

TO

RUN THE RIM

BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

There are some men for whom Security is no reward—but it takes time to learn that!

illustrated by Summers

LOWLY and carefully —as befitted her years, which were many—the star tramp Ariel dropped down to Port Forlorn. Calver, her second mate, looked out and down from the control room viewports to the uninviting scene below, to the vista of almost barren hills and mountains scarred by mine workings, to the great slag heaps that were hills themselves, to the ugly little towns, each one of which was dominated by the tall, smoke belching chimneys of factories and refineries, to the rivers that, even from this altitude, looked like sluggish streams of sewage.

So this, he thought, is Lorn, industrial hub of the Rim Worlds. This is as far as I go. This is where I get off. There's no farther to go.

Captain Bowers, satisfied that the ship was riding down easily under automatic control, turned to his second officer.

"Are you sure that you want to pay off here, Mr. Calver?" he asked. "Are you quite sure? You're a good officer, and we could use you. The Shakespearian Line mightn't be up to Commission standards, but it's not a bad outfit."

"Thank you, sir," replied Calver, raising his voice slightly to make himself heard over the subdued thunder of the rockets, "but I'm sure. I signed on in Elsinore with the understanding that I was to be paid off on the Rim. The Third's quite capable of taking over."

"You want your head read," grunted Harris, the Mate.

"Perhaps," said Calver.

And perhaps I do, he thought. How much of this is sheer masochism, this flight from the warm, happy worlds of the Center to these desolate Rim planets? Could it have been the names that appealed to me? Thule, Ultimo, Faraway and Lorn . . .

"The usual cross wind, damn it!" swore Bowers, hastily turning his attention to the controls. The old ship shuddered as the corrective blasts were fired and, momentarily, the noise in the control room rose to an intolerable level.

When things had quietened down again Harris said, "It's always windy on Lorn, and the wind is always cold and dusty and stinking with the fumes of burning sulfur . . ."

"I'll not be staying on Lorn," said Calver. "I've been too long in Space to go looking for a shore job, especially when there's no inducement."

"Going to try the Rim Runners?" asked Captain Bowers.

"Yes. I believe they're short of officers."

"They always are," said Harris.

"Why not stay with us?" queried the captain.

"Thanks again, sir, but . . ."

"The Rim Runners!" snorted the mate. "You'll find an odd bunch there, Calver. Refugees from the Interstellar Transport Commission, from the Survey Service, the Waverley Royal Mail and the Trans-Galactic Clippers . . ."

"I'm a refugee from the Commission myself," said Calver wryly. Port Forlorn was close now, too close for further conversation; the dirty, scarred concrete apron rushing to meet them. Ariel dropped through a cloud of scintillating particles, the dust raised by her backblast and fired to brief incandescence. She touched, sagged tiredly, her structure creaking like old bones. The sudden silence as the rockets died seemed unnatural.

Harris broke it. "And their ships," he said. "Their ships ... All ancient crocks; mostly worn out Epsilon-class tubs thrown out by the Commission. I'm told that they even have one or two of the old Ehrenhaft Drive jobs."

"Wasn't Ariel once Epsilon Sextans?" asked Calver mildly.

"Yes, but she's different," said Harris affectionately.

Yes, thought Calver, standing at the foot of the ramp to the air lock, Ariel was different. A worn-out Epsilon Class wagon she may have been, but she still had pride, just as her master and officers still had pride in her. This Lorn Lady was a ship of the same class, probably no older than Ariel, but she looked a wreck. Calver looked down at his shoes, which had been highly polished when he left his hotel, saw that they were already covered with a thick film of dust. A sidewise glance down at his epaulettes—the new ones, with their Rim-Runners second officer's braid on the gold tunic—told him that they also were dusty. He disliked to board a ship, any ship, untidily dressed. He brushed his shoulders—with his hand, used a handkerchief, which he afterwards threw away, to restore the shine to his shoes. He climbed the shaky ramp.

There was no air lock watch—but Calver had learned that the outward standards of efficiency diminished, almost according to the Law of Inverse Squares, with increasing distance from the Galactic center. There was a telephone. After studying the selector board Calver pressed the button labeled Chief Officer. There was no reply. He tried Control Room, Purser and then Captain. He replaced the useless instrument on its rest, opened the inner air lock door. He was agreeably surprised to find that the manual controls worked easily and smoothly. He picked up his bags, went into the ship. He was familiar enough with the layout of this type of vessel and went straight to the axial shaft. The newer Epsilon Class ships boasted a light elevator for use in port. Calver was not amazed to discover that Lorn Lady did not run to such a luxury.

There was somebody clattering down the spiral stairway that led up to the officers' accommodation. Calver stood there and waited. The owner of the noisy feet dropped into view. He was a man of Calver's age, no longer young. His uniform was tight on his stocky frame. He wore Rim Runners epaulettes—the three gold bars of a chief officer with, above them, the winged wheel—but his cap badge was an elaborate affair of stars and rockets surmounted by an ornate crown.

He looked up at Calver when he reached the deck, making the tall man suddenly conscious of his gangling height. He said, "You'll be the new second. I'm the mate. MacLean's the name. Welcome aboard."

They shook hands.

"I'll go up to my cabin and drop my bags," said Calver. "I've seen enough of Port Forlorn to last me a while so, if you like, I'll keep the night aboard."

"Night aboard? There's no ship-keeping here," laughed MacLean. "There's no cargo working tonight either. The night watchman will be on duty in an hour or so, and he's fairly reliable."

Calver looked as shocked as he felt.

"I know how you feel," said the mate, "but you'll get over it. I used to feel the same way myself when I first came out to the Rim—after the Royal Mail it seemed very slovenly."

"I'm afraid it does."

"You're out of the Commission's ships, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. You're a typical Commission officer—middle-aged before your time, stiff and starchy and a stickler for regulations. Anyhow, up you go and park your bags. I'll wait for you here. Then we'll go and have a couple or three drinks to wash this dust out of our throats."

Calver found his cabin without any trouble. It was, to his relief, reasonably clean. He left his bags under his bunk, went down to the air lock where MacLean was waiting for him. The two men walked down the ramp together.

"You'll not find Commission standards here," said the mate. "Or, come to that, Royal Mail standards. We keep the ships safe and reasonably efficient, but there's neither money nor labor to spare for spit and polish."

"So I've noticed."

"So I noticed, too, when I first came out to the Rim. And if I hadn't told Commodore Sir Archibald Sinclair to his face what an idiot he was I'd still be with the Royal Mail, still keeping my night on board in port and making sure that a proper air lock watch was being maintained, and all the rest of it. There's not a bad little pub just outside the spaceport gates. Do you feel like trying it?"

"As you please," said Calver.

The pub was better inside than out, almost achieving coziness. It was, at this early hour of the evening, practically deserted. Calver and MacLean sat down at one of the tables. The slatternly girl who served them did not ask for their order but brought a bottle of whisky, with graduations up its side, two glasses and a jug of water.

"They know me here," said MacLean unnecessarily. He raised his glass. "Here's to crime."

After a few more drinks Calver said, "Would you mind putting me in the picture, MacLean? They seemed very vague in the office when I joined the Company."

"They always are," said the mate. "Besides, you hadn't yet signed the Articles. I suppose you noticed the Secrecy Clause?"

"I did."

"I suppose you thought that it was a rather odd clause to find in a ship's Articles. But it's there for a reason. Your predecessor talked out of place and out of turn, and that's why he's doing his spell in the mines, under guard."

"What! Surely they wouldn't—"

"They would, Calver—and his case they did. Bear in mind that Rim Runners is, practically, a government shipping and that all of us are automatically officers of the Naval Reserve . . . "

"Anyhow"—he glanced around, made sure that there was nobody within earshot "this is the way of it. Until very recently Rim Runners owned only a handful of ships and served only four planetary systems—those of Thule, Ultimo, Faraway and Lorn. Just puddle-jumping by our standards. Even then they had to keep on, recruiting officers from the rest of the galaxy. They don't like Deep Space, these Rim Worlders. They're scared of it. I suppose that it's because for all their lives they've been hanging over the edge of the ultimate pit by their eyebrows.

