

THE RIM OF SPACE

Scanned by Aristotle

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Slowly and carefully-as befitted her years, which were many-the star tramp *Caliban* dipped down to Port Forlorn. Calver, her Second Mate, looked out and down from the control room view-ports to the uninviting scene below, to the vista of barren hills and mountains scarred by mine work-ings, to the great slag heaps that were almost moun-tains 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 the end of the penny section. This is where I §st °ff- There's no further to go . . .

Captain Bowers, satisfied that the ship was riding down easily and safely 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'd like to

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

When things had quieted down again Harris said, "It's always windy on Lorn, and the wind is always cold and dusty and stinking with the fumes of burn-ing sulphur . . ."

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

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

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

"They always are," said Harris.

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

"Thanks again, sir, but . . ."

"Rim Runners!" snorted the Mate. "You'll find

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an odd bunch there, Calver. Refugees from the In-terstellar Transport Commission, from the Survey Service, the Waverley Royal Mail, 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 up to meet them. The *Caliban* dropped through a cloud of scintillating particles, the dust raised by her back-blast and fired to brief incan-descence. 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 just before they were due to collapse from senile decay . . . I'm told that they even have one or two of the old Ehrenhaft Drive jobs . . ."

"Wasn't *Caliban* once *Epsilon Sextants*?" asked Calver mildly.

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

Yes, thought Calver, remembering the conversation, standing at the foot of the ramp to the airlock, *Caliban* was different. A worn-out *Epsilon* Class wag-on 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 *Caliban*, but she looked a wreck.

Calver looked down at his shoes, which had been highly polished when he left his hotel, and saw that they were already covered with a thick film of dust. A

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sidewise glance at his epaulettes-the new ones, with their Rim Runners Second Officer's braid, on the old jacket-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 hand-kerchief, which he then threw away, to restore the shine to his shoes. He climbed the shaky ramp.

There was no airlock 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. He shrugged, found the telephone.

After studying the selector board he pressed the button labelled *Chief Officer*. There was no reply. He tried *Control Room*, *Purser* and then *Captain*, then re-placed the useless instrument in its clip, and opened the inner airlock door. He was agreeably surprised to find that the manual controls worked easily and smoothly. He picked up his bags and 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 vessels 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 in the axial shaft, the 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.

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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 the *Forlorn Bitch*." He grinned. "Well, she looks it, doesn't she?"

They shook hands.

"I'll take my bags up to my cabin," said Calver. "I've seen enough of Port Forlorn to last me a long time so, if you like, I'll do the night aboard."

"Night aboard? There's no shipkeeping here," laughed Maclean. "And there's no cargo working to-night, 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 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. It'll wear off. 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 damned dust out of our throats."

Calver climbed the spiral staircase and found his cabin without any trouble. It was, to his relief, reasonably clean. He left his bags under the bunk, went down to the airlock to rejoin Maclean. The two

men walked down the ramp together.

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"You'll not find Commission standards here," said the Mate, taking up the conversation where he had dropped it. "Qr, come to that, Royal Mail standards. We keep the ships safe and reasonably clean -and reasonably efficient-but there's neither mon-ey 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 that he was a blithering old idiot I'd still be in the Royal Mail, still keeping my night aboard in port and making sure that a proper airlock watch was being maintained, and all the rest of it ..." He paused. "There's a not bad little pub just outside the spaceport gates. Feel like trying it?"

"As you please," said Calver.

The two men walked slowly across the dusty apron, past cranes and under gantries, through the gates and into a street that seemed lined with factories and warehouses. The swinging sign, the big bottle with vanes and ports added to make it look like a rocketship, was, even though sadly tarnished and faded, a note of incongruous gaiety.

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, waiting only a few seconds for attention. The slatternly girl who served them did not ask for their order but brought them a bottle of whisky with graduations up its side, two glasses and a jug of water.

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

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Calver sipped his drink. The whisky was not bad. He read the label on the bottle, saw that the liquor had been distilled on Nova Caledon. It wasn't Scotch -but here, out on the Rim, the price of the genuine article would have been prohibitive.

He said, "Would you mind putting me into the picture, Maclean? They were very vague in the office when I joined the Company."

"They always are," the Mate told him. "They're never quite sure which way is up. Besides-you hadn't yet signed the Articles; you had yet to bind yourself, body and soul, to Rim Runners. I suppose you noticed the Secrecy Clause, by the way?"

"I did."

"I suppose you thought it a rather odd clause to find in a merchant ship's Articles of Agreement. But it's there for a reason. Your predecessor signed it- and ignored it. That's why he's doing his spell in the mines, under guard ..."

"What! Surely they wouldn't ..."

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

"Anyhow ..." He glanced around him, made sure that there was nobody within earshot. "Anyhow, 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, Calver-our old standards, that is. Even so, 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

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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. So Rim Runners put their own survey ships into operation. They made a sweep to the Galactic West-and found the anti-matter suns and planets. There was no room for expansion there. They ran to

the East and found normal matter and quite a few stars with inhabited worlds. There's Mellise, which is practically all water and inhabited by a race of intelligent amphibians. There's Tharn, which has yet to build an industrial civilization but whose people are as near human as makes no difference. There's Grollor, where the natives can just be classed as humanoid and have the first beginnings of space travel. There's Stree, with its philosophical lizards ..."

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

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

"The Eastern Circuit? The new worlds?"

"Aye."

"Sounds interesting. But you still haven't made this secrecy business clear."

"The Rim Government," said Maclean patiently, "wants to form its own Federation, out here on the

Rim, wants to have the whole thing sewn up tight with 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 had the odd idea that he still owed them loyalty-in spite of the Court Martial that was the cause of his leaving them ..."

"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 will be until some genius comes up with an intergalactic drive . . . And out here one can be a spaceman, a real spaceman, without all the time being tangled up in red tape . . . And now there are the new worlds, and there'll be more of them ..." He looked around. "The dump's filling up. No more shop talk."

As he said, the place was filling up. There were roughly-dressed men from dockside, mines and factories, a few overly-neat men from offices. There were women-some of them drably and dowdily respectable, others whose skimpy dress, 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 to the music:

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

She said, "You'll be Calver. The new Second."

"I am," said Calver.

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

She extended a slim, strong 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 no less attractive.

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

Arlen sat down gracefully. She said, "Try to im-agine that you're back in the Royal Mail, Maclean. Be a gentleman and pour me a drink."

The Mate poured drinks.

"We're all luses on the Rim, Calver," said Arlen. (She had, he decided, 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 main venturi. But Maclean's not like that. Maclean will cry into his whisky, 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 a millimeter out of place tomorrow!"

".Stow it, Arlen," said Maclean.

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

"No," he said.

"Then you're one of us. You'll make a, real Rim Runner, skimming the edge of Eternity in a super-annuated rustbucket held together with old string and chewing gum, and taking a masochistic pleasure in it. You've run away from yourself until you can't run 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 state of maudlin, mindless happiness; you drink to intensify your feelings, you ..."

"Stow it, Arlen!" snapped Maclean.

She got to her feet. "If that's the way you feel," she said coldly, "I'd better leave."

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

"Goodnight," she said.

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

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

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Calver saw that the woman with the accordion was drifting towards the table, was smiling at Maclean, that Fender was already exchanging glances with one of the bold-eyed girls. He knew how the evening would 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.

"Goodnight, Maclean," he said. "Goodnight, Fender."

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

"I'm rather tired," said Calver.

"All right. See you in the ayem."

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

Calver glanced back to the table. "It looks like being a dog of a night ..."

"What night isn't?" countered Arlen bitterly.

it was cold outside, and the gusty wind filled their eyes with dust. It was not the sort of night on which one finds pleasure in stargazing-yet Calver looked to the sky. The great, 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 unreachable island universes.

Calver shivered.

"It's . . . It's frightening," whispered Arlen. "It's worse, somehow, seen from a planetary surface. Yet it has something . . ."

"Something?" he asked. "Or . . . nothing?"

"There are easier and faster ways of finding noth-ing," she said.

Calver felt a flare of anger and began to appreciate how, at times, her shipmates found this woman hard to live with. He asked brutally, "Then why didn't you take one?"

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"Why didn't *you*?" she countered. "I'll tell you. Because you're like the rest of us. I don't know your story, 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-some-thing that was your fault, and nobody else's. You hit rock bottom-but you refused to admit it. You de-cided, quite probably on a subconscious level, that the only salvation lay in a voyage-real and symbol-ical-to the very edge of the night . . ."

Calver laughed harshly. "And does this fancy the-ory 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. Fender's a Rim Worlder, too. So's Levine, our Psionic Radio Officer.

"But there's Bendix, the Interstellar Drive Engi-neer-he's out of Trans-Galactic Clippers. There's Renault, the Rocket King-he was Reaction Chief of a *Beta Class* liner . . ."

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

"Brentano, Electronic Radio, used to be in a re-spectable little outfit called Cluster Lines. Old Doc Malone had a flourishing practice in Port Austral, in the Centaurian System. Maclean, as you know, was with the Waverley Royal Mail . . ."

"And you?" he asked.

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

Calver realized with a start that they had walked the distance from the tavern to the spaceport gate.

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The guard on duty-alert in spite of his slovenly ap-pearance-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 space-hounds," she said.

"And this gentleman?"

"Our new Second Officer."

The guard looked from the photograph that he had produced from his pocket to Calver's face, nodded curtly. He 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 glimmer of yellow light shining from the airlock.

"The *Forlorn Lady*," said Arlen. "The poor old *For-lorn Bitch*. When I hear people talking about her I always wonder if they're referring to the ship, or to me . . . But I have every right to be forlorn. Do you know what they used to call me? Calamity Jane Lawler. But that was before I was married. It's Calamity Jane Arlen now . . ."

They walked slowly up the rickety 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.

Arlen led the way into the little pantry adjoining the messroom, switched on the percolator. In a mat-ter of seconds it began to chuckle softly to itself. She 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.

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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 Galver slowly, ignoring what she had just said. "Lawler . . . 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 there was the outbreak of food poisoning, and some fool pointed out that something horrid 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 . . ."

"So? What did happen?"

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

Calver finished his coffee. He said, "Goodnight, Arlen."

"Goodnight," she replied dully.

Feeling suddenly 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 Drive or the Reaction Drive, and the Surgeon was also the Biochemist and, as such, was in charge of hydroponics, tissue culture

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and the yeast and 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. Safety First. Efficiency second. Spit and polish this year, next year, some time, never. Yet the gleaming, ever-precising gyroscopes of the Mannsenn 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 a reliability that could have been the envy of many a better found vessel. Old Doc Malone was an efficient farmer, and there was never a shortage of green salads or fresh meat in the mess; the algae served only as air and water purifiers, never as article of diet,

Yet she was old, was *Lorn Lady*. Machinery can be renewed part by part, but there comes a time when the shell plating of the hull holding that same machinery is almost porous, when every structural member is weakened by 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 whom Calver had ever met, even in Space where, barring accidents, extreme longevity is the rule rather than the exception. A few sparse strands of yellowish hair straggled over the thin, transparent 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

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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 mere presence would induce in the mind of the officer of the watch a sense of gross inadequacy and, with it, the resolve not to let the thing, whatever it might have been, 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, Calver decided, 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 struck up a 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 the others aboard the ship, at arm's length.

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

Calver had free time when *Lorn Lady* was in port. He did not particularly want it, but realized the folly of staying aboard the ship. On the evening of the day of arrival he changed into his least shabby uniform and then went to Arlen's cabin to see if she would come with him; she told him curtly that she was busy and that one Rim World city was as bad as the next anyhow. He left her checking stores, walked down

the ramp from the airlock and on to the apron. He was obliged to admit that Arlen was right. From the spaceport Faraway looked like Lorn. The air was a little purer, perhaps, but was just as chilly and as dusty. There was no warmth in the westering sun, no light and color in the world.

He took the monorail from the spaceport to Faraway City. It was hard for a stranger, like him-self, to tell where the industrial suburbs ended and the city proper began. All the buildings were low, all drab and in various stages of dilapidation. Even though the sun was down when his journey was ended, there was a marked shortage of bright lights.

