would take me on conducted tours of the prison.

There were the hydroponic farms, where most of the workers were women, some of them, despite their hideous zebra-striped coveralls, quite attractive. Some of them, and not only the attractive ones, would waggle their hips suggestively and coo, "Hello; spaceman! I'll do it for a cigarette!" And Don would grin and say, "They would, you know. I can arrange it for you." But I refused the offer. I didn't trust him all that much. Besides, my stock of cigarettes — which I kept aboard only for hospitality and not for my own use — had been impounded by the blasted customs.

There were the workshops, where convict labor, all men, assembled machines at whose purpose I could do no more than guess; I haven't a mechanical mind. There was the printery and there was the bookbindery. I was invited to help myself from the stacks of new books, but I did not take advantage of the offer. Collections of sermons of the hellfire-and-damnation kind are not my idea of light reading to while away a voyage. There was the tailor's shop, where both warders' uniforms and convicts' uniforms were made. There were the kitchens and there were the messrooms. (The prison officers' food was plain but wholesome; that for the convicts, just plain, definitely so.) There were the tunnels in which the mood-opal miners worked. It was in one of these that I was accosted by a man with dirt-streaked face and sweat- and dust-stained coveralls.

"Hey, Skipper!" he called. "How about my hitching a ride in your space buggy away from here? I can make it worth your while!"

I stared at him. I didn't like the cut of his jib. Under the dirt that partially obscured his features was a hard viciousness. He had the kind of very light and bright blue eyes that are often referred to as "mad." He looked as though he'd be quite willing to use the small pickax he was holding on a human being rather than on a rock.

I decided to ignore him.

"Stuck-up bastard aren't you, Skipper. Like all your breed. You deep-spacers think yourselves too high and mighty to talk to orbital boys!"

"That will do, Wallace!" said Don sharply.

"Who's talking? You're not in charge of this work party."

"But I am." Another warder had come up. He was holding one of the modified stun guns that were the main weaponry of the guards; on the right setting (or the wrong setting, if you were on the receiving end) they could deliver a most painful shock. "Get back to work, Wallace. You're nowhere near your quota for the shift — and you know what that means!"

Apparently Wallace did and he moved away. Don and I moved on.

"A nasty piece of work," I said.

"He is that," agreed Don, "even though he is a spaceman like yourself."

"Not too like me, I hope."

"All right. Not too like you. He got as high as mate of the Jerry Falwell, and then he was caught smuggling cigarettes and booze in and mood opals out. If only the bloody fool had done his dealing with the right people and not with the convicts! I suppose that it's poetic justice that he's serving his time here as an opal miner."

I supposed that it was.

And then we wandered back to Little Sister, where, after half an hour or so, I loaded two small bags of mood opals — in their rough state they looked like mummified dog-droppings — and embarked a couple of prison officers who were returning to the primary for a spell of leave. Although they were (a) female and (b) not unattractive, they were not very good company for the voyage.

My next trip back from Sheol to Helmskirk I had company again. Unexpected company. For some

reason I decided to check the stowage in the cargo compartment; there was a nagging feeling that everything was not as it should be. This time there were no mood opals, but there were half a dozen bales of clothing, civilian work coveralls, that had been manufactured in the prison's tailor's shop. At first glance nothing seemed amiss. And then I saw a pool of moisture slowly spreading on the deck from the underside of one of the bales. Aboard a ship, any kind of ship, leaking pipes can be dangerous. But there were no pipes running through and under the deck of the compartment; such as there were were all in plain view on the bulkheads, and all of them were intact.

Almost I dipped my finger into the seepage to bring it back to my mouth to taste it. Almost. I was glad that I hadn't done so. I smelled the faint but unmistakable acidity of human urine.

I went back to the main cabin, to my arms locker, and got out a stun gun and stuck it into my belt. And then, very cautiously, I unsnapped the fasteners of the metal straps holding the bale together. The outer layers of folded clothing fell to the deck. I stepped back and drew my stun gun and told whoever it was inside the bale, in as stern a voice as I could muster, to come out. More layers of clothing fell away, revealing a sort of cage of heavy wire in which crouched a young woman. She straightened up and stepped out of the cage, looking at me with an odd mixture of shame and defiance.