"But the Rim Government wants to expand, wants to become sufficiently powerful to be able to thumb its nose at Earth and the Federation. As you know, the Survey Service has always neglected the Rim. Rim Runners put their own survey ships into operation. They did a sweep to the Galactic West and found the anti-matter stars and planets. There was no room for expansion there. They ran to the East and found nothing but normal matter and quite a few suns with in habited worlds. There's Mellise, which is practically all water and inhabited by a race of intelligent amphibians. There's Tharn, whose people have yet to achieve an industrial civilization but who are as near human as makes no difference. There's Grollor, where the natives could be classed as humanoid and have the beginnings of space travel. There's Stree, with its philosophical lizards ..."

"I can see," said Calver, "that I'll have to do some heavy swotting up on the Pilot Books."

MacLean laughed. "There aren't any Pilot Books, Calver. Not yet. When there are, it'll be we who've written them. Anyhow, we're loading zinc and tin and cadmium tomorrow for Port Faraway on Faraway. We load on Faraway for the Eastern Circuit. How does that suit you?"

"The Eastern Circuit? The new worlds?"

"Ay."

"Sounds interesting. But tell me, why all the secrecy?"

"Because our Government wants to form its own Federation, out here on the Rim, wants to have the whole thing sewn up tight by pacts and treaties and trade agreements before any Survey Service ship comes nosing out this way. All known Federation agents have been rounded up and are being kept in protective custody. Pickering, your predecessor, was an ex-Lieutenant Commander out of the Survey Service and he had the odd idea that he still owed them some loyalty, in spite of the court-martial that was the cause of his leaving."

"And are you loyal to the Rim?", asked Calver. "I know that there's no likelihood that the Kingdom of Waverley will ever cast covetous eyes on this sector of the galaxy, but suppose they did?"

"I'm a Rim Worlder," said MacLean at last. "I wasn't born out here, but the Rim has always had its appeal for me. It's a last frontier, I suppose, and it will be until some clever bugger comes up with an intergalactic drive. And out here one can be a spaceman, a real spaceman, without being all the time tangled up in red tape. And now there are the new worlds, and there'll be more of them." He looked around. "The place is filling up," he said. "No more shop talk."

The place was filling up. There were roughly dressed men from the mines, a few overly neat men from offices. There were women—some of them drably and dowdily respectable, others whose too red lips and overly made up faces were like a uniform. There was a slim girl who began to wring a plaintive melody from a piano accordion. She flashed a smile at the two spacemen as she played.

MacLean sang softly in time, with the music.

"Exiled from home

By woman's whim,

We'll ever roam

And run the Rim . . ."

"This," said a female voice, huskily attractive, "is where he usually starts to cry into his whisky."

"That's a lie, Arlen," said Mao, ' Lean, "and you know it."

Calver turned in his chair. He saw the purser, whom he had already met, and, beside him, a tall woman with the silver bars of a Catering Officer on

her epaulettes. She was a little too slim, and her features were too strong for conventional prettiness and bore the ineradicable marks of past strain. There was a startling silver streak in her burnished, dark hair.

"You'll be Calver," she said. "The new second."

"I am," said Calver.

"I'm Arlen. Chief cook and bottle washer."

She extended a slim hand. Calver took it. Her eyes, he noticed, were a blue so deep as to be almost black. Her smile was a little crooked, which made it all the more attractive.

Pender, the little Purser, bustled up with two extra chairs, set them in place noisily. The sullen waitress brought more glasses.

Arlen sat down gracefully.

"Try to imagine you're back in the Royal Mail, MacLean," she said. "Be a gentleman and pour me a drink." MacLean poured drinks.

"We're all luses on the Rim, Calver," said Arlen. She had, decided Calver, already taken more than a few on board. "We're all luses, even though we've learned the hard way that drinking solves nothing. But we don't like happy drunks. The last second mate but one, Wallis, he was a happy drunk. He was so happy that he could never be trusted with the loading. It was all one to him if the center of gravity was up in the control room or somewhere under the venturi. MacLean's not like that. MacLean will cry into his whiskey, and pour a little of it over that absurd Royal Mail cap badge that he insists on wearing, and will stagger back on board tonight full of the woes of all the universe as well as his own—and God help the stevedore if he stows one slab of zinc one millimeter out of place tomorrow!"

"Stow it Arlen," said MacLean,

"Are you a happy drunk, Calver?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Then you're one of us. You'll make a real Rim Runner, skimming the edge of eternity in a superannuated rustbucket held together with old string and chewing gum and taking a masochistic pleasure in it. You have run from yourself until you can't any further, and there's a sort of desperate joy in that, too. You don't drink to forget. You don't drink to get into a gate of maudlin, mindless happiness. You drink to intensify your feelings—"

"Stop it, Arlen!" snapped MacLean.

She got to her feet.

"If that's the way you feel," she said, "I'd better leave."

"Can't a man have a drink in peace without all this, amateur psychiatry?", asked the mate. "I drink because I like drinking. Period."

"Good night," she said

"I'll see you back, Arlen," said Calver.

"No thanks," she said. "I'm a big girl now. I'm not afraid of the dark. Would I be with Rim Runners if I were?"

Calver saw that the girl with the accordion was drifting towards their table, that Pender was already exchanging glances with one of the bold eyed-prostitutes. He knew how the evening was going to develop, and he wanted no part of it. He stood up, put his hand under Arlen's elbow and began to steer her towards the door.

"Good night, MacLean," he said. "Good night, Fender."

"What's the hurry, Calver?" asked the mate. "The night's a pup."

"I'm rather tired;" said Calver.

"See you in the morning, then."

The musician and the other woman took the vacated seats as Calver and Arlen reached the door. The waitress was bringing another bottle of whisky.

It was cold outside, and the gusty wind filled their eyes with dust. It was not the sort of night that one finds pleasure in stargazing, yet Calver looked to the sky. The gleaming lens of the galaxy was almost set, only one last glimmering parabola of cold fire visible low in the west. Overhead the sky was dark, the blackness intensified by the sparse and dim nebulosities that were the, as yet, unreachable island universes.

Calver shivered.

"It's frightening, isn't it?" said Arlen. "It's frightening. Yet it has something."

"Something?" he asked. "Or—nothing?"

"There are easier and faster ways of finding nothing," she said.

"Why didn't you take one?" he asked brutally.

"Why didn't you? I'll tell you. Because you're like the rest of us. I don't know your history, any more than you know mine, but something happened to smash the career that you were carving out for yourself in the Commission's service—something that was your fault and nobody else's.

You hit rock bottom, but you refused to admit it. You found that there were depths below rock bottom, even. You decided that the only salvation lay in a real voyage, as well as a symbolic one, to the very edge of the night—"

"And does this theory of yours apply to all the Rim Runners?"

"To most of us. Not to the Old Man—he was born out here, on Thule. The only thing that he's running away from is the Grim Reaper; he's two hundred years old if he's a day. Pender's a Rim Worlder, too. So's Levine,

our psionic radio operator.

"But there's Bendix, the Interstellar Drive Engineer—he's out of the Trans-Galactic Clippers. There's Renault, in charge of the Reaction Drive—he was Chief of a Beta Class liner."

"I've heard of him," said Calver. "I've never sailed with him."

"Brentano, Radio Communications, used to be in a quite respectable little outfit called Cluster Lines. Old Doc Malone had a flourishing practice in Port Austral, in the Centurian System. MacLean, as you know, was in the Waverley Royal Mail."

"And you?"

"Another refugee from the Commission," she said. "But I was ashore, on Earth, for a few years before I came out here."

The spaceport gate was ahead of them. The guard on duty looked at them, at their uniforms.

He said, "Good evening, Mrs. Arlen. Back early tonight."

"Somebody has to be up in the morning to cook breakfast for these spacehounds," she said. .

"And this gentleman?"

"Our new second mate."

The guard pressed the button that opened the gate. Arlen and Calver passed through. Ahead of them was the ship, black against the dark sky, only a dim yellow glow of light shining from the air lock.

"The Lorn Lady," said Arlen. "The poor old Lorn Lady. When I hear people talking about her I always wonder if they're referring to the ship, or to me. Do you know what they used to call me? Calamity Jane Lawler. That was before I was married. It's Calamity Jane Arlen now."

They walked up the ramp to the air lock, Calver steadying the girl with his arm. They got past the watchman—an ex-spaceman by the looks of him, and a heavy drinker—without waking him. They climbed the spiral staircase to the officers' flat.

They went first into the little pantry adjoining the messroom. Arlen, switched on the percolator. In a matter of seconds it began to chuckle softly to itself. The woman drew two mugs of the bitter, black brew. "Sugar, Calver? Cream?"