Across the street from the monorail station was a hotel-*Rimrock House*, proclaimed the flickering neon sign. Calver walked across to it, went first into the bar. The whisky, he soon discovered, was inferior to the rotgut distilled by old Doc Malone. After his second drink he went into the hotel restaurant, ordered a meal. He did not enjoy it. Whoever had cooked it could have taken a few lessons from Arlen, with advantage.

He was grimly amused to see that the couple at the next table shared his low opinion of the Rimrock House cuisine. He could not help overhearing some of their comments. Their accent was familiar, and brought a wave of nostalgia with it. *Earth*, he thought. *But what are they doing here? They must be tourists. But who 'd come out to the Rim for pleasure?*

The man got abruptly to his feet, stalked out of the restaurant. The girl remained seated, caught Calver's eye and grinned ruefully. She said, "Grim, isn't it? It was too much for my brother. He's gone up to his room to nurse his indigestion . . ."

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Now that the girl had spoken to him, Calver was able to look at her without rudeness. There were pretty women, and even beautiful women, on the Rim Worlds-but all of them were lacking in finish, all of them ruined what had been given them by Nature with unsuitable clothing and accessories. This girl, obviously, had been brought up to regard the adornment of her face and body as an art, as a fine art. *No beauty doth she miss*, thought Calver, remembering the words of an old poet, *when all her robes are on. But beauty's self she is when all her robes are gone . . .*

"We thought that we should be playing safe by having something simple," she went on. *"Steak Diane . . . That wasn't asking too much, was it?"*

"One would think not," admitted Calver.

"I saw you making faces over your dinner," she said.

"Lobster Thermidor," he told her. "But I'd hate to meet the arthropod that was masquerading as a lobster. My guess is that it was just an oversized cockroach . . ."

Her face, even with the grimace of disgust, was attractive-and her laugh was even more so, its silvery, tinkling quality somehow matching the gleaming platinum of her hair. She said, "Will you join me for brandy and coffee in the Lounge? I'll get them to bring down a bottle of the real stuff from my room. Even though Napoleon never dipped his beak into it, it's still the produce of France . . ."

"Thank you," said Calver.

He got to his feet when he saw that the girl was about to rise, escorted her from the restaurant to the Lounge, to a table in a dimly-lit corner. He heard her ask the waitress to send somebody to her room,

heard the other woman say, "Certainly, Miss Verrill. . ."

He said, "From Earth, Miss Verrill?"

"How did you know?"

"I heard the waitress address you by name."

"I meant, how did you know that I was from Earth?"

"The accent is obvious. You're from Earth, from one of the English speaking nations. North America . . . In fact, Virginia . . ."

"You're right, Mr ____ ?"

"Calver."

"Mr. Calver. Also from Earth. With the in-definable accent, the amalgam of accents, of the true spaceman. But I didn't know that there were any big ships in port."

"There aren't."

"I must be slipping. When I saw you sitting there I thought that you were a typical I.T.C. officer out for an evening's slumming, seeing how the poor live . . ."

"I *was* in the I.T.C.," said Calver shortly.

"And now?"

"Rim Runners."

"Oh, yes. Rim Runners. They're the local ship-ping line, aren't they?"

"They are."

The waitress brought the coffee. With it, on the tray, there was the bottle of brandy, the two balloon glasses. The coffee was vile. The brandy was not.

Calver felt its warmth creeping through him. It was pleasant here, away from the ship, pleasant to be seeing a new face, listening to a fresh voice. Even though the meal had been almost inedible, there

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were compensations. This was the sort of life that he had run away from (or been driven away from?)-the pleasant chatter over a glass of good liquor, the companion at whom other men looked with envy. And perhaps . . .

Perhaps . . .

And why not? he asked himself. A beautiful wom-an, unattached, lonely . . . So she's got her brother with her. So what? No matter what the *mores* of the rest of the Galaxy might be, Earth had left the Vic-torian era centuries behind.

"I envy spacemen," the girl was saying.

"Why? The life's not bad at times-but at times it's not good."

"What I envy," she said, "is the here today and gone tomorrow philosophy."

Promising, he thought, studying her face in the dim, flattering light. He decided that she was not as young as he had first thought, but that did not matter. She was an attractive woman, and an available woman, and he, despising the spaceport trollops, had been too long without a woman.

"Love 'em and leave 'em . . ." she went on.

"Too right," he agreed. Then, "This is rather absurd. I don't even know your given name."

"Does it matter? 'Darling' is safe. Stick to that and you can be as absent-minded as you please." She smiled again-and there was definite promise in the smile. "But if you must know-it's Sonya . . ."

"It rather suits you," he said. "If it wasn't for that Virginian accent-but I like it-you'd look fine with one of those Russian hounds, a Borzoi, on a leash. . ."

"So I'm the Grand-Duchess-in-exile type?"

"You could be, at that. But a human Grand Duchess, not a female with a mixture of ice water and indigo in her veins. As for the 'in-exile' part- any civilized person is in exile out here." He added, "You especially."

"And you. You belong to big ships, not the scruffy little tramps that run the Rim." She sipped her drink, looking at him over the rim of her glass with violet eyes in which there was more than a hint of promise. "Fair exchange is no robbery. What do they call you when you're up and dressed?"

"Calver. But take away the uniform and it could be Derek."

"It rather suits you. Derek . . . Derrick . . . Puts me in the mind of something tall and angular . . ."

"The original Derrick, after whom derricks were named, was a public hangman," Calver told her.

"Need we be so morbid, Derek?"

"We needn't, Sonya."

"Then let's don't. Or don't let's. You know what I mean, anyhow." She raised a slim wrist, looked at the tiny, jeweled watch that seemed more ornament than precision instrument. "If I know my darling brother he's away by now, drowning that vile dinner in one of the low grogeries he's so partial to. If you don't mind, I'll slip upstairs and make sure. His room's next to mine, and he's inclined to be just a little old-fashioned and stuffy . . . Don't bother to get up. I shan't be long."

Calver watched her walk towards the door. She walked as a woman should walk-not flaunting the slendernesses and the curves below her beautifully-cut clothing, but not making any secret of them, seeming to move to inaudible music. He thought,

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She's what I've been needing. It's a pity that the old Forlorn Lady will be such a short time in port, but Sonya might still be here when we get back. Or she might come to Lorn . . .

He thought, Careful, Calver, careful. You know what these rich bitches are like-or you should know. Once bitten, twice shy. Don't get too deeply involved again. You heard what she said- 'Love 'em and leave 'em . . .'

He saw the other woman standing by the door through which Sonya had passed-the tall brunette, handsome rather than beautiful (but who, given the correct stimuli, would be beautiful), slimly elegant, too elegant (as Sonya had been) for her surround-ings, somehow familiar.

She was looking at him intently, and her gaze was accusatory.

He wondered what specter this was from his past come to haunt him-then realized that it was Jane Arlen, strange in her civilian clothes.

in uniform she was a handsome woman. In her tai-lored gray costume, with the little, bright accessories detracting from its severity, she was a little more than handsome. *Beautiful?* Calver decided-although not rapidly-not. She would never be beautiful until she lost that hardness.

She walked slowly to the corner where Calver was sitting. He got to his feet, sketched the suggestion of a bow.

She said, "Doing yourself proud, aren't you?" He said, "I'd offer you a drink-but it's not mine to offer."

He added, "But I don't suppose Sonya would mind."

She said, "*Sonya!* Why not Olga Popovsky?" "What the hell are you getting at, Arlen?" demanded Calver.

"The original innocent abroad," she sneered. "I suppose you think that she's after you for your good looks. Or your bankroll. It's a well-known fact that all Rim Runner Second Mates are millionaires."

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He retained a precarious grip on his temper. He said reasonably, "Listen, Arlen, there's no need to be a dog. I asked you to come ashore with me, and you refused. Now, just because I'm having a few drinks with an attractive woman, you go off at the deep end . . ."

She sat down abruptly.

She asked, her manner serious, "Calver, just what have you been telling that tow-haired canine?"

"It's no concern of yours," he replied. "But, if you must know, we've just been exchanging light, civilized conversation-one of the commodities that's in very short supply out on the Rim."

"And that's all?"

"That's all."

She relaxed a little then, allowed herself to sink back in the chair. She said, "I think I will have some of this excellent brandy. Ask the waitress for another glass, will you? We may as well finish the bottle; your precious Miss Verrill won't be taking it where she's going."

"Arlen, what is this?"

She ignored the question, continued, "And if any-body wants to know in whose company you've passed the evening, it's mine."

"I still don't get what you're driving at."

"You will," she told him. "You will." Her eyes, that had been fixed on his, shifted their regard, looked towards the door. A faint smile played over her firm mouth.

Calver followed her glance. He saw the two men who had just come in, the two men who, in spite of their civilian clothes and casual manner, could only be police officers. They looked at him and at Arlen,

their faces expressionless, walked purposefully to-wards the table.

One of them said, "Good evening, Mrs. Arlen. At first I didn't recognize you in your finery."

"Hardly finery, Colonel Trent. I've had this cos-tume for all of five years."

"The age makes no difference to the cut," said Trent. Then, "I don't think that I've met this gentleman."

"Colonel Trent, Mr. Calver," said Arlen. "Mr. Wayne, Mr. Calver."

"New to Rim Runners, Mr. Calver?" asked Trent.

"Yes."

The police officer's keen eyes were making an in-spection of what was on the table-the bottle of French brandy, the three glasses.

He said, "Been having a slight party, I see."

"Yes," said Calver, feeling the need for caution but still not knowing why. "Care to join us in a drink?"

"Some other time, perhaps, when we aren't on duty. As a matter of fact we are looking for Miss Ver-rill."

"She went upstairs to powder her nose," said Arlen.

"Thank you, Mrs. Arlen. We'll find her there."

When they were gone, Arlen said, "Yes, they'll find her there. And they'll also find the concealed tape recorder that was supposed to record everything you said ..."

"Are you crazy, Arlen?"

"Far from it," she remarked, sipping her brandy. "Far from it. I got the buzz that the Verrill wench and her partner were in town, sniffing around and on

the look-out for somebody, anybody, from the ship. The pair of 'em will sleep in jail tonight-and as many nights hereafter as the trumped-up charge will hold 'em. My dear, innocent Mr. Calver-that wom-an is one of the slickest operators in the Federation Secret Service. We, of course, are still in the Feder-ation-but the big boys have heard rumors of our impending secession and it's got 'em worried. They've heard rumors of the new worlds to the Galactic East, too, and suspect some kind of a tie-up. So . . ."

"You mean," said Calver, "that she is a spy?"

"You could call her that-although, at the mo-ment, with the Rim Planets among the Federated Worlds still, she hasn't quite got that status ..."

"But Trent and the other fellow were very . . . gullible."

"They know me."

"But what about the hotel staff?"

"They know me, too. I asked them to do me a favor, to say that I had dined here with you. They knew that if they didn't do that small favor I'd be doing no more small favors for them." She smiled her attractive, crooked smile. "After all, I've never regarded smuggling as a sin."

"I see," said Calver tiredly. "Anyhow, thanks for saving me from the mines."

"I didn't want the ship to be held up," she told him. Then, "I'm afraid this has rather ruined your night on the tiles."

"It has, rather. But it could have been much worse. Thanks to you, it wasn't. Well, I suppose that we'd better get back to the ship."

"The night," she said, "is young, and neither of us is senile."

They finished the brandy between them and, as he was sipping the last glass, Calver thought regretfully of the woman whose gift it had been—regretfully, but not too regretfully. After all, whatever had happened to her was merely one of the normal hazards of her profession. She would suffer a little indignity, a little discomfort, and that was all—and then, her usefulness at an end insofar as this sector of the Galaxy was concerned, would be returning to Earth or some other civilized planet.

Even so—it could have been good.

And how much, wondered, Calver, would he have told her? A man in love—or a man infatuated—will babble foolishly. But how much would there have been to tell? He had browsed through the log books covering past voyages of *Lorn Lady*, had been told by Maclean and the other officers much about the commercial side of the Eastern Circuit trade. He knew that large shipments of machinery were being made to Tharn—and that was a contravention of Federation law. He knew that the people of Grollor—who already had interplanetary rockets plying between the worlds of their own system—were importing manuals concerning the manufacture and operation of the Interstellar Drive. That was another crime by Federation standards.