She said, "I shouldn't have had that last drink of water, but I thought that I should half die of thirst if I didn't...." She looked down at the sodden legs of her civilian coveralls and managed an embarrassed grin. "And now I suppose, Captain," that you'll be putting back to Sheol and handing me over."

I said, "I can hand you over just as well at Port Helms."

She shrugged. "As you please. In that case, could I ask a favor? The use of your shower facilities and the loan of a robe to wear while my clothes are drying ... I have to wash them, you know."

I thought, You're a cool customer. And I thought, I rather like you.

Despite her ugly and now sadly bedraggled attire, she was an attractive wench: blonde, blue-eyed, and with a wide mouth under a nose that was just retrousse enough, just enough, no more. She had found some way to tint her lips an enticing scarlet. (The women convicts, I had already learned, used all sorts of dyes for this purpose, although cosmetics were banned.) And I remembered, too, all the fuss there'd been about taking showers and such, all the simpering prudery, when I had carried those two women prison officers.

So I let her use my shower and hang her clothes in my drying room, and lent her my best Corlabian spider silk bathrobe, and asked her what she would like for dinner. She said that she would like a drink first and that she would leave the ordering of the meal to me.

It was good to be having dinner with a pretty girl, especially one who was enjoying her food as much as she was. The autochef did us proud, from soup — mulligatawny, as I remember — to pecan pie. The wines could have been better; an autochef properly programmed can make quite a good job of beer or almost any of the potable spirits, but as far as, say, claret is concerned, is capable of producing only a mildly alcoholic red ink. Not that it really mattered on this occasion. Everything that I gave my guest to eat and drink was immeasurably superior to the prison food — and, come to that, streets ahead of anything that could have been obtained in any restaurant on Helmskirk.

After the meal we relaxed. I filled and lit my pipe. She watched me enviously. I let her have one of my spare pipes. She filled it with my shredded, dried, and treated lettuce leaf tobacco substitute. She lit it, took one puff, and decided that it was better than nothing, but only just.

"Thank you, Captain," she said. "This has been a real treat. The drinks, the meal, your company...." She smiled. "And I think that you've been enjoying my company, too...."

"I have," I admitted.

"And won't you feel just a little bit remorseful when you turn me in after we arrive at Port Helms? But I suppose that you've already been in touch with the authorities by radio, while I was having my shower, to tell them that you found me stowed away...."

I said, "I'll get around to it later."

Her manner brightened. "Suppose you never do it, Captain? I could ... work my passage...." The dressing gown was falling open as she talked and gesticulated, and what I could see looked very tempting — and I had been celibate for quite a while. "Before we set down at Port Helms, you can put

me back in the bale. The consignees of the clothing are members of a sort of ... underground. They have helped escaped convicts before."

"So your crime was political?"

"You could call it that. There are those of us, not a large number but growing, who are fighting for a liberalization of the laws — a relaxation of censorship, more freedom of thought and opinion.... You're an off-worlder. You must have noticed how repressive the regime on Helmskirk is."

I said that the repression had not escaped my notice.

"But," she went on, "I do not expect you to help me for no reward. There is only one way that I can reward you...."

"No," I said.

"No?" she echoed in a hurt, a very hurt, voice.

"No," I repeated.

Oh, I'm no plaster saint, never have been one. But I have my standards. If I were going to help this girl, I'd do it out of the kindness of my heart and not for reward. I realize now that I was doing her no kindness. In fact, she was to tell me just that on a later occasion. A roll in the hay was just what she was needing just then. But I had my moments of high-minded priggishness, and this was one of them. (Now, of course, I'm at an age when I feel remorse for all the sins that I did not commit when I had the chance.)

She said, "People have often told me that I'm attractive. I would have thought.... But I can read you. You're a businessman as well as a spaceman. You own this little ship. You have to make a profit. You're afraid that if it's discovered that you helped me, you'll lose your profitable charter. Perhaps you're afraid that you'll become one of the inmates of Sheol yourself, like Wallace...."