"Just sugar, thanks."

"I don't know why I drink this muck," she said. "It'll sober me up, and I don't want to be sober. When I've had a few drinks I can accept the coldness, the loneliness, and make them part of me. When I'm sober they ... they frighten me."



"Lawler . . ." said Calver slowly. "Calamity Jane Lawler. The name rings a bell. Weren't you in Alpha Scorpii at one time?"

"Yes," she said flatly. "I was. It was when we had the outbreak of food poisoning, and it was when some fool pointed out that something always happened aboard any ship that I was in. Hence the name. It stuck. The worst of it is that I do seem to be an accident prone sort of person, even ashore. When I left the Commission's service, when I married, the calamities still kept on coming. So—"

"What happened?" asked Calver.

"What happened to you?" she countered. "We don't know each other well enough yet to start swapping life stories. I doubt if we ever shall."

Calver finished his coffee.

"Good night, Arlen," he said.

"Good night," she replied dully.

Feeling both helpless and useless Calver left her there in the little pantry, went to his cabin and turned in.

He was surprised at the speed with which he was able to adjust himself to the rather slovenly routine of Lorn Lady. She was pitifully shorthanded by the standards to which he was accustomed; there was no third officer, there were no junior engineers for either the Interstellar or the Interplanetary Drives, the surgeon was also the biochemist and, as such, in charge of hydroponics, tissue culture and the algae vats. There were no cadets to do all the odd jobs that were beneath the dignity of the officers—such jobs were done, if they were essential, otherwise they remained undone.

Safety first, MacLean had said. Efficiency second. Spit and polish this year, next year, some time, never. Yet the gleaming, ever-precising gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive Unit sang softly and smoothly, with never a stammer, and the pumps that drove the fluid propellant into the furnace of the Pile functioned with an efficiency that could have been the envy of many a better found vessel. Old Doc Malone was an efficient "farmer," and there was never any shortage of green salads or fresh meat in the mess; the algae served only as air and water purifiers, never as an article of diet.

Yet she was old, the Lorn Lady. Machinery can be renewed piece by piece, but there comes a time when the shell plating of the hull holding that same machinery is almost porous, when every structural member suffers from the fatigue that comes to all metal with the passage of the years. She was old, and she was tired, and the age of her and the fatigue of her were mirrored in the frail body of Captain Engels, her master. He was the oldest man that Calver had ever met, even in Space where extreme longevity, barring accidents, is the rule rather than the exception. A few sparse strands of yellowish white hair straggled over the thin parchment covering his skull. His uniform was too big for the fragile, withered body it covered. Only his eyes, pale blue and bleak, were alive.

He worried the officers very little, keeping to his own accommodation, most of the time. Yet any minor malfunctioning, any deviation from normal routine, no matter how trivial, would bring him at once to the control room. He would say nothing, yet his very presence would induce in the officer of the watch a sense of gross inadequacy and, with it, the resolve not to let the thing, whatever it was, occur again.

There was very little camaraderie aboard the ship whilst she was in Space; watch and watch routine gives small opportunity for social intercourse. But, decided Calver, there would not have been much social life even if the ship had been adequately manned. She carried too heavy a cargo of regrets. With MacLean he might have succeeded in striking up a real friendship, but the only times they met were at the changes of watches. He would have liked to have gotten to know Jane Arlen better—but she kept him, as she kept all others aboard the ship, at arm's length.

The voyage to Faraway passed, as all voyages pass. There were no emergencies. The landing at Port Faraway was slow and painful, old Captain Engels refusing to trust the auto-pilot and treating the ship as an extension of his own aged and brittle body. Discharge and loading progressed according to plan.

Calver was able to spend two evenings ashore, in faraway City, during the time that Lon Lady was in port.

On the first of these he was by himself. He had a meal—which was vastly inferior, to anything served by Arlen aboard the ship—and then a few drinks. He went to a solido show and realized, one quarter of the way through, that he had already seen it, years before and in much happier circumstances. He left the theater and returned to the ship. Old Doc Malone was still awake and let Calver have a bottle of the so-called Irish whisky that he distilled in his spare time.

The second evening Arlen was with him. She had met him in the alleyway outside the officers' cabins as he was on his way to the axial shaft.

"Wait for me, Calver," she said. "I'll come with you."

"I didn't think you bothered the beach much, Arlen," he said.

"I don't as a rule. But every now and again I have to get off this ship before I go mad."

"I feel the same," he said.

"You've been here only a dog-watch," she said scornfully.

They took the monorail from the port to Faraway City. They tried to lose themselves in the feverish, artificial gaiety that is common to all the Rim World settlements, but it was hopeless. They finished up at last in a quiet drinking place, one of the very few with subdued lighting and no noisy music.

"How do you like the Lorn Lady?" asked Arlen abruptly.

'She feeds well.'

"I know that, too. Perhaps I should ask, 'How do you like the Rim?'"

"I don't," he said. "Even though I'm no telepath I can feel the mass fear, the dread of the cold and the dark."

"Why don't you go back to where you came from?"

"You should know the answer to that one, Arlen. I was Chief Officer, in the Commission's ships, and by leaving them I insulted them. That's the way they always look at it. I can never get back into big ships."

"There are plenty of smaller lines far superior to Rim Runners."

"I know. And they run to ports also served by the Commission. I should always have the reminder of what could have been, if . . . I'd always be seeing some big Alpha or Beta Classs-liner and thinking, I could have been master of her, by now, if—"

"If what?" she asked bluntly.

He said, "I like you, Arlen, but I'm not going to do a psychological strip-tease just to keep you amused."

She said, "I like you. As you know very well, it's customary for the average spacewoman to have her steady from among the ship's officers. I've never been like that. MacLean tried hard when I first joined Lorn Lady, but never got any place. Pender tried—he took the attitude that the catering officer was one of the purser's perquisites. The engineers and the radio men have made an odd pass or two."

"So?"

"I think that we should know a little more about each other, about each other's backgrounds right from the start."

"There's not much to tell," he said. "I was, as you know, in the Commission's service. I was mate of one of the big Beta Class jobs. I was married, fairly happily, with a couple of children. One voyage from Caribbea to Port Austral I met the woman, the only woman. Funnily enough, her name was Jane, the same as yours. There was the usual mess—resignation from the Commission's service, divorce and all the rest of it. Dorothy, my wife, remarried—happily, I hope. Jane and I married. Her father found me a shore job—a too well paid sinecure, actually—in the firm of which he was president. What does a spaceman know about the manufacture of personalized wrist radios? Anyhow, it all worked out not too badly for a while until Jane began to realize that a spaceman aboard his ship and the same spaceman holding down an office chair are two different animals. The glamour began to fade. It went out like a snuffed candle the night that she went alone to a party to which I had not been invited, returning unexpectedly find me entertaining a girl I had picked up in a bar. Cutting a long story short, I didn't bother to pack. I just got out. Since then I've been drifting out towards the Rim. I've got here now."

"And you?"

She said, "Not a very pretty story."

"Fair exchange," he insisted.

"If you wish it. In my case it's just that I've always been Calamity Jane. I left the Commission to get married. My marriage was very happy. A drunken surface car driver smashed it. Don was killed. I wasn't. That's all."

He said, knowing that the words were inadequate, "I'm sorry."

She said, "I like you,' Calver. I think that I like you rather too much to see anything happen to you. I'm afraid that if we do start something, the old Calamity Jane business will begin again."

"What have I got to lose?" he asked. Then— "That was rather selfish, wasn't it?"

"It was," she said.

It was on Tharn that they lost MacLean.

The people of Tharn are human, except for very minor differences. There is a yellowish tinge to their complexions and the coloration of their hair is usually either blue or green. Their women are, however, obviously mammalian.

It was on Tharn that Lorn Lady discharged her parcel of such tools and instruments as would be of value to a people with only the beginnings of an industrial technology. There was a large consignment of magnetic compasses, which would fetch good prices among the fishermen and merchant mariners. There were needles and scissors, and there were hammers, planes, chisels and saws. There were scientific textbooks for the Temple University.

It was on Tharn that Lorn Lady discharged these goods, and on Tharn that she lay idle until the commencement of loading the following morning. After the evening meal Calver and Jane Arlen went ashore together. The mate, and the purser were already ashore—they did not ever, as Bendix, the interstellar drive engineer rather bitterly remarked—waste any time. Bendix, aided by Renault and Brentano, had to stay on board to overhaul the Mannschenn Drive unit. Old Doc Malone was playing chess with Captain Engels and Levine, the psionic radio officer, was in his cabin with his dog's brain amplifier, trying to find out if there were any practicing telepaths on the planet.