"There is only one word for this conversation," said Arlen, breaking into his thoughts. "Scintillating."

"Sorry," he said. "I was thinking."

"Poor boy," she murmured. "Did Mummy take away his little platinum-haired doll?"

"Mummy did just that," he grinned.

"That's better. As long as you can see the funny side of things there's hope for you yet." She signalled

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to the waitress. "Oh, Sue, we seem to have finished Miss Verrill's excellent brandy. I know that you can't supply another bottle of the same—but have you any of that tiger's milk of yours?"

"We have, Mrs. Arlen. I'll bring it right away."

"That's a good girl, Sue." She turned to Calver. "It's a local liqueur. It's got a fancy name—*felis tigris*. Don't ask me how they get that striped effect, because I don't know. Just drink it and enjoy it."

They drank it and enjoyed it—but it did nothing to loosen Calver's tongue.

At last Arlen asked abruptly, "How do you like the *Forlorn Bitch*?"

"Which one do you mean?" he countered, grinning.

"The ship, of course."

"She's . . . a ship."

"I know that. But how do you like her?"

"She feeds well."

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

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

"Then why don't you go back where you came from?"

"You should know the answer to that question, Arlen. You were with the Commission yourself. I was

Chief Officer of one of their big ships, and by leaving them I insulted them. That's the way that they always look at it. I can never get back."

"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 (what should have been?) if . . . I'd always be seeing some big *Alpha* or *Beta* Class liner and thinking, *I could have been Master of her,*

»/••••" "If what?"

He said, "I like you, Arlen, but I'm damned if I'm going to do a psychological strip-tease just for your amusement."

She said, "I hate to have to admit it-but I like you." She paused, sipped her drink thoughtfully. She went on, "As you know very well, it's customary for the average spacewoman to have her steady from among the officers of whatever ships she's serving in. I'm no prude-but I've never been like that. Maclean tried hard when I first joined *Lorn Lady*, but never got any place. Now, as you've seen, he's well content with the cheap little trollops he finds in every port. Fender tried, too. The engineers and the radio men have made passes."

"So?"

"I'll be frank. Do you want me, Calver? If you do, I think that we should know a little more about each other's backgrounds before we start anything."

Calver looked at her. He thought, *Such an arrangement could take the keen edge off the loneliness for both of us. It can never replace what's been lost, but it could be . . . comforting. For her as well as for me.*

He said, "There's not much to tell. I was, as you know, in the Commission's service. I was Mate of one of the big *Beta* Class wagons. \ was married, fairly happily, with two children . . ."

"Go on," she told him gently.

"Oh, it's an old story. It's always happening to

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somebody. It's the sort of thing that always happens to somebody else-until it happens to *you*. Anyhow, I met *the* woman, the only possible woman, you know -she was a passenger from Caribbea to Port Austral. (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 well-paid sinecure, actually-in the firm of which he was president. What the hell does a spaceman know about the design and manufacture of personalized wrist radios?"

"Sweet Fanny Adams, I should imagine," said Arlen.

"How right you are. 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. Then the glamor began to fade . . ."

"Glamor has nothing to do with pretty uniforms," she told him.

"Perhaps not. But there's the other, more real glamor-the glamor of authority over men and machines. In a job in which I could have pulled my weight it might have been different. In a job where I was no more than the boss's pampered son-in-law . . ."

"You should have struck out for yourself."

"I should have. I realize that now. But there was so much that I wanted to be able to buy for Jane-and so much that I could never have afforded if I'd started again at the bottom in some worthwhile employment. Anyhow, as I said, the glamor began to

fade. And 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 to find me with a girl I'd 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. And now I'm here."

She said, "I'm rather sorry for her. I'm rather sorry for both of them."

"Thank you," he said. "And what about me?" "You're sorry enough for yourself," she told him. "Any sympathy from me would be superfluous." "If that's the way you look at it ..." "That's the way I look at it." "All right. Well, what's your story?" She shrugged. "Nothing much. Just that I've always been Calamity Jane, and always shall be ..." "Fair exchange," he insisted, "fair exchange." "All right, then. You know about the reputation I had when I was with the Commission; it always amazed me that they kept me in their employ. There are accident prone people to whom accidents happen -and there are accident prone people around whom accidents happen. I come in the latter category. But I thought that the jinx was licked at last. Like you, I met the only possible person during a voyage. I left the Commission's service to get married. We were very happy. And ..." "And?"

"As I said, my marriage was very happy. A drunken surface car driver smashed it. He got off without a scratch. So did I."

He said, acutely conscious of the inadequacy of the words, "I'm sorry."

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"So was I. So am I." She stared into her empty glass. "Pour me another drink, Calver, will you?" He obeyed. She went on, "You know, Calver, I like you. I think that I like you rather too much to see any-thing happen to you. I'm afraid that if we do start anything between us, the old Calamity Jane business will begin again ..."

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

"It was," she said. "It was." Again she was silent. She almost whispered, "But you've been warned. If you still want to go through with it ..."

"If you do," he said.

the people of Tharn, where *Lady Lorn* made its first call, are human, except for very minor differences. There is a greenish tinge to their complexions and the coloration of their hair is usually either blue or dark green. (There are, of course, other differences, but these are obvious only to the biologist.) Their women, however, are indubitably mammalian.

It was on Tharn that *Lorn Lady* discharged the parcel of such tools and instruments as would be of value to a people with only the beginnings of an industrial technology. There was, for example, a large consignment of magnetic compasses; these would be in great demand among the fishermen and seamen. There were such items as needles and scissors; and there were hammers, planes, chisels and saws. There were scientific text books for the Temple University.

It was on Tharn that *Lorn Lady* discharged these goods-and others-and on Tharn that she lay idle until the commencement of loading the morning following completion of discharge. So, after the evening

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meal, Calver and Jane Arlen went ashore together. The Mate and the Purser were already ashore-they did not ever, as Renault, Reaction Drive Engineer caustically remarked, waste one second of boozing or wenching time. Renault, aided by Bendix and Bren-tano, was having to stay on board to overhaul his propellant pumps. Old Doc Malone was playing chess with Captain Engels. Levine was in his cabin with his dog's brain amplifier, trying (but in vain) to find out if there were any practicing telepaths on the planet.

Calver and Arlen walked slowly from the primitive spaceport-no more than a field with a few ware-houses around its periphery-to the town. The short-est way lay over rough heathland, but it was

pleasant to walk after the weeks of Free Fall. The westering sun, bloated and ruddy, was behind them, and in the planless 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 softly, "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. Then- "But I'm a stranger here, Jane. Where do we spend our money? And on what?"

"We'll have a quiet evening in one of the taverns," she said. "The liquor here isn't at all bad; as you know, we're loading a fair consignment of it tomorrow . . . There's usually a musician or juggler or con-juror to amuse the customers. And 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 their breasts and most of their legs, and any small animals abroad would have been dogs and cats, not things like elongated, segmented tortoises. Even so, there must have been very similar displays of ambiguous-looking meat, of glowing fruit, of gleaming fish (gleaming *and* reeking), 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 her a bracelet of beaten silver, paying for it what seemed to be an absurdly small number of the square copper coins. The robed shop-keeper 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 flickering light. "He gave you quite a good discount on this . . ."

"One of the ones who likes us?" asked Calver. "I'd have thought that everybody would have liked us."

"Always the innocent abroad," she jeered. "When are you ever going to grow up, Derek? Anyhow, the shopkeepers are pleased to see us here. Naturally. 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 upon us as a source of new knowledge that will not run dry for centuries."

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"Well, then-who else is there?"

"The peasants, who have the typical peasant mentality, the distrust of any and all novelties. The land-owning noblemen who sense, and not altogether without justification, that we are ushering in the forces of evolution and revolution that will destroy them. . ."

"Aren't we taking a bit of a risk coming ashore here?"

She laughed. "This is a University town. The priesthood maintains a very efficient police force. If anybody were fool enough to harm any of us, the High Priest, personally, would see to it that he died very slowly. *Pour encourager les autres* . . ."

"Voltaire didn't say it, or mean it, in quite that way."

"Is Voltaire buying the drinks tonight? If he's not, he can shut up."

They paused outside the door of one of the taverns, looked up at the swinging sign, the sign that shone bravely silver in the light of the flaring gas jet. Arlen chuckled. "This is new. It wasn't here the last time that 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 stand us a 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, foolishly, that it came from pipes and cigars and cigarettes, then saw that it was eddying from the big open fireplace. Even so,

there was a distinct aroma of burning tobacco in the air. Puzzled (for smoking is a minor vice practiced

only by Earthmen and their descendants) he looked around, saw Maclean and Fender sitting at a table in the corner of the big room. A giggling girl, who was trying to smoke a cigarette and who was making a sorry job of it, was perched on the Purser's lap. The Mate, as usual after a sufficient intake of alcohol, was singing softly.

*Goodbye, I'll run to seek another sun Where I may find
There are worlds more kind than the ones left behind...*

Another girl stood beside him, trying 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 of these days ..."

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

Nobody was. Everybody present seemed to be worrying about one thing-the maximum intake of liquor in the minimum time. They were a rough crowd-most of them, obviously, seamen and fish-ermen; knee- or thigh-boots combined with clothing of dark blue seemed to be almost standard wear throughout the Galaxy for those who followed the sea. Most of them had girls of their own with them- and those who did not were not the type 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

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into a spirited conversation with the tough, grizzled seaman on her left. She did condescend, now and again, to translate some of his sallies.

"He's Master of a schooner," she said. "You may have noticed her as we came in, the quite large ship at the quay just below the bridge. He says that he'll sign me on as his cook any time that I want a change ..."

"I'd starve without you, Jane," said Calver. "In more ways than one."

He let his attention wander from the incomprehensible conversation, looked to the corner where Maclean and Fender were sitting, saw that they were getting along very well indeed with the two native girls. He felt smugly superior to them, then thought, *But I wonder what it would be like? There must be some difference . . . And that green skin, and the blue hair . . .*

He started as the door opened with a crash.

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

He glared around him, looking for somebody. He saw the two spacemen with their girls in the far corner. His mouth tightened and his yellow eyes gleamed dangerously. "Sayonee!" he called in a

voice of command. "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 run away and get lost ..."

The young man, his followers at his heels, 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 Fender. The Mate

matched him, glare for glare, his face flushed and angry under the carrot thatch. The girl, Sayonee, looked fright-ened, whispered something to Maclean, tried to slide off his lap. Maclean said, in English, "You're my woman for tonight. I've paid for you. I'm not giving you up to any damned planetlubber!"

Fender 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 in reply. "And if you're scared, get the hell out!"

The aristocrat said something. It must have been insulting. Maclean, obviously, knew what had been said-the spacefarer usually learns the curses of any strange language long before he is capable of carry-ing out a polite conversation in it. 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, and used them well-if he had been allowed to do so.

The nobleman's sword whipped out from his scab-

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bard, 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 glass-ware. From somewhere above there was the furi-ous, incessant clanger of a bell. Calver was on his feet, about to go to Maclean's help-although he "knew that the Mate was beyond help-when he re-membered Jane Arlen.

"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 unsheathed, and the blood on it gleamed scarlet in the flaring gaslight. His bullies had drawn long knives. One of them staggered as a flung bottle struck him on the temple. Another bottle shattered in mid-air 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 sea captain growled something that sounded like a curse. 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 fishermen and seamen 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

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brawl. This was a one-sided battle against soldiers, experienced and ruthless killers, intelligently led.

The swordsman was close now. The old captain shouted and jumped forward to meet him. He fell into a crouch, holding his knife for the deadly, up-ward thrust. The blade of the sword flickered harm-lessly over his left shoulder. Had he been fighting one man only he might well have won-but one of the retainers jumped him from behind, 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 seaman in the back. He brought it up again just in time to intercept and to deflect the vicious sword.

He heard Arlen scream.