"I never said that I wasn't going to help you," I told her. "But there are conditions. One condition. That if you are picked up again, you say nothing about my part in your escape."

When she kissed me, with warm thoroughness, I weakened — but not enough, not enough. And before the sleep period I rigged the privacy screen in the main cabin, and she stayed on her side of it and I stayed on mine. The next "day" — and I maintained Port Helms standard time while in space — she dressed in her all-concealing coveralls, which were now dry, instead of in my too-revealing bathrobe. We had one or two practice sessions of repacking her in the bale. And before long it was time for me to repack her for good — as far as I was concerned.

And I made my descent to the apron at Port Helms.

There was, of course, something of a flap about the escape of a prisoner from Sheol. The authorities, of course, knew that if she had escaped, she must have done so in Little Sister — but I was in the clear. The ship was under guard all the time that she was berthed in the air lock. Too, there was a certain element of doubt. In the past convicts had hidden for quite a while in unexplored tunnels, and some had even died there. Convicts had been murdered by fellow inmates and their bodies fed into waste disposal machinery.

And then Evangeline — that was her name — was picked up, in Calvinville. She had been caught leaving pamphlets in various public places. She was tried and found guilty and given another heavy sentence, tacked on to the unexpired portion of her previous one. She kept her word insofar as I was concerned, saying nothing of my complicity. She even managed to protect the clothing wholesalers to whom her bale had been consigned. Her story was that this bale could be opened from the inside, and that after her escape from it, at night, she had tidied up after herself before leaving the warehouse.

Inevitably, I got the job of returning her to incarceration. (The repairs to the prison tender ferry Falwell were dragging on, and on, and on.) She was accompanied by two sourpussed female prison officers returning to Sheol from planet leave. These tried to persuade me — persuade? Those arrogant bitches tried to order me — that during the short voyage there should, be two menus, one for the master, me, and the warders, and the other, approximating prison fare, for the convict. I refused to play, of course. The poor girl would eat well while she still had the chance. But there were no drinks before, with, or after meals, and I even laid off smoking for the trip.

And so I disembarked my passengers and discharged my cargo at Sheol. I'd not been able to

exchange so much as a couple of words with Evangeline during the trip, but the look she gave me before she was escorted from the ship said, Thanks for everything.

So it went on, trip after trip.

Then it happened. I was having an unusually long stopover on Sheol, and my friend, Don Smith, suggested that I might wish to see, as he put it, the animals feed. I wasn't all that keen — I've never been one to enjoy the spectacle of other people's misery — but there was nothing much else to do, and so I accompanied him through the maze of tunnels to one of the mess halls used by the male prisoners. Have you ever seen any of those antique films about prison life made on Earth in the latter half of the twentieth century? It was like that. The rows of long tables, covered with some shiny gray plastic, and the benches. The counter behind which stood the prisoners on mess duty, with aprons tied on over their zebra-striped coveralls, ladling out a most unsavory-looking — and -smelling — stew into the bowls held out by the shuffling queue of convicts. The guards stationed around the walls, all of them armed with stun guns and all of them looking bored rather than alert.... The only novel touch was that it was all being acted out in the slow motion imposed by conditions of low gravity.

Finally, all the convicts were seated at the long tables, their sluggishly steaming plastic bowls — those that were still steaming, that is; by this time, the meals of those first in the queue must have been almost cold — before them, waiting for the prison padre, standing at his lectern, to intone grace. It was on the lines of: For what we about to receive this day may the Lord make us truly thankful.

As soon as he was finished, there was a commotion near the head of one of the tables. A man jumped to his feet. It was, I saw, Wallace, the ex-spaceman.

"Thankful for this shit, you smarmy bastard?" he shouted. "This isn't fit for pigs, and you know it!"

The guards suddenly became alert. They converged upon Wallace with their stun guns out and ready. They made the mistake of assuming that Wallace was the only troublemaker. The guards were tripped, some of them, and others blinded by the bowls of stew flung into their faces. Their pistols were snatched from their hands.