Calver and Arlen walked slowly from the primitive spaceport to the town. The way lay over rough heath-land, but it was pleasant walking after the weeks of free fall. The westering sun, bloated and bloody, was behind them, and in the huddle of buildings ahead of them the soft yellow lights, primitive affairs of burning natural gas, were already springing into being. Blue smoke from the chimneys of the town hung in layers in the still air. There was the smell of frost.

"Things," said Arlen, "are a lot better now. I used to dread going ashore just as much as I dreaded staying aboard. Now, I'm beginning to enjoy it."

"I'm glad," said Calver. "But where do we spend our money, Jane? And on

what?"

"Just a quiet evening in one of the inns," she said. "The liquor here is not bad; as you know, we're loading a fair consignment of it tomorrow. There's usually a musician or a conjurer or juggler to amuse the customers. There'll be a blazing fire, as like as not."

They were in the town now. They walked slowly along the rutted street, between the stone houses with their high, thatched roofs. Shops were still doing business, their open windows illumined by flaring gas jets. It could almost, thought Calver, have passed for a street scene in the Middle Ages back on Earth. Almost— But gas lighting was unknown in those days, and the women did not wear dresses that exposed most of their legs, and any animals abroad would have been dogs and cats, not things like elongated, segmented tortoises. Even so, there must have been very similar displays of rather ambiguous looking meat, of fish, of fruit, of rich cloth and of cloth far from rich, of jewelry both clumsy and exquisite.

They stopped at a shop and Calver, with Arlen translating, bought for the girl a bracelet of beaten silver, exchanging for it what seemed to him to be an absurdly small number, of the square copper coins. The robed shopkeeper bowed low as they left his premises.

"He," said Arlen, "is one of those who like us." She lifted her slim arm so that the bracelet caught the light. "He gave you quite a good discount on this."

"You said that he was one of the ones who like us. I'd have thought that everybody would have liked us."

"The shopkeepers are pleased to see us here—of course. So are the fishermen and sailors, to whom our compasses are a godsend. The artisans, who buy our fine new tools, welcome us. The priests at the University look on us as a source of new knowledge that will not run dry for centuries."

"Who else is there?"

"The peasants, who have the typical peasant mentality. The land-owning noblemen who sense, and not altogether dimly, that we are ushering in the forces of evolution and revolution that will destroy them."

"Aren't we taking rather a risk, coming ashore like this?"

She laughed. "This is a University town. The priesthood maintains a very efficient police force. If anybody harmed any one of us, the High Priest would see to it that he died very slowly. Old Commodore Grimes, to give him his due, made a really good job of getting things set up in our favor."

They paused outside the door of an inn, looked up at the sign that hung there, illuminated by a gas jet. Arlen chuckled. "This is new; it wasn't here the last time we were on Tharn. It used to be some sort of dragon, done in red. Now it's a spaceship."

"The innkeeper," said Calver, "is obviously one of those who like us. He might even shout us a free drink or two. Shall we go in?"

They went in.

The place was warm and the air was blue with smoke. Calver thought at first that it came from pipes and cigarettes, then saw that it was eddying from the big open fireplace. Even so, there was the aroma of tobacco. Puzzled, Calver looked around, saw MacLean and Pender sitting at a table in the corner. A giggling girl, who was trying to smoke a cigarette, was on Pender's lap. MacLean was, as usual, singing softly.

"Exiled from home

By woman's whim,

We'll ever roam

And run the Rim . . ."

Another girl stood before him, doing her best to pick out the notes on a stringed instrument like a small harp.

Arlen frowned. She said, "I suppose it's all right, but those two are liable to get themselves into serious trouble one day."

"Nobody here seems to be worrying," said Calver.

Most of the men in the place were, obviously, seamen and fishermen—knee boots or thigh boots combined with clothing of dark blue seem to be almost standard wear throughout the galaxy for men who follow the sea. Most of them had girls of their own, and those who did not were not the kind to allow women to interfere with serious drinking. Almost all of them raised their mugs to the spaceman and spacewoman in salutation. Room was made for them at one of the larger tables and tankards of the dark, sweet brew were pressed upon them.

Calver felt a little out of things as Arlen entered into a spirited conversation with the tough, grizzled seaman seated on her left; She condescended now and again to translate some of his sallies.

"He's master of a merchantman," she said, "and he says that he'll sign me on as his cook any time I want a change."

"I'd starve without you, Jane," said Calver.

He let his attention wander from the incomprehensible conversation. He looked to the corner where MacLean and Pender were sitting, saw that they were getting along very well indeed with the two native girls.

The door opened with a crash.

A young man strode, arrogantly into the hall, followed by half a dozen others who were, obviously, his servants or retainers. He wore emerald trunks, scarlet boots and a scarlet jacket. A great scarlet plume nodded above his wide-brimmed black hat. All of his clothing was lavishly ornamented with gold embroidery. A long sword swung at his left side. He was, obviously, neither seaman, fisherman nor artisan. He could not, thought Calver, possibly be one of the priestly scholars from the University.

He must be one of the land-owning nobility of whom Arlen had spoken.

He glared around him, obviously looking for somebody. He saw the two spacemen with their girls in the far corner: His mouth tightened and his black eyes gleamed dangerously.

"Sayonee!" he called. Then, again, "Sayonee!"

The woman on MacLean's lap looked up and around. Her lip curled. She spat like an angry cat.

"Oh, oh!" whispered Arlen. "I don't like this. She told him to go and get lost."

The young man, his followers close behind him, pushed to the corner of the room, careless of the overset bottles and tankards in his wake. He stood there, glaring down at MacLean and Pender. The mate returned his glare, his face flushed under the carrot hair. The girl, Sayonee, looked frightened, whispered something to MacLean, tried to wriggle off his lap. MacLean said, in English, "I'm not giving you up to any planet lubber."

Pender said, "Mac . . . Hadn't you better . . .?"

"Shut up!" snapped MacLean.

"MacLean!" called Calver, "don't be a fool!"

"Stay out of this, Calver," shouted the mate. "And if you're scared, get out, and take that frosty-faced Arlen with you!"

The aristocrat said something. It must have been insulting. MacLean, obviously, knew what it meant—the spacefarer usually learns the curses of any strange language long before he is capable of carrying out a polite conversation. The blood drained from his face, leaving it a deathly white. He got to his feet, unceremoniously dumping Sayonee. Her little harp jangled discordantly as she fell. He picked up his mug from the table, let the Tharnian have the contents full in the face. He took a step forward, his fists clenched and ready.

Drunk as he was, he would have used them well—if he had been allowed to.

The Tharnian's sword whipped out from its scabbard and ran him through before he could make another gesture either of offense or defense.

There were shouts and screams, there was the crash of overturned furniture and shattered glassware. From somewhere above there was the furious, incessant jangling of a bell. Calver was on his feet, about to go to MacLean's help—although he knew that he was beyond help—when he remembered Jane Arlen. He realized that she was standing beside him.

"Get out of this!" he snapped.

"No."

"Then keep behind me!"

The aristocrat was pushing towards the door, his men on either side of him and behind him. He held his sword still, and the blood on it gleamed scarlet in the flaring gas light. His bullies had drawn long knives. One of them staggered as a flung bottle struck him on the temple. Another bottle shattered in midair as the long sword leapt up to deflect it.

He saw Calver and Arlen. A thin, vicious grin split his face. At Arlen's side the old merchant captain growled something incomprehensible. Calver saw that he, too, had drawn a knife. For a moment he feared attack from this quarter, then realized that this was an ally, that most of the seamen and fishermen in the inn were allies.

But they were not trained fighters —not trained fighters of men, that is. With wind and weather, with straining, refractory gear and with the monsters of the deep they could cope, but all their fights with their own kind had been limited to the occasional tavern brawl. This was, more than a mere tavern brawl. This was a one-sided battle against soldiers, experienced killers, intelligently led.

The swordsman was close now. The sea captain shouted and jumped forward to meet him. He fell into a crouch, holding his knife for the deadly, upward thrust. The blade of the sword flickered harmlessly over his left shoulder. Had he been fighting one man only he might well have succeeded—but one of the retainers fell on him, driving his blade deep into the old-man's back.