He dared not look around, but from the corner of his eye he saw that two of the bullies had seized her, were dragging her towards the door. Hostage or vic-tim? He had no time to reason it out. He was

fighting for his life, and he was very conscious of the fact. He was fighting with a clumsy weapon, held in unskilled hands, against a finely balanced instrument of murder in the hands of a master. His body and head 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 bloodied face of his enemy, the twisted smile under the broken nose. He fell back farther, as though in terror. He hoped that the Tharnian would be in no hurry to follow, that he would elect to play a cat and

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mouse game, to finish his victim almost at leisure.

Calver thought, *I'm no swordsman, but I do know some-thing about ballistics . . .*

With all his strength he hurled the chair, followed it before it had reached its target. He saw the Tharnian, foolishly, bring up his sword to parry the heavy missile, saw the point of it drive through the thick wooden seat. Then the other man was down, and Calver was on top of him, his hands seeking the other's throat. But somebody was pulling at his shoulders, trying to drag him off his enemy. He tensed himself for the sharp agony of the blade in the back-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 uniforms of short black tunics over yellow trunks, who carried (and used) polished wooden clubs. He saw new-looking, shiny handcuffs being snapped on the wrists of those of the nobleman's bullies who were still standing.

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

"The party's over," she said with a sorry attempt at flippancy. "These are the University police. They'll see us back to the ship . . ."

"And Maclean?" he asked.

"Dead," she replied flatly. "But Fender'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 now handcuffed.

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

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

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

"I forgot that," he muttered.

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

That following day was a busy one. In spite of the events of the previous evening, in spite of the tragedy, the ship's work had to go on. There was cargo to load -casks of the local liquor, ingots of gold, the baled pelts of the great, richly-furred mountain bears. There was the inquiry held by Captain Engels into the death of his Chief Officer, the inquiry at which, in addition to Calver, Arlen and Fender, the High Priest was present.

The old Tharnian-he seemed more aged than Captain Engels himself, his green skin deeply wrinkled, his sparse hair faded to a pale yellow-was sorrowful.

He said, speaking in English, "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 Engels, "that my own officer was in part to blame for what happened."

"The girl was not Lanoga's property," said the

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priest. "She was free to go with whom she would. Lanoga's actions were aimed as much against the University as against your people."

"And Lanoga?" asked Calver.

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

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

"And so do I," said Jane Arlen. "If I am not re-quired any farther, I will see to the business of the next meal, Captain."

"You may go, Mrs. Arlen."

"And if I may be spared, sir," said Calver, "I have the stowage to see to."

"But of course. I forgot that you're the Mate now."

Calver and Jane left the Captain's day room, left the two old men who, although of different races, had so much in common, the two sad old men voicing their fears and regrets over a glass of wine.

Calver said, "I feel sorry for the old priest. If he's not careful, he'll bring his world tumbling about his ears. The way I see it, the Barons are just itching for an excuse to crush the University and all that it stands for . . ."

"He's no fool," Arlen told him, "and he's tougher than he looks. I think that he rather hopes that the Barons will march on the town. There are quite a few things you don't know, Derek. Now that you're Chief Officer, you'll be finding them out . . ."

"Such as?"

"It's not for me to tell you. I'm only the chief cook and bottle washer. But you'll find out."

They parted company then-Arlen proceeding to

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her own domain, Calver to see to details of the load-ing. His first task was a melancholy one-to make space for Maclean's body in one of the ship's deep-freeze chambers. It had been decided that he would not be buried on Tharn, in the soil of an alien planet, but in Space, as a spaceman should be.

Then there was a session of work at the Ralston, the ingenious instrument which was, in effect, a two-dimensional model of the ship mounted on gymbals, upon which shiftable weights represented stores, pro-pellant, personnel and cargo. After a few trials and errors he had the center of gravity where he wanted it for the next leg of the voyage-in theory, that is- and then busied himself, aided by little Brentano, Electronic Radio Officer and now Acting Second Mate, in ensuring that his calculations were carried out in practice.

What remained of the morning passed rapidly. When the stevedor's help ceased work for the midday meal, Galver was ready for his own lunch, as were the other officers, all of whom, in their separate de-partments, had been making all ready and secure for Space.

But in the messroom the table was not laid. In the galley the stove was cold, the pots and pans all hang-ing in their proper places with none in use. Calver thought that Arlen must be ill, perhaps suffering from some sort of delayed reaction to the previous night's events, hurried to her cabin. The bunk was neatly made and empty, however. Of Arlen there was no sign.

Calver reported to the Captain the absence of the Catering Officer.

Engels was worried. He said, "Do you think she

could have jumped ship? Such cases are not uncommon . . ." He looked sharply at Calver's face, remarked drily, "But I was forgetting, Mr. Calver. I'm sorry. She has no reason to desert, has she?"

"She has not," said Calver. "There must be some-thing seriously wrong, sir. I'll go into town straight away, start making inquiries . . ."

"Not so fast, Mr. Calver. We start making in-quiries here. Call all officers into the messroom. We will find out who saw Mrs. Arlen last, and in what circumstances."

Calver did as he was told. They sat around the table-the burly, swarthy Renault, the Rocket King; the gangling, balding Bendix, Chief (and only) In-terstellar Drive Engineer; the dark, compact and competent Brentano; little, weedy Levine, looking (as he always did) as though he had just been dragged away from his crystal ball; the monkish Doc Malone; pudgy Fender with his fat, sulky face. At the head of the table sat Captain Engels.

"Mr. Calver," he asked, "when did *you* see Mrs. Arlen last?"

"I exchanged a few words with her after we left your cabin this morning. I haven't seen her since."

"Mr. Renault?"

"Captain," said old Doc Malone, interrupting. "I think that I can throw some light on the matter. The last time that we were here Mrs. Arlen asked me to analyze some of the local fungi. I found that they were not only non-toxic, but quite delicious. She told me this morning that she was going out to gather some for our lunch ..."

"And where was she going to gather them?" de-manded Calver.

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"I'm not sure. But I think that she found the last lot in that little wood about a mile to the west of the landing field ..."

Calver jumped to his feet. "Sir," he said, "there's no point in wasting further time. With your permission ..." (and he made it plain that the ask-ing of permission was a mere formality) "... I shall go to the woods at once. Somebody had better come with me. She may have twisted her ankle, or may have been attacked by some wild animal ..."

"All right, then, Mr! Calver. But report to my cabin first."

"Sir, there's no time to waste ..."

"Report to my cabin, *now*." He paused, seemed to be making mental calculations. "And bring Mr. Ben-dix and Mr. Fender with you."

Impatient, gnawed by anxiety, Calver followed the Captain to his quarters. He, with Bendix and Fender, stood there while the old man unlocked the big, steel cabinet, opened the door to reveal the neatly-racked weapons. As he did so he was speaking softly, saying, "I understand your feelings, Mr. Calver; that's why I'm letting you go. But I can't strip the ship of all effective personnel. In a pinch, Brentano can be Acting Mate. And, if things blow up in our faces-as the High Priest said they might-Renault can get the ship up and in orbit, while Levine yells for assistance . . . But take an automatic each, with spare magazines ..."

Calver buckled belt and holster around his waist, took one of the heavy weapons from its rack and hefted it appreciatively, then tested the action. He rammed a clip of 10-mm cartridges into the butt, snapped back the slide to load the pistol, thumbed on

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the safety catch, holstered the gun. He filled his pockets with spare magazines. While he did so, he was thinking of what the Old Man had been saying -and his thoughts were not pleasant ones. The sprained ankle was still a possibility, but it was re-mote. And evil men were more to be feared than wild animals.

He hurried down the spiral stairway in the axial shaft, followed by the others. He walked hastily to-wards the little copse, as hastily as the roughness of the terrain would permit. And as he walked he stared at the hill on the horizon-the hill upon which stood the rugged, domineering pile of the castle.

"And that was all you found?" asked Captain Engels tiredly.

"That was all we found," said Calver. "Her basket, one shoe, the signs of a struggle ..." He said, almost as an afterthought, "There was no blood ..."

"Why should there have been?" asked Engels sharply. He added, more softly. "I appreciate your feelings, Mr. Calver. I know that you're all in favor of leading an armed assault upon the castle. But it would be futile. Oh, I know that it would be a case of modern automatic firearms against bows and arrows -but the people with the bows and arrows out-number the crew of this ship a hundredfold, and

they will be firing from behind stone battlements ..." With thin fingers he filled a pipe of polished porcelain, a pipe as old and fragile as himself, lit it with the glowing coil of the lighter that he pulled from its socket on his desk. He said, "I sent Levine into town with a message to the High Priest. He should be back at any time now."

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"The High Priest," said Calver bitterly. "What can he do?"

"Plenty," snapped the Captain. "This is his world. Furthermore, he is in a position to bargain ..."

"To bargain?" echoed Calver. Then- "Oh, I be-gin to see . . . This is all just a matter of filthy local politics, isn't it? That arrogant murderer Lanoga will be returned to his father intact-and in exchange we get Jane in like condition ..." A dreadful doubt as-sailed him. "I suppose that the High Priest will play?"

"That, Mr. Calver, can be decided only by him-self."

"Damn it all, sir, can't we force him? Can't we threaten to lift ship and juggle lateral drift so that we pass over the town? A tongue of incandescent ex-haust gases licking around his precious University would soon make him see reason!"

"Mr. Calver! Get it into your head that there's more at stake than the safety of one woman!"

"More politics!" sneered Calver. "More politics! Don't let's be nasty to the poor, dear aliens . . . Who knows? In ten thousand years' time they might be our allies against the wicked Federation ..."

"Mr. Calver!"

"I warn you, sir, that if you won't do it, I shall. The other officers will be with me. This won't be the first time that a Master has been relieved by his sub-ordinates."

"Perhaps not," replied Engels-and Calver was suddenly shocked by the strength that was an almost visible aura about the feeble old man. "Perhaps not, Mr. Calver. But it would be the last thing that you

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ever did. The old penalties for piracy and mutiny still exist ..."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. It was Fender-still armed, still wearing the belt with its holstered automatic with the air of a small boy forced, against his will, to participate in a game of Cowboys and Indians. It was Fender, who said, "His Wisdom is aboard to see you, sir." It was Fender who stood aside to let the High Priest pass.

The old Tharnian walked slowly into the room, faced Engels. He said, "Captain, this is a serious business."

"A masterly understatement!" flared Calver.

"Mr. Calver!" snapped the shipmaster. Then, "Please be seated, Your Wisdom."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Can I offer you refreshment?"

"Thank you, no. This matter is better discussed in absolute sobriety."

"You may stay, Mr. Calver," said Engels. "Sit down. And now, Your Wisdom, what can you tell us?"

"Little more than you already know. I have re-ceived a message from Baron Tarshedi to the effect that your woman officer will be returned unharmed if his son is returned in like condition. On the other hand-if the execution is carried out as planned your officer will be killed. Slowly."

"So you will return Lanoga," said Calver.

"I am afraid," said the priest, "that that is im-possible. " There is so much at stake, sir. Cannot you see that such a capitulation will weaken the power of the Temple and the University?"

"Damn your Temple and University!"

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"Mr. Cialver! Any further outbursts and I shall be obliged to order you to leave!"

"The woman," said the priest gently, "is your woman?"

"Yes."

"Then the anxiety is understandable. But, sir, you must try to understand too. You must try to understand that the future happiness and prosperity of this world are of far greater importance than the life of one individual ..."

"To you, perhaps!"

The High Priest ignored this, went on, "Even so, there are so many factors that must be weighed. Firstly, there is the inevitable loss of face if I accede to Tarshedi's demand. Secondly, there is the inevitable loss of face if I do not accede to his demand, if I allow it to become obvious that I can do nothing to save those under my protection. The time is ripe for what your people call a showdown. The time is ripe to smash the power of the first of the baronies ..."

"So you intend," said Engels quietly, "to assault the castle?"

"I so intend, Captain."

"This last cargo of ours should have built up your strength sufficiently ..."

"I think that it has, Captain."

"This last cargo . . .?" echoed Calver without comprehension.

"Yes, Mr. Calver. This last cargo. All is not ploughs that comes in cases stencilled *Agricultural Im-plements* ..."

"But, sir, Federation Law ..."