"Get out of here, John," said Don Smith urgently. He pulled me back from the entrance to the mess hall. "Get out of here! There's nothing you can do. Get back to your ship. Use your radio to tell Helmskirk what's happening...."

"But surely your people," I said, "will have things under control...."

"I ... I hope so. But this has been brewing for quite some time."

By this time we were well away from the mess hall, but the noise coming from it gave us some idea of what was happening — and what was happening wasn't at all pleasant for the guards. And there were similar noises coming from other parts of the prison complex. And there was a clangor of alarm bells and a shrieking of sirens and an amplified voice, repeating over and over, "All prison officers report at once to the citadel! All prison officers report at once to the citadel!"

Don Smith said, "You'd better come with me."

"I said, "I have to get back to my ship."

"He said, "You'll never find the way to the air lock."

I said, "I've got a good sense of direction."

So he went one way and I went another. My sense of direction might have served me better if I had not been obliged to make detours to avoid what sounded like small-scale battles ahead of me in that maze of tunnels. And the lights kept going out and coming on again, and when they were on kept flickering in an epilepsy-inducing rhythm. I'm not an epileptic, but I felt as though I were about to become one. During one period of darkness I tripped over something soft, and when the lights came on found that it was a body, that of one of the female prison officers. Her uniform had been stripped from the lower part of her body, and it was obvious what had been done to her before her throat had been cut. And there was nothing that I could do for her.

At last, at long, long last, more by good luck than otherwise, I stumbled into the big air lock chamber in which Little Sister was berthed. There were people standing by her. The guards, I thought at first, still at their posts. Then the lights temporarily flared into normal brightness, and I saw that the uniform coveralls were zebra-striped. But I kept on walking. After all, I was just an innocent bystander, wasn't

I?

Wallace — it had to be he — snarled, "You took your time getting here."

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"What the hell do you think? But we wouldn't be here now if we could get your air lock door open."

"And suppose you could, what then?"

"That, Skipper, is a remarkably stupid question."

I looked at Wallace and his two companions. I looked at the sacks at their feet. I could guess what was in them. The lights were bright again, and I saw that the other two convicts were women — and that one of them was Evangeline. She looked at me, her face expressionless.

"What are you waiting for, Skipper?" almost shouted Wallace.

I'm playing for time, I thought, although I hadn't a clue as to what I could do with any time I gained.

Wallace shot me with his stun gun. It wasn't on the Stun setting but on that which gave the victim a very painful shock, one that lasted for as long as the person using the gun wished. It seemed to be a very long time in this case, although it could have been no more than seconds. When it was over, I was trembling in every limb and soaked in cold perspiration.

"Want another dose, Skipper?" Wallace demanded.

"You'd better open up, Captain," said Evangeline in an emotionless voice. She was holding a gun, too, pointed in my direction. So was the other woman.

So what could I do? Three, armed, against one, unarmed.

There was more than one way of getting into Little Sister. The one that I favored, if the ship was in an atmosphere, was by voice. It always amused guests. And it worked only for me, although I suppose that a really good actor, using the right words, could have gained ingress.

"Open Sesame," I said.

The door slid open.

And while Wallace and the woman whom I didn't know had their attention distracted by this minor miracle, Evangeline shot them both with her stun gun.

"Hurry," she said to me, throwing the sacks of mood opals into the air lock chamber. "Lend a hand, can't you?"

No, I didn't lend a hand, but I accompanied her into the ship. I used the manual air lock controls to seal the lock. I went forward to the control cab, my intention being to try to raise somebody, anybody, on my radio telephone to tell them what had been happening — and to try to find out what was still happening.

She said, from just behind me, "Get us out of here, Captain."

I asked, "Do you expect me to ram my way out of the air lock chamber?"

She said, "Wallace's men have taken over the air lock control room. If they hear my voice and see my face in their telescreen, they'll open up."

"But there's also a screen," I said, "that gives a picture of the air lock chamber. They must have seen what happened outside the ship, when you buzzed Wallace and the girl."