Calver picked up a chair, held it before him as a shield. He jabbed the three legs of it at the aristocrat's face, felt a savage satisfaction as flesh and cartilage gave beneath the blow. He swung his makeshift weapon down and around, felled the man who had stabbed the old captain in the back. He brought it up again just in time to intercept and deflect the vicious sword.

He heard Arlen scream.

He dare not look around, but from the corner of his eye he saw that two the retainers had seized her, were dragging her towards the door. Hostage or victim he had no time to reason out. He was fighting for his life, and he knew it. He was fighting with a clumsy weapon held in unskilled hands against a finely balanced instrument of murder wielded by the hands of a master. His body he could protect, but his legs were, already bleeding from a score of wounds, some of them deep.

He fell back, saw the smile that appeared on the blood-smeared face of his enemy, the twisted smile under the broken nose. He fell back as though in terror. He hoped that the Tharnian would be in no hurry to follow, that he would decide to play a cat and mouse game, to finish him almost at leisure.

He thought, I'm no swordsman, but I know something of ballistics.

With all his strength he threw the chair, followed it before it could reach its target. He saw the Tharnian, foolishly, bring up his sword to parry the heavy missile, saw the point of it penetrate the thick wooden seat.

Then the other man was down and Calver was on top of him, his hands



seeking the other's throat. Somebody was pulling at his shoulders, trying to drag him off his enemy. He tensed himself for the blade between his shoulders, but it never came. Muscular hands closed over his own, pulling them away from the Tharnian's bruised neck. He was jerked to his feet. He glared at the men who surrounded him—the hard, competent looking men who wore a uniform of short, black tunics over yellow trunks, who carried polished wooden clubs. He saw the nobleman's bullies being efficiently bound by other uniformed men.

He saw—and he found it hard to forgive himself for having forgotten her—Arlen. She was pale, and her uniform was torn, but she seemed unharmed.

"The party's over," she said, with an attempt at flippancy. "These are the University police. They will escort us back to the ship."

"And MacLean?" he asked.

"Dead," she replied flatly. "Pender's all right. He kept under the table."

"And what will happen to . . . him?" asked Calver, nodding towards the swordsman who, like his followers, was being expertly trussed.

"I don't know. I don't want to know. His father, who's the local baron or whatever, might be able to buy him back from the High Priest before justice has run its full course. I doubt it."

"I feel rather sorry for him," said Calver slowly. "After all, MacLean did steal his girl."

"And he," she flared, "did his best to steal yours!"

"I forgot," he muttered.

"You'd better not make a habit of it," she said coldly.

Lorn Lady lifted from Tharn the following evening, having taken aboard her cargo of casks of the local liquor, gold, and the baled pelts of the great, richly furred mountain bears. Before her departure the High Priest himself came down to the spaceport to make a formal apology to Captain Engels for the events of the previous evening. He spoke in English.

He said, "There are those on Tharn who hate and fear you, captain, who hate and fear the knowledge that will set all men free."

"I am afraid, Your Wisdom," said the captain, "that my own officer was in part to blame for what happened."

"The girl was not Lanoga's property," said the priest. "Lanoga's actions were aimed as much against the University as against your people."

"And Lanoga?" asked Calver who, as chief officer, was present.

"If you delay your departure," said the High Priest, "you will be able to witness his execution tomorrow."

"We have to maintain our schedule," said Captain Engels.

When the priest and his attendants had gone, Calver asked, "Isn't he rather sticking his neck out, sir? He has his police, but surely the barons can muster enough men to wipe out the town and crush the University. He's no fool. Surely he must realize that."

"He's no fool, Mr. Calver," said the Old Man. "Furthermore, he wants the barons to march on the town." He hesitated. "You're the mate, now. There are one or two things you have to learn. One of them is that many of the crates and cases on the manifest as containing carpenters' tools contain ironmongery of a somewhat different kind. Our friend the High Priest is sitting pretty on top of a well stocked arsenal of machine guns and automatic pistols."

"But Federation law . . ."

"If the Federation concerned itself with the well-being of the Rim we would respect its laws. Secure for space, Mr. Calver."

"Secure for Space, sir," repeated Calver.

So Lorn Lady lifted from Tharn with Calver as her chief officer and with Brentano, the Electronic Radio Officer, as a not too inefficient acting second mate. Once clear of the planet she set her course for the star around which revolved Grollor, but the Mannschenn Drive was not activated, as usually was the case, once acceleration had ceased. Any change in the mass of the ship when the Drive is in operation can have catastrophic consequences.

Carefully, reverently almost, MacLean's shrouded body was carried to the air lock, was placed inside the little compartment. Smoothly, silently the inner door shut. There was a brief sobbing of pumps as the air lock pressure built up to four ship atmospheres. Outside the air lock stood the captain and his officers, the magnetic soles of their shoes holding them to the deck. Engels, in his dry, cracked, old voice, read from the little book in his hand.

Calver listened to the solemn words, to the ages-old ritual. He wanted hard to believe that this was not for MacLean the end, the ultimate nothingness, but he found himself incapable of doing so. This was not the first funeral in deep space in his experience—but the others had been in towards the Center, with the bright stars above and below and to all sides, where it was not hard to regard those same stars as the veritable Hosts of Heaven. Here, on the Rim, the final negation was too close to the living; it must be closer still to the dead.

"We therefore commit his body to the deep . . ." read the captain.

Calver pulled the lever. The light over the air lock door changed from green to red. The structure of the ship shook ever so slightly. MacLean—or what was left of MacLean—was now outside. Would he, wondered Calver, plunge into some blazing sun years or centuries or millennia from now? Or would his frozen body circle the Rim forever? The maudlin words of the song of which the dead Mate had been so fond sprang into his mind.

We'll ever roam

And run the Rim . . .

Calver pulled the second lever. Again the pumps sobbed. The light changed from red to green. The needle of the gauge steadied on One Atmosphere. He opened the air lock door, looked inside, making sure. He shut the door.

Mr. Calver," said Captain Engels, secure for Interstellar Drive." He made his slow way to the axial shaft. Calver began to follow.

Jane Arlen caught his sleeve.

"Derek," she said, "I'm frightened. I thought when I came out to the Rim I'd shaken off the jinx that's always followed me . . ."

"It had nothing to do with you," said Calver. "It had nothing to do with poor MacLean, even. It was politics—politics on a world that none of us had ever heard of a few years ago."

She said, "But I'm still frightened."

There were no incidents on Grollor. Everybody on that planet, a world that had made almost a religion of technology, was glad to see Lorn Lady. There were no temptations on Grollor. The Grollans regarded alcohol as a good cleaning fluid and antiseptic, nothing more. Although they were humanoid they were so grotesque that their women could make no appeal even to Pender, even if he had by this time—which was doubtful—recovered from the fright he had suffered on Tharn.

There were no incidents on Stree. The great, lazy lizards stirred from their somnolence to make their slow, lazy way to the ship where they deigned to accept the cargo that Lorn Lady had brought them. There was reel upon reel of microfilm—books on philosophy in the main, but a surprisingly large number of contemporary novels. In exchange they offered great jewels, intricately cut, and rolls of parchment covered with their spidery calligraphy.

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"These," said Engels to Calver, "might well hold the ultimate secrets of the Universe."

It was on Mellise, on the "homeward leg of the voyage, that disaster struck again.

Mellise is a watery world, fully four fifths of its surface being covered by the shallow seas. Mellise, with its absence of land masses and, consequently, of the conditions producing steep barometric gradients, should not be a stormy world. Normally it is not. Normally the only winds known are the steady, predictable Trades and Anti-Trades. But there is a long, straggling archipelago of low islands almost coincident with The Equator, and at the changes Of Equinox conditions obtain, although briefly, favorable to the generation of hurricanes.

Mellise is a watery world and, in the main, a pleasant one.

Calver walked slowly along the white beach, the sun pleasantly hot on his skin, the sand crunching satisfyingly between his toes, Arlen walked beside him, her hand in his. Neither of them said anything. There was no need to.

Calver glanced inland, looked to the blunt, gleaming spire that was the stern of Lorn Lady just visible above the feathery, purple foliage of the trees. He was glad that a breakdown of the pumps had caused the delay in departure. There had been little leisure during the discharge—nets and cordage and harpoon guns—and little during the loading, although the great pearls that were their homeward cargo had offered few problems in stowage.