"We make our own laws on the Rim." Engels

turned to the priest again. "My officers will be willing to help, Your Wisdom."

"Your offer is appreciated, Captain-but I am safe in saying that my own men are better trained in the use of arms than your people. However ..." and he smiled slightly . . . "this gentleman has a personal interest ..."

Calver was already on his feet.

"When do we start?" he demanded. -

"There is no hurry," said the priest quietly. "The execution is not taking place today. Furthermore, in this matter you are displaying an understandable impetuosity. What, do you think, will be the fate of your woman when my forces breach the walls, break through the outer defenses? Will Tarshedi let himself be robbed of his revenge?"

"Then ..." In desperation Calver turned again to the Captain. "Damn it all, sir. We have to make this man agree to an exchange! It's the only way!"

"There are," said the priest softly, "other ways ..."

Calver was a spaceman and the solution of problems of spaceman'ship and astronautics was, to him, second nature. When it came to the problems of warfare and war on a planetary surface at that time he was obliged to admit his deep ignorance. Even so, he was amazed, and a little shocked, at the High Priest's mastery of the subject. A man of any god should be a man of peace. (But it is at times necessary, and for the highest possible motives, to fight.)

He walked with the priest into the town, and through the town to the University. They talked on the way-but not of the impending assault on the castle. Gently but persistently the High Priest drew him out, questioned him about the worlds that he had visited, the civilizations of Earth and her colonies, of the non-human cultures. The Tharnian was curious, too-although not offensively so-about the relationship existing between Calver and Jane Arlen. It was somehow a relief for Calver to be able to talk about it.

The University-it was, Calver realized, more like a fortress-stood on a rise to the east of the town, overlooking the broad river and, a few miles to the northward, the wide expanse of the sea. As they approached it, Calver looked up at the turrets standing to either side of the great gate, noticed the searchlights and the ugly, eager snouts of heavy machine guns. The guards who came to smart

attention were armed-but not armed as had been those guards who had broken up the tavern brawl. It was not polished wooden truncheons that they wore at their belts but vicious automatic pistols.

After he had acknowledged the salutes of his men, as he and Calver were walking across a cobbled courtyard, the High Priest said, "As you see, Mr. Calver, we are in a state of preparedness. If Baron Tarshedi should march upon the University . . ."

"I believe," said Calver slowly, "that you'd welcome it."

"I should. The barons have to go-and if they are the aggressors in any trouble *we* shall be all the more highly regarded by the people. And it is essential- you understand that, don't you?-that we retain our leadership by respect, not by force of arms . . ."

They passed through another gate, into another courtyard, a larger one.

Calver gaped. He stared at the light tanks, the mechanized field artillery, the rocket launchers on their half tracks. He ejaculated, "An arsenal!"

"Yes, Mr. Calver. An arsenal. Unluckily we have no flying machines yet. They are on order, of course, and the first of them should be delivered here by *Rimhound*, together with an instructor, in three weeks' time. But, you will appreciate, one of your heli-

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copters would be of great value to us tonight. Even so, some of my priests have been studying books on the history of aeronautics and one of them-although he could not possibly have had an emergency of this nature in mind-has done more than merely read the books . . . But come with me. We still have much to discuss, to plan."

Calver followed the old priest through a doorway, up a flight of stone stairs, into a large room. From the glazed window of it-even though the local glass was translucent rather than transparent-he was able to see the courtyard, the ranked vehicles of war. He found the sight of the massed weapons comforting and, after he was seated, kept glancing out at them.

There were others in the room-Tharnians, some of them in the uniform of black tunic and yellow trunks, some of them in priestly robes. There was a girl, too-a girl with impudent breasts and long, arrogant naked legs-a girl whose frightened face belied the careless bravery of her body. Calver recognized her. It was Sayonee, the woman who had been with Maclean when he had been murdered.

The High Priest said, "I shall not bother to introduce you. Very few of those here understand spoken English-although most of them have a grasp of the written language. And Sayonee, I think, you already know."

"He was there," said the girl sullenly. "He was there when Mac was killed."

"And you will help our friend to rescue his woman," said the priest.

"If you say so, Your Wisdom. But it will not bring my man back."

The High Priest ignored her, went on talking to Calver. "These," he said, "are my officers, who will

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lead tonight's assault on the castle. In spite of all our reading and all our drills we can think of nothing better than a simple, frontal assault. We have the firepower, and we shall use it. We shall batter down the defenses, force an entry and smash opposition as we meet it."

He paused. "Meanwhile, while all this is going on we have to consider what thoughts will be passing through Tarshedi's mind. If it is obvious to him from the beginning that there is no hope, then it is fairly certain that he will take his revenge on the girl as soon as possible. (Of course, there is another possibility-he may barter her safety for his own. But Tarshedi, to give him his due, has never cared much for the safety of his own person, or the safety of any other person. With the exception, of course, of his pampered pup.) So this is what I have decided. Our first attack will be a diversion only. We shall refrain from showing the full strength of our hand. Tarshedi will think himself secure behind his stone walls. Meanwhile you, Calver, will drop into the fortress, taking Sayonee with you as a guide. You will rescue your woman. Then, when you are out and clear, the real assault will begin."

These, thought Calver, *are an incredibly simple people*. He demanded, "And how do I get into the

fortress? Do I fly?"

"Yes," said the priest.

"But you said that you had imported no aircraft yet."

"I said that we had imported books on the subject. Totesu!"

"Yes, Your Wisdom?" said one of the scholarly men.

"Totesu, tell Mr. Calver what you have achieved."

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"Your people," said the scholar, "obsessed by idea of heavier than air flight. Why? Inefficient. Power of engine used to keep machine airborne. Yet, on your world, beginnings of lighter than air flight. First of all Montgolfier, then balloonists who used gas and not hot air, then, at last, your Count Zeppelin. We, here, have gas. Can make balloons. So far, no proper en-gine, but ..."

"A balloon?" asked Calver.

"Yes. Balloon. Hold four people and plenty ballast. Take you, me, this woman to castle. Lift you, me, two women away from castle ..."

"It could be done ..." whispered Calver.

"It can be done," said the High Priest. "There is much to be worked out-some sort of a timetable, signals. Meanwhile, I suggest that you familiarize yourself with Totesu's contraption." He looked dis-tastefully at Sayonee. "And take the girl with you."

The sun was down when the long column clanked and rumbled through the gates of the University, down the slope and into the streets of the town. The beams of headlights were reflected from armor and armament, from grinding track and swiveling turret -and from the pale faces of the townspeople who, alarmed by the noise, had come out, were standing in the doorways of their houses to watch. There was a cheer from a group of men outside the *Spaceship* tav-ern-a cheer that was drowned by the snarling ma-chines. But, on the whole, the crowd, although not hostile, was not enthusiastic. Calver remembered something he had read about one of the old wars on Earth, one of those futile conflicts that had been fought, in somebody else's country, between two great powers each of whom was convinced of its own

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essential Tightness. A peasant had been asked what he thought about it. He had replied, bitterly, "What difference does it make to a blade of grass if it is eaten by a horse or a cow?"

But who ruled Tharn was no concern of Calver's. All that concerned him was Jane Arlen's safety-and her safety depended upon such a fantastic, flimsy de-vice. He felt between his fingers the bundled fabric upon which he was sitting, looked at the clumsy gas cylinders from which that same fabric would be in-flated, at the pile of bags of sand ballast. He looked at his companions-at the young priest, Totesu, whose face wore the expression of a small boy with his first working model rocketship, at Sayonee, who was obviously terrified by the growling, jolting monster in which she rode. A little fear was justified, Calver thought. What if the motion of the halftrack should chafe holes in the balloon fabric?

They were clear of the town now, striking out across the heathland. Away to his right Calver could see the spaceport, could see the floodlit, silvery tower of *Lorn Lady*. He knew that his shipmates would all be in the control room, would be watching through the big mounted binoculars. He knew, too, that most of them would be wishing that they were with him- but Captain Engels had refused to allow his ship's complement to be depleted any further. *Lorn Lady* was secured for space and, at a pinch, could blast off without her Chief Officer or Catering Officer. And Engels, fanatically loyal to his own world, would blast off without hesitation-although not without regret.

They were striking out across the heathland, pitching and rolling over the rough, uneven surface,

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their headlamps probing the night like the questing antennae of great insects. Ahead of them was the cas-tle, the grim bulk of it in silhouette against the glow-ing arc of the westering Galactic lens. Ahead of them was the castle-and from turrets and battlements glowed the ruddy watchfires. *The watchfires,*

thought Calver. *The watchfires, and the cauldrons of molten lead and boiling oil. . . Every time that anybody uses atomic weapons against some primitive and unpleasant race there's a squeal goes up to High Heaven from the humanitarians-but what's the difference between being fried in oil and fried by hard radiation?*

He realized that Totesu was speaking, his voice barely audible over the growl of the motor. He said, "What?"

"Wind just right," said the priest. "Good." He grinned broadly, his teeth startlingly white in the chance beam of another vehicle's headlight. "First use of flying machine in Tharn warfare."

"At least," said Calver, "you know what you're doing. Which is more than the Wright brothers did ..."

"No understand."

"Skip it."

"Still no understand."

"It's cold," complained the girl.

"If you put some clothes over that shapely carcass of yours you wouldn't feel the cold," said Calver roughly.

Sayonee glared at him, hugging herself. Her long legs, under the short skirt, glowed greenly luminous. She repeated, "It's cold."

"Oh, all right."

Calver took off his jacket-first of all transferring

the spare clips for his automatic to his trousers pockets. He draped it over Sayonee's slim shoulders -and felt the chill wind striking through the thin fabric of his shirt. He looked at the girl with distaste. He thought, *This is all your fault. Because of you, how many men died last night? And how many men will die to-night?* He stared at the pale green oval of her face, said, "Is this the face that launched a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Ilium?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Skip it," he said, thinking that the use of those two words was becoming a habit.

But Jane's is the face that's launched the thousand ships, he thought. (And it seemed, briefly, that there were phantom masts and square sails in silhouette against the sky over the lurching war vehicles, that the roll-ing heathland was Homer's wine dark sea.) He thought, playing with ideas to try to dispel his fears, *But I'm no Menelaus. And Tarshedi's no Paris, and that ugly castle of his ts no Troy . . .*

He thought, *Even so, there's truth in all the old stories. Whenever there's bloodshed and upheaval there're always women involved somewhere, somehow. Helen . . . Cleopatra . . . What historian was it who deplored the disproportionate influence that a few square inches of mucous membrane have always had upon the course of human history?*

"Balloons used in warfare on your world," said Totesu, making light conversation. "Siege of Venice. Montgolfier balloons. Dropped bombs."

"Really?"

"Airships used, too. In First World War. Zep-pelins. Dropped bombs."

"Fantastic."

"Pity tonight no bombs." The priest waved his

hand at the column of tanks and artillery ahead of them and behind them. "All this-useless. Cost too much. Few bombs-much better. Cost less."

"You're wasted in the priesthood," Calver told him.

"No. Not waste. As say in your religious books- Church Militant."

"Who," demanded Calver, "will rid me of this tur-bulent priest?"

"No understand."

"Just a quotation."

The castle was closer now and the vehicles were climbing the hill upon which it stood. The castle was closer and, drifting down against the wind, came the thin high notes of a trumpet, the rattle of kettle drums. The castle was closer, towering black and seemingly impregnable against the dark sky, sullenly contemptuous of the mobile armor that was advancing against it. And Calver, suddenly, thought again of the flimsy affair of fabric and wickerwork in which he and his two companions would ride, the frail contraption that, according to its pilot, was more deadly a weapon than the land ironclads. Their half track, the specialized vehicle with the winch and the gas cylinders, halted, as did its next astern. The rest of the squadron rumbled by, ignoring them. Totesu clambered out, dropped to the ground, followed by Calver and the girl. The priest began giving rapid orders to the men from the troop carrier.