"Very luckily," she said, "that screen got smashed during the fight when we took over the control center."

She'd seen me operate the NST transceiver when I was making my approach to Port Helms the voyage that she'd stowed away. She got it switched on — the controls were simple — without having to ask for instruction except for the last important one.

"What channel do I call on?"

"Hold it," I said. I had acquired quite a dislike for Wallace but had nothing against his girlfriend. "The air's going to be exhausted from the chamber before the outer doors open."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that..."

I activated the screens that showed me what was going on outside the ship. (From the control cab our only view was forward.) I saw that Wallace was just getting groggily to his feet, assisted by the girl, who must have made a faster recovery than he had. I spoke into the microphone that allowed me to talk to anybody outside the hull.



"Wallace," I said, "get out of the chamber, fast! It's going to open up — and you know what that means!"

He did know. He raised his right hand and shook his fist. I saw his mouth forming words, and I could guess what sort of words they were. Then he turned from Little Sister and made for the door leading into the interior of Sheol at a shambling run, with the girl trailing after. No women and children first as far as he was concerned.

"Channel six," I told Evangeline. "Evangeline here," I heard her say. "We're all aboard, and the stones. Open up."

"We're relying on you to spend the money you get for the stones where it will do the most good! I hope Wallace can find his way to the nearest Shaara world, where there'll be a market and no questions asked!"

"We'll persuade Grimes to do the navigating."

"Are you taking him with you?" I was annoyed by the lack of interest and regretted, briefly, having allowed Wallace to escape from certain asphyxiation. "Stand by. Opening up. Bon voyage."

But opening up took time. The air had to be exhausted from the chamber first. How long would it take Wallace to reach the control center? From my own controls I had a direct view overhead. At last I saw the two valves of the air lock door coming apart, could see the black sky and the occasional star in the widening gap. I had Little Sister's inertial drive running in neutral and then applied gentle thrust. We lifted, until we were hovering just below the slowly opening doors.

Was there enough room?

Yes, barely.

I poured on the thrust and we scraped through, almost literally. And just in time. In the belly-view screen I saw that the doors were closing again, fast. Wallace had reached the control center just too late.

And I kept going.

"Back to Helmskirk," said Kitty Kelly, "to hand that poor girl back to the authorities. They must really have put the boot in this time."

"I said," Grimes told her, "that I kept on going. Not to Port Helms. To a Shaara world called Varoom, where we could flog those stones with no awkward questions asked. I considered that I owed far more loyalty to Evangeline than to the Helmskirk wowsers."

"But what about those prison guards under siege in their citadel? Didn't you owe them some loyalty?"

"One or two of them, perhaps," he admitted. "But what could I have done? And, as a shipmaster, my main loyalty was to my ship."

"But you could have carried reinforcements, police, from Port Helms to Sheol."

"In Little Sister? She was only a pinnace, you know. Aboard her, four was a crowd. Too, there was one of the Commission's Epsilon-class tramps in port. She could be requisitioned as a troopship."

"But that time charter, Commodore ... weren't you tied by that?"

"Oddly enough, no. The original six weeks had expired and it was being renewed week by week. At the time of the mutiny it was due for renewal."

"And the girl. Evangeline. Did you dump her on that Shaara planet?"

"Of course not," said Grimes virtuously. "I was rather too fond of her by that time. After we sold the jewels, I carried her to Freedonia, a colony founded by a bunch of idealists who'd take in anybody as long as he or she could claim to be a political refugee. I'd have liked to keep her with me, but there were too many legal complications. She had no papers of any kind, and the authorities on most planets demand documentation from visitors, crew as well as passengers. I got into enough trouble myself for having left Helmskirk without my Outward Clearance."

"And during your wanderings, before you got to Freedonia, did you lose your priggish high-mindedness?"

He laughed reminiscently. "Yes. I did let her work her passage, as she put it. And I accepted, as a farewell gift, quite a substantial share of the mood opal money."

She said, not admiringly, "You bastard. I'd just hate to owe you a favor."  
"You've got it wrong," Grimes told her. "I took what she offered because I owed her one."