"Somebody coming our way," murmured Arlen, raising one long, slim arm and pointing.

Calver looked, and saw the small dark blob that broke the calm surface of the sea.

They walked to the water's edge.

The Mellisan waddled through the shallows, his sleek hide gleaming in the sunlight. The necklace of gaudy shells around his long, sinuous neck proclaimed him a person of some consequence. Calver thought that he was the Chief who had supervised the discharge and loading from the shore end, but could not be sure.

"Meelongee," he said, his voice almost like that of a Siamese cat.

"Meelongee," replied Arlen.

The word meant, Calver knew, "greetings." It was about the only word of which he did know the meaning.

The native shifted from one webbed foot to the other. He gesticulated with his stubby arms. It was impossible for Calver to tell what the expression on the long-muzzled face signified, but he guessed that it was grave concern. There seemed to be anxiety in the yelping voice.

Concern showed on Arlen's face. "Calver," she asked, "when shall we be ready for Space?"

"Another twenty-four hours," he said.

"That will be too late. Our friend here tells me that there will be a big blow before tomorrow morning. A gale—or a hurricane."

"Not a cloud in the sky," said Calver, looking upwards.

"There's an old saying," she remarked quietly, "about the calm before the storm. Hadn't we better get back and warn the Old Man?"

"Yes," he agreed.

Arlen thanked the native who, bowing clumsily, backed into the still water, turned suddenly and then was gone with hardly a splash. She walked with Calver along the rough path from the beach to the clearing that was dignified by the name of spaceport. Once she stopped, saying nothing, and pointed. Calver looked silently at the little furry mammals, not unlike squirrels, that normally lived in the trees. Whole colonies of them had come down from their arboreal homes, were industriously digging burrows in the

soil.

Arlen and Calver came into the clearing, hurried to the ramp. They ran up the spiral staircase from the air lock to the control room. The mate went directly to the aneroid. It had, he remembered, read 1020 millibars that morning. The 1010 millibar noon reading he had ascribed to diurnal range. Since noon it had dropped to 930 millibars. He tapped the face of the instrument with his forefinger: It dropped still further.

He went to the telephone, pressed the selector button for the Reaction Drive Engine Room. It was Bendix who answered, "Yes? What do you want?"

"How long will Renault be on those pumps of his?"

"It'd be a ten-minute job if this lousy outfit carried spares," snapped Bendix. "When we have to make impellers by hand . . ."

"How long will you be?"

"This time tomorrow."

"Not good enough." To the girl he said, "Arlen, wake the Old Man, will you? Tell him it's important." And into the telephone, "Can't Renault fake up some sort of jury rig to get us into Space? We've been warned that there's the father and mother of all storms brewing, and our own observations confirm the warning."

Renault came to the other end of the line. He said, "We're doing our best, Calver. You know that. The best I can promise is tomorrow noon. Now leave us alone, will you?"

Arlen came back into the control room, followed by Captain Engels.

The Old Man, thought Calver, looked an old man in fact as well as in name. He had always looked old, but until recently there had been a sort of wiry indestructibility about him. That was now gone.

He walked slowly, a little unsteadily, to the aneroid. He studied it for a few moments.

He said, "I have heard about these storms, Mr. Calver. I always hoped that it would be my good luck never to experience one. A surfaced spaceship is, perhaps, the most helpless of all Man's creations." He paused. "I am older than you, Mr. Calver, much older, but all my spacefaring experience has been on the Rim—and, until recently, only with the Ultimo, Lorn, Thule and Faraway run. Perhaps . . ."

"I'm afraid that this situation, is outside my experience, sir," said Calver.

"There's something I read . . ." said Arlen hesitantly.

"Yes, Mrs. Arlen?" said Engels. "What was it?"

"It was in a historical novel. It was about the early days of space flight, the days of the first explorations of Mars and Venus . . ."

"Mars and Venus?"

"Two planets in Earth's solar system," said Arlen. "Venus is a world very much like this, but closer to its primary. Fierce storms are of very frequent occurrence. Anyhow, in this novel the characters had to set up stays—I think that's the right word—to prevent their ship from being blown over."

"There are the towing lugs forward," said Calver thoughtfully. "There are the towing wires. We have shackles and bottle screws."

"And to what do you propose to anchor your . . . stays?" asked the captain.

"To the roots of the stoutest trees," replied Calver.

"It could work," said the Oki Man.

"It will have to work," said Arlen.

"Shall I go ahead with it, sir?" asked Calver.

Captain Engels tapped the aneroid barometer. Its needle fell another few millibars. He walked to the nearest port and looked out at the sky. All the brilliance had gone from the westering sun, which now had a smudgy appearance. Overhead the long mares' tails had appeared in what had been a cloudless sky. Faintly audible in the control room was a distant, sighing rumble, rhythmic and ominous. Engels asked, "What is that noise?"

"The surf," said Calver. "There was a flat calm, but the swell's getting up."

"Rig your stays, Mr. Calver," ordered the captain.

By nightfall the job was done. Calver, aided by Arlen, Levine, Pender and old Doc Malone had broken out the towing wires, the shackles and the bottle screws from the spare gear store. He had shackled the four wires to the towing lugs just abaft of Lady's stern. These wires had been brought down to the boles of convenient, stout trees and had been again shackled to the powerful bottle sows. They had been set up tight—but not too tight. Calver was haunted by visions of the frail old ship crumbling down upon herself if too much weight were put on the stays.

Sunset had been a dismal, gray end to the day, and with it had come the wind, fitful at first, uncertain, bringing with it occasional vicious squalls of rain and hail. The swell was heavy now, breaking high on the beach. The water had lost its usual phosphorescence and every roaring comber was black and ominous. The sky was black, and the sea was black, and the frequent, dazzling lightning brought a deeper darkness after every frightening flash.

Calver, his last inspection made, entered the ship and climbed wearily up to Control. His light uniform was sweat-soaked and every muscle was aching and trembling. He reported to Captain Engels, "All secure, sir." He sank gratefully into one of the acceleration chairs.

"Thank you, Mr. Calver." The Old Man tapped the aneroid. "Still falling, still falling," he murmured.

"How are the engineers getting on?" asked Calver.

"They are still working. I fear that there's no hope of our getting off before the blow hits us."

Arlen appeared with a tray upon which there was a plate of sandwiches, a can of cold beer. She put it on one arm of the chair, disposed herself gracefully upon the other. She had been working, Calver well knew, as hard as any of the men, but had still found the time to attend to their needs.

"Thanks, Arlen," said Calver gratefully. He took a satisfying draught of the beer, bit deeply into one of the sandwiches.

The rain was heavy now, torrential, obscuring the weather ports, drumming upon the hull like a swarm of micro-meteorites. The ship trembled as the gusts hit her, trembled and groaned. Something crashed into her—the branch of a tree? the tree itself?—and she seemed to sag, to sag and recover. Calver looked around at the others. Arlen's face was pale, but calm. Levine's thin features had, somehow, assumed an almost ludicrous expression of polite interest. Fat little Pender was terrified, and didn't care who knew it, Old Doc Malone looked like a Buddha with Neanderthal Man somewhere in his ancestry. Captain Engels' eyes were the only part of him that seemed alive, and they were fixed anxiously on the aneroid with its plunging needle.

"I wish you'd use more mustard when you make sandwiches, Arlen," said Calver, his voice deliberately casual.

"Mustard with lamb?" she demanded scornfully.

"I like it," he said.

"You would," she replied.

"Will this wind get any worse?" asked Pender anxiously.

"Probably," said Calver.

"Mightn't we be safer outside?"

"We might be—if we were amphibians, like the natives. This island will be under water when the storm's at its height."

"Oh," said Pender. "Oh."

The wind was steady now, but stronger than any of the gusts had been. Lorn Lady seemed to shift and settle. Calver wished that he could see out of the ports to inspect his stay wires. He got to his feet and, ignoring Pender's protests, switched out the control-room lights, switched on the external floods. The ports to leeward were clear enough, and through them, Calver could see the two lee stays, silvery threads in the darkness, hanging in graceful catenaries. It must be, he realized, the weather stays that had had all the weight, that must have stretched. They were still tight enough, bar taut, although they could not be seen through the streaming ports to windward. Their thrumming could be felt rather than heard.

Walking to inspect the inclinometer, Calver was not surprised to find that the ship was all of three degrees from the vertical.