Working with smooth efficiency, they pulled the balloon fabric from the half track and, with it, the sections of basketwork that fitted together to make the car. Flexible pipes were run from the gas cylinders to the balloon. Calver heard a faint hissing noise, saw a gray mound growing upon the dark ground, a gray mound that heaved and stirred as though alive. He watched the clumsy, formless bulk struggling to lift, watched its wrinkled skin smoothing out, watched it swell to a dull-gleaming rotundity. It was clear of the ground now, held only by the mooring lines. It was well clear of the ground, straining against its moorings, seemingly resentful of

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the burden of the basket that men were securing beneath it.

Calver stood with Sayonee, watching. He was rather grateful for her company. She knew as little about what was being done as he did and could hardly distrust the contraption more than he did. In a way, she was lucky. She took such things on trust. Whereas he, Calver, whilst not knowing enough at the same time knew too much.

"Ready," said Totesu.

"If you say so," said Calver.

"I can't!" cried Sayonee suddenly. "I can't go in that thing. It's . . . It's not safe!"

"Be quiet," said Calver roughly.

He picked the girl up, threw her into the basket, followed her. Totesu was close behind him, saying, "All right. Everything good. All right." The priest shouted an order to those on the ground and suddenly the dark heathland, the black shapes of the two vehicles and the bright beams of the headlights were far below them, were diminishing with every passing second.

Calver gulped, trying to conquer his queasiness. He heard Sayonee being noisily sick over the side of the basket. He could sympathize with her. This was so different from a powered ascent in aircraft or spacecraft; the unsteady swaying of the basket was worse than Free Fall to a first tripper.

To occupy his mind, he pulled his torch from his belt, began to make an inventory of the car's contents. There were the bags of ballast. There was the line depending from the gasbag that controlled the valve and the other, heavier line that was the ripcord. There was yet another line that ran from the car

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down to its own reel in the truck, a line that, at intervals, passed through rings spliced into the cable. It was a signalling device and Calver did not trust it. One pull meant, "Pay out"; two pulls-"Stop paying out"; three pulls-"Heave in." But if the line should foul it did not much matter. He had arranged for flashes from his electric torch to hold the same meaning.

"Good," said the priest happily.

"Mphm," grunted Calver noncommittally.

"I . . . I feel sick . . ." complained the girl.

"Like seasick," explained Totesu. "Soon better."

"But I'm *always* seasick . . ."

Calver looked down from the basket-and as he watched, the battle was opened. He could see the flashes from the guns, could hear the thud and rattle of heavy and light weapons. He hoped that the gunners were following the High Priest's orders-the direction of the fire of the light automatics against the castle walls, where it could do no possible damage; the use of reduced charges and practice ammunition in field pieces; the holding of rocket fire until the order was given for the real assault. Mean-while, it was spectacular enough-the column of vehicles, headlights blazing, roaring around the castle just out of bowshot, pouring in streams of prettily-colored tracer. It reminded him of films he had seen of the old days of the American West-the mounted Redskins riding in a circle around the encampment of the pioneers-and seemed no more deadly than the cinematic make-believe.

And Tarshedi's boys, he thought, will no more think of looking up than those old pioneers would have done . . .

The castle was almost below them now. Calver,

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turning His attention back to the interior of the car, saw Totesu jerk the signal line twice, saw him standing there, the line in his hand, waiting. Abruptly the worried frown was erased from his face. "Good," he said. "Good."

With his other hand he reached for the valve cord, pulled it gently. There was the faintest sigh of escaping gas and the balloon began to drop, began to sag down to the center of the dark rectangle that was the flat roof of the main building of the castle. There would be nobody there, thought Calver hopefully. There would be nobody there. They would all be on the battlements, shooting off their arrows and dying for the opportunity to use their boiling oil and molten lead. They would be thinking, optimistically, that the new-fangled weapons that the High Priest had imported were fine for making a noise, but for little else . . .

And what happens, he wondered, when our cable falls across the battlements? It's bound to be noticed . . . Or is the tower high enough to carry it clear? Even so, there's a considerable catenary . . .

"Jump," Totesu was saying urgently. "Jump!"

Calver checked his equipment-the pistol, the spare clips of ammunition, the torch. Not without misgivings he made the end of the line that he would carry down with him fast to his belt. He clambered on to the rim of the basket, gripping the rigging firmly as his foothold shifted and tilted. He looked down, saw that the flickering light of the fires on the battlements was being reflected from the underbelly of the balloon, was falling upon a reasonably level surface, only a few feet below him. He was grateful for the light-and frightened by it. There was, perhaps, lit-

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tie likelihood that any of the defenders would look behind him, would see the ruddily-illuminated shape hanging over the central keep. But if one did, his action would be followed almost immediately by a shower of arrows, and the means of escape for Arlen and himself would be destroyed.

But, he thought, the main thing is that I've got here. I've got here, and I've a pistol and ample ammunition, and Arlen and I should be able to hold out until the priests take the castle . . .

"Jump!" Totesu was urging. "Jump!"

Calver jumped.

He fell more lightly than he had anticipated; the balloon, freed from his weight, surged upwards, taking up the slack of the line that he carried. He was dragged to the parapet, almost carried over it, throwing both arms around a chimney to halt his uncontrolled rush. He recovered his breath at last, was able with one hand to cast off the hitch about his belt, to throw another hitch of the mooring line around the stone flue. He looked up, saw that the red-gleaming shape (he thought, *There's far too much light from those fires . . .*) was descending steadily. Then he heard the noise of a scuffle in the basket, heard Sayonee cry out in pain and anger. He saw her figure appear over the edge of the car, saw her descending jerkily to the roof -an undignified flurry of arms and legs-as Totesu lowered her at a rope's end.

Quickly he released her.

"Which way?" he demanded. "Which way?"

"I'll scream," she snarled. "I'll scream, and then. . ."-

"You'll not scream," he said coldly. He pushed the muzzle of his pistol against her, feeling the soft

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flesh give beneath it. "You'll not scream. You know what this is for. If you give any trouble, I'll use it."

"You . . . would . . ." she whispered, with a cer-tain wonderment. Then, "That turret . . . There's a stairway. Follow it down, all the way down, and you come to the dungeon . . ."

He said, "You are leading the way."

"But I don't want to. Not any longer. At First I thought that I was avenging Mac-but now I see that it's wrong to do so. It's you spacepeople who're ruining this world, who're turning priest against noble and both of them against the people. Until you came . . ."

He put his free hand on her shoulder, turned her so that her back was towards him. He felt the fore-sight of his pistol graze her skin as he did so. He pushed the muzzle into her back, said, "Lead the way."

"But. . .It's dark. . ."

With his left hand he pulled his torch from his belt, adjusted the control so that it threw the feeblest of beams. He switched on, let the pool of faint light fall before her feet.

"Lead the way," he said again.

She led the way.

She led the way into the little turret, to the stone spiral stairway that wound down, and down, and down. Calver was reminded of the spiral stairway in *Lorn Lady's* axial shaft and, with his gift for remem-bering odd things at odd times, recalled how filthy he had thought it when he first joined the ship. But, in spite of the odd cigarette ends and scraps of waste paper, it was a model of cleanliness compared with

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this noisome corkscrew. The people of the town had seemed to be reasonably civilized in their sanitation; it was obvious that the people of the castle were not.

Down they went, and down, the feeble glow of the torch their only light, the noise of the battle (still the mock battle? Calver wondered) muffled by the thickness of the stone walls. Down they went, and down-until at last they could go no farther. Sayonee fumbled with the latch of the heavy door ahead of her, muttering to herself, spitting a curse as Calver prodded her with his pistol. At last the door swung open. There was light beyond it, yellow light, the flickering illumination of crude, smoking oil lamps set on shelves on the rough stone walls of the pas-sageway. At the end of the passage there was another door.

Ignoring the gun, Sayonee turned. There was fear on her face, fear and horror. She asked, pleadingly, "Must I come any farther? I'll wait for you here. I promise that I will. I promise . . ."

"Go on," said Calver, motioning with the pistol.

"But I promise. I promise. Lanoga made me come down here once. He made me watch what they did to a woman-one of the castle wenches-who'd been unfaithful to his father . . . Please let me wait here . . . Please . . ."

Galver said coldly, "A bullet in the guts is more painful than the most painful memory. Lead the way."

"But . . ."

With his free hand he slapped her viciously, "*Lead the way!*"

She sobbed as she turned from him, her slim shoulders drooping. She dragged herself towards the

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door at the far end of the passage, opened it. Her head hanging low, she passed through it. Calver fol-lowed. The room beyond the door was large and, like the approach to it, was lit with oil lamps-and by the ruddy glow of a brazier from which the handles of . . . of implements protruded. There was the smell of blood, and of sweat, of fear and of agony. Against one wall there was a thing like a narrow,

spiked bed. Against another wall there was hanging a pallid . . . something-a something that still writhed feebly in its chains, that was mewling weakly.

Nausea filled Calver's throat and a dreadful fear almost stopped his heart. He started to run towards what had once been a woman-then realized that the skin, where it was not burned, was not blood-covered, was green. But he did not stop. He approached the thing and, when he was close enough to be sure that he would not miss, pulled the trigger of his auto-matic.

When the echoes of the shot had died away the mewling had stopped.

Calver turned back, caught Sayonee by the shoulders, shaking her. The girl was dumb with fear, with horror, at first could only stare past him with wide, blank eyes at the dreadfully dead woman. She began to moan a little as he continued his rough treatment -then turned away sharply.

"Sayonee," he almost shouted.-"Sayonee! Where is she? Where's Arlen?"

"The cells," she muttered. "The cells/Through that other door ..."

He left her standing there, ran for the door to which she had pointed. It opened easily enough. Beyond it was a long corridor, once again oil-lit, with

rows of stout doors on either side, each one of which had a heavily barred opening in its upper part.

"Arlen!" he shouted. "Arlen!"

He was answered by a chorus the like of which he never wished to hear again-a cacophony of screams and animal howlings.

"Arlen!" he shouted again. "Arlen!"

He didn't hear her answer-but he saw her hand -slim, white-extended through the bars, beckoning him. He ran towards her, saw her face behind the grill. Still looking at her, still trying to make himself heard above the uproar being made by the other prisoners, still trying to hear her, he fumbled with the door. He realized that it was (as it had to be in this place) locked. He shouted, "Stand back and away! I'll have to blow this open!"

This time the noise of the pistol shot was almost inaudible, was drowned by the tumult from the other cells. Calver pushed the door, almost fell through it, found himself in Arlen's arms. He wanted to stand back, wanted to look at her, wanted to assure himself that she was unhurt-but it was some time before he was able to do so. It was as well that he was able to break away from her at last, able to pull her out of the noisome cell. He saw, in time, the brutish fellow who was hurrying along the passageway with a cudgel in his hand, a bunch of keys dangling at his belt. He saw him in time to bring his pistol up and to snap off two hasty shots-one of them at the man as he was advancing, the other as he was running in full retreat.

Both of them missed.

And it was very shortly after that the great bell, somewhere above, broke into clangorous life.

They found Sayonee standing where Galver had left her, still seemingly dazed. Calver let go of Arlen, grabbed the Thamian girl, pushed her roughly to-, ward the door to the corridor to the turret stairway, sent Arlen stumbling after her before she was able to look at the dead woman, at what had been done to her. Something whirred past his ear, something vicious and deadly, something that fetched up with a crack and a clatter against the farther stone wall.

Calver turned, saw the bowmen standing in the entrance to the cell corridor, shooting from the doorway. He raised his pistol fast-and yet, it seemed to him, with slow deliberation. He had time to think, to count, before he pulled the trigger. *Two from eight leaves six*, . . . He fired again. And again.

He realized that Arlen was beside him.

He said, trying to jest, "Get up them stairs!"

She said, "But that stupid girl. She says it's dark."

"Then take my torch. And hurry. I'll be close behind you."

Again he fired, at an incautiously exposed head, then ejected the spent clip. His hand went down to his pocket for a fresh one, found only emptiness. He remembered his descent from the balloon to the roof, his involuntary gymnastics. So he was out of ammunition. But it didn't matter; the enemy could not know that and the pursuit would be made with caution.

He walked backward, carefully, the menacing but useless pistol held before him. He hit the wall a couple of feet to his left of the doorway, stepped sidewise until he was in the opening, backed through it. He shut the door, sorry that there was no means of bolt-

ing or otherwise securing it.

He ran to the doorway to the turret stairs, ran through it. He slammed the door behind him-then thought that he should, perhaps, have left it open. He could hear the footsteps of the women above his head, but the curvature of the stairway cut off the light of the torch that Arlen was using. But it was of no real importance. A spaceman, he was trained at working by feel, in pitch darkness.

He started confidently up the stairs.

He slipped on something, on some nameless filth, and fell heavily. For what seemed a long time, too long a time, he could only crouch there where he had fallen, waiting for the pain in his side to ease. He heard noisy feet in the corridor, heard voices. He saw the dim, growing light as the door started to open slowly, cautiously. Groaning, he staggered erect, drove himself to the ascent of the stone stairs.

Light suddenly flooded the stairway, reflected from the walls. The others must have taken a lamp from one of the shelves, were bringing it with them. As yet, the direct source of the illumination was hidden from him-but unless he hurried this state of affairs would not last for long.

He tried to hurry-and each step was like a knife driven in deep just below his heart. He tried to hurry, and he did hurry-but haltingly, lamely-and the light around him grew brighter and the voices of his pursuers louder.

He tried to console himself with the thought that bows and arrows would not be effective weapons in this locality-and knew that the Tharnians would have swords or knives, whilst he had nothing.

Not even a chair . . . he thought bitterly.

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He drove himself up the stairs, forcing his legs into a steady rhythm, ignoring the pain in his injured side. He climbed, gasping for breath, staggering, falling against the stone walls, bruising himself more with every impact. Above the roaring in his ears he could hear the shouts of the soldiery, imagined that there was a note of triumph in their voices. But of course, there would be; they would have found the pistol that he had dropped, would have realized that he was weaponless.

He wondered if he should take one of the side doors, leave the stairway for one of the floors or galleries of the tower. But he still retained the ability to think logically, decided against it. The Tharnians could not possibly know of the waiting balloon, would think that once he was on the roof they would have him-and the women-at their mercy, would be able to drive them to the parapet, to the sheer drop to the cobblestones below.

He hoped that Jane would have the sense to tell Totesu to cast off the balloon before it was too late. It was too risky for the others to wait for him now, whether or not he succeeded in reaching the roof before the soldiery. A flight of arrows, however hastily directed, and the balloon would be useless.

Again he fell-and this time he didn't get up.

He was too tired and his side was hurting too badly. He half-closed his eyes against the glare as the glaring oil lamp was carried around the last bend below him, saw, through slitted lids the advancing soldiers, the triumph on their faces, the short swords that they held in their hands.

So I've run to the edge of night, he thought, and soon I shall be over the edge . . .

He saw the men hesitate, start to fall back.

In the confined space the deadly chatter of the machine pistol was deafening. He looked around, and by the flickering light of the dropped lamp he saw Jane, her face set and hard, the vicious, smoking weapon in her hands. She fired one last short burst and the light flared-and with it the man who had carried it.

There was a steady light then, the light of his torch, and Jane, holding it, was kneeling beside him, "Derek," she was saying, "Derek. What's wrong? Are you wounded?"

"Just a fall," he said tiredly. "One or two ribs cracked, perhaps ..." He began to recover. "Where did you get the gun?"

"From your pilot, that aeronautical priest. *He* wouldn't come. He thinks that the only civilized way of making war is to drop bombs on people . . . ;"

"But you came ..."

"But of course. Now, if you can manage the rest of these stairs, the carriage waits, my lord."

With Jane supporting him, Calver managed the last of the stairs up to the roof of the tower. The balloon was still there, hanging with its basket just clear of the flags. Totesu was having a heated argument with Sayonee about something-about what, Calver neither knew nor cared.

He ignored the balloon at first, walked unsteadily to the parapet, looked out and down. The High Priest's motorized column was still circling the castle, still pouring in an ineffectual fire. But the rate of fire had slackened. Ammunition was not too plentiful-and it would all be needed for the real assault. Meanwhile, the apparent loss of enthusiasm on the part of the

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attackers was all to the good. It would lull the defenders into a state of false security.

Arlen said, "There's somebody else coming up those stairs. It's time that we weren't here."

"All right," said Calver. He raised his voice. "Totesu! We're coming aboard!"

"Ready. Always ready." *

He and the girl walked back to where the basket was suspended. His foot struck against something small, something that rang metallically. *One of the magazines*, he thought. *It's not much good finding it now.*

Jane clambered into the basket. The balloon dropped, with her added weight, until the car was touching the flags of the roof. Calver tried to follow, found that stiffness was setting in around his bruises. Jane cursed him softly and, aided by Totesu, pulled him in over the wickerwork rim.

There was a growing light in the turret doorway. The priest saw it, began to make impatient noises, began to throw out the bags of ballast. Jane helped him. Calver asked, "Where's your pistol? A couple of bursts will keep them down."

The girl answered, "I . . . I thought that you had picked it up and brought it . . . It must still be there. . ."

"Ballast," grunted the priest. "Finish. No lift."

Calver found his torch, flashed it around the interior of the car. Inadvertently he held the beam for a second on Sayonee. She cringed away from it, whispering, "No. Please. No. Not me."

"I'm tempted," said Calver.

There was a spare magazine for Totesu's lost weapon. He threw it out. There was his uniform jacket, that Sayonee had again draped around her

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shoulders. He pulled it from her, dropped it overside. There was the flare pistol-but that would be needed. It would be needed-but only one cartridge. There were six in the carton-but why waste them?

The light in the turret door was bright now, the voices loud. There was a certain reluctance on the part of the owners of the voices to show themselves, but that was understandable. However, sooner or later they would pluck up courage and charge upon the helpless balloon.

Hydrogen, thought Calver, *is a light gas. It rises. So, if there're any leaks in the fabric of the gasbag, as there must be (unless the sky pilot's calculations were all to buggery, which is a possibility) the gas will be well clear of the*

basket . . . But what about a mixture of hydrogen and the atmospheric oxygen?

He broke the fat pistol, inserted a thick cartridge into the breech. He closed the gun with a snap, drew back the hammer. As he did so, the light in the turret was extinguished. He thought, *So they're going to come creeping out under cover of darkness . . .* He aimed, fired. There was a scream as the incandescent flare found its target and Calver saw a man rolling inside the doorway, his chest a mass of red flame. Calver hesitated before reloading-then remembered the woman whom he, mercifully, had shot. He fired again-and a screaming wretch, his clothing ablaze, flung himself over the parapet.

Totesu cried out in pain, clutching his shoulder. By the light of the flares Calver saw that the priest had been hit by an arrow, realized that the archers on the outer battlements now had the tower-and the balloon-under fire. He sighed. There was only one thing for him to do. Perhaps, with luck, he would

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still be here, would still be alive and kicking, when the defenses crumbled before the real assault and the priestly armor swept into the fortress. He said to Jane, "Take this pistol. As soon as you're up and clear, fire one flare . . ."

"What are you doing?"

He said, "What else is there to do?"

He got one leg over the rim of the basket, heard Totesu cry out again. He heard Jane call, "Derek, stop! Look!"

Calver looked. The priest was dead; of that there could be no doubt. No man can take an arrow through the eye and live. Calver scrambled back into the basket. He knew that there was no time for senti-ment, but he felt strangely guilty as he helped the two women to tumble the body of the young man- the man who was going to revolutionize Tharnian warfare and who had been killed by one of the primitive weapons he despised-out of the car. The balloon lifted suddenly, springing aloft on the end of its cable, rising above and clear of the driving storm of arrows.

Calver pointed the flare pistol downwards, fired. Almost at once, it seemed, there was a new note in the thunder of the mobile artillery below them-a deeper, more deadly note. The streams of tracer were sweeping the battlements, no longer expending themselves harmlessly on the castle walls. And the rocket launchers were bursting into action-and even at their altitude those in the balloon could hear the roar of the explosions, the crash of falling masonry.

The beams of the headlights white in the smoke and dust showed the High Priest's armor advancing,

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crawling over the rubble, probing every possible shelter with the fire from the light automatic weap-ons. The balloonists could see the milling men and machines in the courtyard around the central tower -until, after only a short time, there were no more men.

Sickened, Calver wondered about the ethics of sell-ing modern arms to these people-then remembered what he had seen and what he had been obliged to do in the castle dungeon.

He went to the signal cord, gave it three sharp jerks. It was slack and unresponsive in his hand. He tried to find his torch to give the light signal, re-alized that it must have been dumped during the at-tempts to lighten the balloon. He thought of valving gas, came to the conclusion that, should he do so, the aircraft would fall again on or in the neighborhood of the tower-and the tower (there must have been wood, somewhere, in its construction) was now burn-ing.

But it didn't matter. The men at the winch would have a rush of brains to the head sooner or later and reel the balloon in. He sat with Arlen on the floor of the basket, made no objection when Sayonee, seeking warmth, huddled against his other side.

And he went to sleep.

thk following morning, before daybreak, *Lorn Lady* lifted from Tharn.

When Calver and Jane Arlen returned on board, delivered to the ramp of one of the triumphant tanks, they found the ship secured for Space, ready to blast off at a second's notice. Old Captain Engels had greeted them at the airlock, had allowed a momen-tary warmth to dispel his usual coldness. He had said, briefly, "I'm glad," and then, with a swift re-turn to his old manner, "Go to your quarters, Mr. Calver, and remain there until sent for."

Calver felt a sudden chill. Was his mutinous out-burst of the previous day being remembered, being held against him? He realized that he knew little of the shipmaster's psychology, knew only that it was a complex one.

"But, sir..."

"Go to your cabin, Mr. Calver. I think that the old girl is capable of clambering upstairs this once without her Chief Officer to hold her hand."

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"But sir, I'm perfectly fit."

"You don't look it. You look all in. I'll have Doc Malone look you over before we raise ship."

"But sir..."

"Go to your cabin!"

Calver went.

He tried to climb, unassisted, up the spiral stair-case in the axial shaft from the airlock to the officers' flat. Then he was remembering that other spiral staircase, the one in the tunnel--and with the memo-ries the numbness left him and all the pain of his bruised side came back. Jane supported him, tried to assist him, then stood to one side as Brentano and the Purser, sent down by the Captain, took over. He was practically carried to his cabin, let himself col-lapse thankfully onto the bunk. He was dimly con-scious of old Doc Malone's probing fingers, of his voice saying, "Nothing broken. He'll be as good as new once we're in Free Fall. But you'd better stay with him during blast-off, Arlen."

He heard her reply, "I already had every intention of so doing."

It was strange for him to ride the rockets to the sky as a passenger, with Jane beside him--strange, but not unpleasant. Even so, it felt . . . *wrong*. His place was in Control, sitting in the co-pilot's chair, ready to take over in a split second should anything happen to the Master himself. (And Engels was so very old, so very fragile.) Brentano was keen, and efficient- but Brentano was an Electronic Radio Officer, had no training in ship handling . . .

"What are you grinning at?" Jane had demanded, speaking with difficulty as the acceleration tended to squeeze the air from her lungs.

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"Already," he had told her, "I'm beginning to think like a Chief Officer again. Already I have an acute attack of Mately indispensability . . ."

"As far as I'm concerned," she had whispered, "You *are* indispensable . . ."

They heard the rockets give a last cough, heard the whining of the big gyroscope as *Lorn Lady* swung about her short axis, as she was lined up for the sun about which revolved Grollor. They felt the weight-lessness of Free Fall, tensed themselves for the short burst of acceleration that would put them on course, that would send them falling down the long trajec-tory. It came-but the expected dizziness, the loss of temporal orientation following upon the activation of the Mannschenn Drive, did not come.

Calver started to fumble with the straps holding him to the bunk.

He said, "There's something wrong. I'd better get up to Control."

The door opened. Captain Engels stood there. He said, "Mr. Calver, I fear that your first duty as Chief Officer will be a melancholy one. Take Mr. Brentano and Mr. Fender with you and bring poor Maclean's body to the airlock."

Calver understood, then. The burial could not take place once the interstellar drive was in operation. Changing the mass of a ship during temporal pre-session can-and will-have catastrophic consequences.