He tried to dismiss from his mind what the consequences would be should a stay carry away, should one of the tail fins to leeward crumple under the strain. By the unsteady glare of the lightning, he made his way back to his chair, sat down again.

"There's nothing further that we can do," said Arlen.

"Not yet," he said. "But there will be."

"When?" she asked. "How soon?"

"I don't know. We just have to wait."

"Can we have the lights on again?" asked Pender plaintively.

"Switch them on, then," said Calver.

It was a little more cheerful with normal lighting in the control room. The wind and the rain, the thunder and the lightning, were still there but, somehow, more distant. There was a sense of security—of false security Calver knew full well. There was the sense of security that comes from familiar surroundings, no matter what hell is raging unchecked outside.

Now and again Calver would get up to walk to the aneroid, to stand with Captain Engels to stare at the instrument. He knew what had to be done when the needle stopped falling, and hoped that there would be enough time for it to be done. He thought how ironical it was that the spacemen should be confronted with a problem that must have been all too familiar to the seamen of the long dead days of sail on Earth's seas, how fantastic it was that Lorn Lady could well be wrecked by the same forces that had destroyed many a proud windjammer.

As they waited, the air of the control room became heavy with smoke. The burning tobacco eased the strain on taut nerves, helped to dull the apprehensions even of Pender. Arlen got up from the arm of Calver's chair and went to make tea, taking some to the engineers and Brentano, who were still working on the pumps. Doc Malone went to his cabin and returned with a bottle of the raw liquor—of his own manufacture, insisted on tipping a stiff tot into each tea-cup.

Then — "It's stopped falling!" cried Captain Engels in a cracked voice. ,

"The trough," said Calver. "Sir, we must go outside again. There will be a shift of wind at any moment and when it comes, unless we have taken up the slack on the lee stays, we shall be caught aback."

The Old Man grinned, and it was like the grin of a death's head. "By all means, Mr. Calver. Do as you see fit. I am afraid that I can be of no help to you."

"Your place is here, sir," said Calver gently.

He led the way to the axial shaft, clattered down the stairway to the air



lock. The tools that he had used before were still there—the spanners and the heavy spikes. With the others standing well back, waiting, he opened the outer air lock door a crack. Save for a distant moaning and the splashing of water, all was quiet. He opened the door to its full extent, saw in the light of the floods that the sea had covered the island. The ramp was gone, as he had expected that it would be, but the ladder rungs, part of the actual structure of the ship, were still there.

He clambered down the ladder, dropped into the water. It was not, to his relief, cold and was a little less than waist deep. Arlen followed, then Levine, then Doc Malone. Pender stayed in the air lock to pass the tools down to them, came down himself with obvious reluctance.

They splashed clumsily through the flood to the trees to which what had been the lee stays were anchored. It was heavy going; they could not see what was underfoot and the floating debris impeded their progress. Once Arlen screamed faintly as she blundered into the battered body, of one of the natives.

Calver left Malone, Pender and Levine at the nearer of the two slack stays, carried on with Arlen to the further one. He and the girl worked well together, she holding the bar that prevented the bottle screw from rotating bodily, he turning with his spike the threaded sleeve. He realized that the other party was having trouble. He could hear Doc Malone's picturesque curses and Pender's petulant whine.

He gave the sleeve a last half turn, grasped the tight wire with his hand to test it. It was taut, but not too taut.

"Come on," he said to Arlen, "we'll give the others a hand.

The wind tore the words from his mouth, threw them into the suddenly howling darkness. He caught Arlen by the ballooning slack of her shirt, felt the fabric rip in his hand. He flung himself after her as she staggered helplessly down wind, caught her and held her to him tightly. They fell, both of them, and floundered helplessly for long seconds under the water. Calver regained his footing at last, struggled to his feet, dragging Arlen with him. He stood there, his back to the wind and the torrential rain, and looked at the tall, shining tower that was the ship. He thought that he saw her shudder, begin to shift.

He turned slowly, fighting to retain his balance, to look at the stays. The one that he had tightened was still taut, the other still hung in a bight. Two figures at the bole of the tree—he knew that they would be Malone and Levine—were fighting yet with the refractory bottle screw.

Let the stay hold, he thought intensely. Let the stay hold.

Before his horrified eyes the tree to which it was made fast lifted, was pulled up and clear of the water by the whiplash of the wire. It looked, with its sprawling roots, like some huge octopoid monster at the end of giant's fishing line. At the other end of the wire was Lorn Lady, and she was toppling, as she must topple with that dreadful pressure suddenly along her side. Over she went, and over ... and checked.

The second stay, the slack stay, miraculously had held. By the bole of the tree old Doc Malone raised his pudgy arms slowly against the weight of the wind, made the thumbs-up sign.

And thumbs-up it is, thought Calver, as they struggled back to the ship. He was even prepared to be charitable to Pender, who had run at the first sign of danger. But Pender's body they never found.

Captain Engels' body they found, sprawled pitifully in his control room. They all knew what must have happened, did not need Doc Malone to tell them that the old man's heart had stopped when it seemed to him that his ship was doomed.

"Derek, I'm frightened," said Jane Arlen when the worst of it was over and the wind was no more than a moderate gale. "I'm frightened. This jinx of mine . . ."

"We saved the ship," said Calver.

"But this was the second thing," Arlen said. "And they always come in threes."

"Shut up, Calamity Jane!" he whispered, closing her mouth in the most effective way of all.

Lorn Lady was pitifully shorthanded and would be until her return to Port Forlorn. Calver was Master and Brentano, the electronic radio officer—that unassuming Jack of all trades—was his mate, Arlen was second mate. Levine would have liked to have helped out, but he was one of those unfortunate people to whom machines of any kind are an insoluble mystery, to whom the language of mathematics is absolute gibberish.

It was Levine who came into the control room where Calver, to give Arlen a chance to prepare a meal, was standing part of her watch; old Doc Malone was, in the opinion of all hands, the Universe's worst cook.

"Captain," he said, "we have company."

"Company?" asked Calver. "Faraway Queen's not due to make the Eastern Circuit for another month."

"It's one of the T. G. Clippers," said Levine. "Thermopylae. I've been yarning to her P.R.O. He wanted the names of the officers here."

"Trans-Galactic? That's Bendix's old company, isn't it? Anyhow, what in the galaxy is she doing out here?"

"A Galactic cruise, captain," said Levine, grinning. "See the romantic Rim Worlds, Man's last frontier. Breathe the balmy air of Lorn, redolent of sulfur dioxide and old socks."

"And we're getting paid for being out here," marveled Calver. "What world is she visiting first?"

"None of the inhabited ones. She's showing her passengers that weird planet, Eblis. She's going to hang off it in closed orbit until they've had a

bellyful of spouting volcanoes and lava lakes on the viewscreens; then she's making for Lorn." He stiffened. "Hello! Something's wrong somewhere."

Although no telepath himself, Calver felt a thrill of apprehension. Psionic radio had always made him feel uneasy. He could imagine the psionic amplifier, the tissue culture from the brain of a living dog, hanging in its nutrient solution and probing the gulfs between the stars with its tendrils of thought, sounding an alarm in the brain of its master at the first hint of some danger imperceptible to the normal ran of humanity.

Levine's face was expressionless, his eyes glazed. He picked up the stylus from its clip in the desk before Calver, began to write in his neat script on the scribbling pad.

S.O.S. S.O.S. Thermopylae, off Eblis. Tube linings burned out, falling in spiral orbit to planet. Cannot use Mannschenn Drive to break free from orbit, ship still losing mass due to leakage from after compartments. Require immediate assistance. S.O.S. S.O.S.

"Tell him," said Calver, "that we're on our way." He knew that Bendix was in his drive room, called him there. "Mr. Bendix," he said, "I want you to be ready to push the Drive as hard as you can without throwing us back to last Thursday. One of your old ships is in distress off Eblis. I'll give you the word as soon as I've made the necessary trajectory adjustments." He switched to the Reaction Drive Engineer's cabin. "Mr. Renault, stand by your rockets and gyroscopes. We're going to the assistance of Thermopylae." He switched to Public Adress. "Will all off-duty personnel report to Control, please?"

Levine was writing on the pad again.

Thermopylae to Lorn Lady. I hear you. Hurry, please. Estimated first contact with atmosphere in thirty-six hours.

Arlen and Brentano, followed closely by old Doc Malone, came into Control. Calver pointed to the pad, then busied himself setting up the Tri-Di chart on large scale. It showed the ball of light that was the sun of Eblis, the far smaller ball that was Eblis itself and, just inside the sphere, the tiny spark that was Lorn Lady. He read off co-ordinates, threw the problem to the computer and tried not to show his impatience while the machine quietly murmured to itself. He looked at the figures on the screen.

"Thirty-five hours," he said. "But Bendix should be able to cut that."

"And Renault can give her an extra boost," said Brentano.

"Cut Interstellar Drive," ordered Calver.

The familiar whine faltered and died. Outside the ports the huge lens of the Galaxy- resolved itself from what had been, as poor MacLean had once put it, a Klein flask blown by a drunken glass blower. There was the hum of the big directional gyroscope starting up.

"Doc," said Calver, "you'd better secure for acceleration. And you, Arlen. Mr.

Levine, is your amplifier secure."

"All secure," said Levine, snapping out of his daze.

"Then you'd better stay here. Tell Thermopylae that we're hurrying."

The directional gyroscope was braked to a sudden stop. At Calver's command the rockets burst into roaring life, building up the acceleration. Calver watched his meters and gauges carefully. Too high an initial speed would be as wasteful of time as too low a one. Deceleration still had to be carried out.

"That will do," he said at last.

"Cut Reaction 'Drive, Mr. Brentano."

"Cut Reaction Drive, sir."

"Resume Interstellar Drive."

"Resume Interstellar Drive."

Into the mouthpiece of the telephone Calver said, "It's up to you, Mr. Bendix."

Below the two ships hung the burning world of Eblis, a glowing scarlet affront to the dark. Lorn Lady had made the run in less than thirty-three hours, Galactic Standard, but there was little enough time to spare. Thermopylae's tow lines had been broken out and were already shackled to the lugs just abaft her needle prow, all that remained to be done was for her spacesuited personnel to leap the gulf between the ships and to shackle them to the lugs forward of Lorn Lady's after vanes.

But this took time, just as it took time for Calver, with infinite care and patience, to jockey his vessel into the best position, to check that none of the lines would be cut by his back-blast and then—carefully, carefully—to take the weight.

Mass, thrust, inertia—all had to be juggled.

Calver juggled them, striving to break the big ship out of her suicide orbit while Brentano, operating the radar, checked and rechecked the readings that told, with dreadful finality, that even though Lorn Lady was doing her best it was not good enough. Arlen sat beside Calver. There was nothing that she could do, but he knew that she was there and the knowledge gave him strength.

It was Arlen who looked at the pressure gauge, who saw that the needle was falling fast. She signaled to Brentano, who left his radar to look at the dial.

"She's rotten," he whispered fiercely. "She's opening at the seams, leaking like a colander."

"Spacesuits?" she asked.

"Of course. I'll warn Doc and the engineers."

Arlen nudged Levine, who was sitting on the other side of her. She said, "Get into your spacesuit." She turned to watch Calver, waited until she saw the tense lines of his jaw momentarily relax. "Derek! We're losing air, fast. You'll have to get into a suit."

He glanced at the pressure gauge, saw the seriousness of the situation. He pondered briefly the advisability of turning the controls over to Brentano for a minute or so, then dismissed the idea. Brentano was a good man, an excellent man, but had no experience with ship handling.

"Derek!" Arlen's voice was sharp. "Your suit!"

"It will have to wait."

That pound or so of extra thrust, he thought. Renault's giving her all he's got. But ...

"Your suit!"

He glanced away from the controls, saw that all the others, except Arlen, were already wearing the bulky, pressurized garments, the transparent helmets.

"Put yours on," he snapped. "That's an order!"

Thrust . . . Thrust . . . And for lack of thrust the needle peaks of the hell world beneath them were reaching up through the ruddy, glowing clouds, reaching up to rip the belly of the huge Trans-Galactic Clipper with her fifteen hundred passengers and three hundred of a crew, to rip her belly and to spill her screaming people into the lava lakes below. He should have used his boats, thought Calver, Thermopylae's captain should have used his boats and put his people into the relative safety of a closed orbit around the planet while there was time. He would have used his boats, either to attempt a tow or for lifesaving, if I hadn't come bumping along in this decrepit old tub with my futile promises of assistance.

He chanced another sidewise glance, saw that Brentano and Levine were forcing Arlen into her suit.

Thrust, he thought. Thrust . . . The auxiliary jets . . . But the tow lines . . . How long will they last in the blast of the auxiliaries?

Levine, his hand clumsy in the thick glove, was writing on the pad.

Thermopylae to Lorn Lady. It was a good try, but intend to abandon ship before it is too late.

"Wait," said Calver. "Tell him—Wait!" he shouted, hoping that Levine would hear him through his helmet.

His hand dropped to the firing keys of the auxiliary jets. He felt the sudden surge of additional power that pressed him down into the padding of the chair. Dimly, he saw Brentano turn away from the radar, his dark face behind the helmet transparency one big grin.

There was a sudden shock, a sharp shift of orientation.

The first of the wires gone, thought Calver, but it doesn't matter now. Then he felt, rather than heard, the dreadful splintering and grinding. The air was gone from the control room in one explosive gasp and he was choking, suffocating. Jane was bending over him—Jane, Calamity Jane. It's not your fault, he was trying to say. Darling, it's not your fault. But his lungs were empty and no sound came.

She got the helmet over his head and opened the valve. Calver took a deep breath and held it until, aided by Arlen and Brentano, he had the rest of the suit on.

When he was sealed in, he asked, "What happened?"

"She broke in two, captain," said Brentano. "After that first wire carried away. Everybody's safe, luckily, but the ship's a total loss."

"And Thermopylae?" asked Calver.

"Safe and sound in a closed orbit," Brentano told him.

Through the control room ports they could see the fiery globe that was Eblis, the incredibly long, slim shape of the Trans-Galactic Clipper. They could see, too, the after section of Lorn Lady and the busy, spacesuited figures working around the stern. Although the old ship was dead, some of her would live on for a while. Her cannibalized tube linings would provide Thermopylae with the jury rig to make Port Forlorn.

"Derek," said Jane Arlen, her voice strange sounding in the helmet phones, "I always bring bad luck with, me, wherever I go. Perhaps you'll believe me now."

"Rubbish," he replied. "Lorn Lady was due for the breakers years ago. And by the time that the lawyers have finished arguing, Rim Runners will be getting a fine new ship out of the deal and—who knows?—I may be master of her."

She said, ignoring his optimism, "I hate to leave her. The poor old Lorn Lady . . ."

"We must go," he said gently. "They are waiting for us aboard Thermopylae."

Together they left the old, broken ship. Together, using their suit reaction units; they jetted across the emptiness to the big liner, to the circle of light that was the air lock door. In the little compartment, they divested themselves of their spacesuits, felt pride in rather than embarrassment for the shabby uniforms so revealed. They stepped through the inner door, the magnetic soles of their shoes silent on the carpeted deck. Steel, lay beneath it but, as they had known when they, themselves, had served in vessels of this class, passengers must be shielded from the harsh realities of Space.

The young officer waiting to receive them saluted smartly.

"Glad to have you aboard, Captain Calver," he said. "May I take you to Captain Hendriks?"

"Thank you," said Calver.

They followed their guide along alleyways, through public rooms. Passengers stared curiously at the man who had lost his ship to save their lives. Calver was thankful when they entered the comparative privacy of the big ship's axial shaft. Hand over hand, he and Arlen pulled themselves swiftly along the guide rail behind the Thermopylae's officer.

The captain of the liner—an old man, a man who had aged years in the last few hours—was seated behind his big desk. He snapped open his seat belt as they entered his day cabin, advanced to meet them.

He said, "Captain Calver, my thanks are inadequate."

"I did what I could, captain," said Calver.

"At least," said Hendriks, "I shall do what I can, too. Sometimes, in wrangles over salvage money, the owners of the ships involved are remembered and their crews, who have done, all the work, are forgotten. But I am not without influence—"

"That aspect of the matter had never occurred to me," said Calver.

"You must hate it out here," said the other captain. "But you'll be able to return now, to the warmth and the light of the Center."

"So we shall," said Calver, with a mild amazement. "So we shall." His hand found Jane Arlen's, closed upon it, felt the answering warmth and pressure. "But I belong on the Rim," he said. "We belong on the Rim."

THE END