He saw that the Acting Second Mate and the Purser were standing behind the Captain. He led them to the deep-freeze chambers, watched as they slid Maclean's shrouded body from its temporary icy tomb. The frost crystals on the sheet that covered

him sparkled in the glare of the lamps, reminded him of the stars on the ornate cap badge that the dead man had always worn.

He led them to the axial shaft, to the spiral stair-way. It would have been faster to have made the passage of the shaft the way that it always was made in Free Fall—a swift, swimming motion from one end to the other. It would have been faster—but lacking in dignity and respect. So he and the others used the stairs, the magnetic soles of their shoes clinging to the metal treads, walking slowly, walking almost as though the corpse had weight.

They carried the body to the airlock, outside which the Captain and the other officers were waiting. They placed it in the little compartment. Smoothly, silently, the inner door shut. There was the sobbing of pumps as the airlock pressure built up to four ship atmospheres. It ceased. Engels, in his dry cracked voice, began to read from the Book in his hand.

Calver listened to the solemn words, to the ancient 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 Deep Space funeral 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 easy 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 the body to the deep . . ." read the Captain.

Calver pulled the lever. The light over the airlock

door changed from green to red. The structure of the old 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 echoed in 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 trembled, crept to One Atmosphere, steadied. Calver opened the inner airlock door, looked inside, making sure. He shut the door.

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

Jane Arlen caught his sleeve. Her face was white.

"Derek," she said, "I'm frightened. I thought when I came out to the Rim that I'd shaken off my jinx . . . But now . . . Maclean, and all those others . . ."

Calver said, "It was nothing to do with you, or with your jinx, or even with poor Maclean. It was just power politics—power politics on a world that none of us had ever heard of until we came out here."

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

So Lorn Lady CAME to Grollor.

Almost everybody on that planet, a world that makes a religion of technology, was glad to see the ship. Even so, thought Calver, it was a dull world, with no temptations. The Grollans look upon alcohol

as a good antiseptic, cleaning fluid and rocket fuel, nothing more. And although they are classed as humanoid they are so grotesque in appearance, batrachian, that their women could make no appeal even to Fender-who, in any case, had yet to recover from the severe fright that he had suffered on Tharn.

In terms of weight and measurement there was little cargo to discharge on Grollor-but ideas cannot be weighed, can be measured only by results. Calver, as he checked the manifest, found himself wondering what those results would be. He ticked off the cases of technical books, of scientific instruments, of precision tools. He could not help querying the wisdom of the Rim Government's export policy. To equip an ally may be wise; to equip a potential rival is not.

But, he told himself, Space is vast. There would be room for the Grollan ships when they ventured beyond the bounds of their own planetary system.

The cargo was discharged and other cargo-once again tools and instruments, but manufactured under license-was loaded. But *Lorn Lady* did not lift at once. Repairs had to be made before she was space-worthy-the main propellant pump was giving trouble-and Grollor, with its machine shop facilities and relatively cheap labor-was an ideal planet upon which to make them.

Calver and Jane Arlen went ashore. They sampled meals that were stodgy and flavorless, sipped drinks that were flavorless and non-intoxicating. They wandered around art galleries exhibiting the works of artists who were competent mechanical draftsmen and who, obviously, were in love with the machines that they depicted in such loving detail. They attended the performance of an opera (Jane was able to maintain a running translation) that was all about the efforts-eventually and happily successful-of a young works manager to persuade his sweetheart, running a screw-slotting machine in his factory, to increase her output of slotted screws.

It was when they were walking back to the space-port after this performance that they saw, in the black sky, the flaming exhaust of an inward-bound ship.

"One of the local interplanetary jobs," said Jane, not very interested.

"No," said Calver. "That exhaust's all wrong. Too ruddy. These people haven't any ships yet that can use atomic power and still expell a clean exhaust. They always use chemical propellant inside a

planetary atmosphere. That's one of our ships."

"It can't be," she said. "*Rimhound's* not due for all of a month."

"By one of *our* ships," he corrected her, "I didn't mean one of Rim Runners' palatial cargo liners. I meant a human ship."

"There are other races," she pointed out argumentatively, "with interstellar ships. The Shaara, for example ..."

"Those communistic bumblebees have never made it out to the Rim," he said.

"There's always a first time," she told him. "And they and the Grollans would get along fine."

"The Grollans," he said, "would never approve of the Shaara drones."

After a while she panted, "Hey! Where's the fire? If we're going to run, we shall be better off taking a taxi..."

"I thought you wanted exercise."

"Yes. But not this strenuous. And anybody would think you'd never seen a ship before, the way you're dragging me back to the spaceport ..."

They paused for breath, standing on the footpath, keeping a look-out for the flashing green light that was the sign of a ground taxi. One of the mono-wheeled vehicles approached them from the direction of the port. Calver waved. The vehicle executed a neat U turn, cut across the bows of a multi-wheeled heavy truck, drew up alongside them and stood there, its gyroscope softly purring.

Calver handed the girl into the passenger compartment, said to the grinning, frog-faced driver, "The

port, please."

"Sure, boss."

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The vehicle shot away from its standing start, skimmed along the road toward the glare of working lights.

"You've come from the port," said Calver. "What was the ship that just landed?"

"Don't know, boss. Not Rim Runner, not one of ours. Little ship. Stranger."

"Alien?"

"Yes," said the driver. Then, "Alien, like you. You alien."

"I suppose we are," admitted Calver after a pause, glaring at Jane as she giggled. "I suppose we are. It's all a matter of viewpoint, really ..." He asked the driver, "Did you see what she was like? Did you find out her name?"

"Little ship, not big. Not like yours. Name? Can speak your language, but not read. Did hear name, but not remember too well. Something like, you know, *Star of Er*."

"*Star of Earth*?"

"No. Not Earth. *Er*."

"Er," said Jane, not very helpfully, "is next door to Oz. Didn't you know?"

"But you see now ..."

The taxi paused briefly at the spaceport gates, then swept on, heading away from the berth at which stood *Lorn Lady*. It cruised slowly past the strange ship. She was, as the driver had said, small. The name just under her sharp stem was picked out in glowing letters-*Star Rover*.

"There's money there," said Jane, a little envious-ly. "There are only a handful of men in the Galaxy who can afford an interstellar yacht ..."

"If I had that much money," said Calver, "I

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shouldn't come out to the Rim."

"Things are always so much better when you pay for them," said Jane. "After all, I did hear that T. G. Clippers are going to run cruises out to this sector of the Galaxy, and their customers will be in the mil-lionaire class."

"More money than sense," said Calver.

The taxi stopped at *Lorn Lady's* ramp and he and the girl got out. Calver fumbled in his pocket for a handful of the plastic coinage, paid the driver and followed Jane into the ship, up the spiral compan-ionway that led to the officers' quarters. Captain Engels' door was open and he called to them, "Mr. Calver, Mrs. Arlen! Will you see me, please?"

"You have signed the Contract, both of you," said the old man. "And as officers of a Rim World merchant vessel you are, automatically, officers of our Naval Reserve." He smiled bleakly, adding, "Not that we have a Navy. Even so ..."

Even so what? thought Calver, sipping the drink that the Captain had poured for him.

"This ship. This *Star Rover* ..."

"Yes, sir. We've seen her."

"Have you considered the implications of her being here, Mr. Calver?"

"Not in any great detail, sir. But it's fairly obvious. Just a rich man with his money burning holes in his pockets, coming out here to see how the poor live."

"Perhaps, Mr. Calver. Perhaps. But there are oth-er implications."

"Such as, sir?"

"I am surprised that you have to ask, Mr. Calver. You are already aware that Federation agents have

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been operating out on the Rim." There was a trace of warmth in his smile. "If my memory is not at fault,

did you not meet one on Faraway?"

"I was told that she was one," said Calver-ex-pecting, and receiving, a hostile glare from Jane.

"On our own planets," said Captain Engels, "there is efficient counter-espionage machinery. On these worlds, where our people have no jurisdiction,, there is not. The Grollan Government is pro Rim Worlds-but we Rim Worlders are the only humans with whom the Grollans have been in contact. In a year or so, treaties will be ratified and we shall be secure. Until such time the Federation could steal our trade and oust us from our position of influence."

"I've no desire to get mixed up in any more private wars," said Calver bluntly.

"I was not suggesting that you should," the Cap-tain told him coldly. "Furthermore I wish to make it quite plain that we, in spite of our status as Reserve officers, are essentially merchant spacemen. Our first duty is to our ship. On the other hand, we do have a duty to find out all that we can and, if possible, to put a spoke in the Federation's wheel."

"I see," said Calver. Then, "Have you any sugges-tions, sir?"

"None," said the Old Man frankly. "But you're a man with a certain amount of resource and sagacity, or should it be ingenuity? It is a long time since I read Kipling ..."

"The mariner," quoted Jane, " 'was a man of infinite resource and sagacity . . . ' "

"I believe that you are right, my dear. And now, if you will think over what I have told you ..."

"We'll do that, sir," promised Calver.

Undressing in his cabin, hanging his uniform in his wardrobe, he asked Jane, "And what's tomor-row's rig of the day? False beard and dark glasses?"

"Don't worry about it," she told him. "You're just not cut out to be a spy or counter-spy. But I'll take you as you are."

The following evening Jane did not go ashore; she was fully occupied with an overdue inventory of her stores. Calver, after his offer of assistance had been spurned for the third time, left the ship by himself in rather a bad temper. He walked from the spaceport to the city and there spent an hour in a newsreel the-ater. Finally, dizzy and bored after watching shot af-ter shot of machinery of various kinds in violent mo-tion, he left the place and went in search of a small restaurant where he had been once or twice with Jane. The proprietor of this establishment en-deavored to emulate Terran cuisine and his menu, now and again, produced surprises, some of them quite pleasant ones. Even though he himself could not appreciate subtle flavorings he was willing to ad-mit that there were those who did.

Calver sat in a booth morosely toying with his food. This was one of the restaurant's off nights. Sud-denly he realized that the people in the next booth were talking English.

He was grimly amused by the fact that the couple shared his low opinion of the food. And their accent was familiar, and brought with it a wave of nostalgia. *Earth ...* he thought. *They must be off that yacht. They must be tourists. But who'd come out to the Rim for pleasure?*

He heard the man get to his feet, caught a glimpse of him as he stalked out of the restaurant. There was

something vaguely familiar about him. In Calver's mind the penny started to drop.

He pushed away from his own table, got up and walked the step or so to the next booth. The girl, who was still seated, looked at Calver and grinned rueful-ly. She said, "Grim, isn't it? It was too much for my brother. He said that he had an important business engagement, but I think that he's rushed back to the yacht for an alcoholic gargle to wash the taste out of his mouth."

Calver grinned.

"We thought that we should be playing safe by having something simple," she went on. "*Steak Diane*. That wasn't asking too much, was it?"

"One would think not," admitted Calver.

"And did you enjoy *your* dinner?" she asked.

"It was supposed to be *Lobster Thermidor*," he told her. "But I'd just hate to meet the arthropod that was masquerading as a lobster. My guess is that it was just an oversized cockroach ..."

Her face, even with its grimace of disgust, was attractive-and her laugh was even more so, its silvery, tinkling quality somehow matching the gleaming platinum of her hair. She said, "Will you join me for coffee? And mine host has something that he calls brandy, if you'd care to risk it ..."

Calver smiled. "I think that this is about as far as we can go with the encore of the scene that we played at the Rimrock House on Faraway, Miss Verrill. Al-ready we have started to deviate from the original script."

"And what happened to my Napoleon brandy that night, Mr. Calver?"

"We finished it, of course."

"We?"

"One of my shipmates and myself. And what hap-pened to you, and your . . . your brother?"

"As a matter of fact," she told him, "he *is* my brother. Oh, there was a little unpleasantness with the authorities, but nothing serious, and we were given the bum's rush off the Rim Worlds. A case of mis-taken identity, actually. It seems that there's a cou-ple who Ye almost our doubles who specialize in sell-ing shares in mythical enterprises on the more back-ward planets ..." There was a pause while the waitress brought the coffee service and the unlabelled bottle, and the glasses. She went on, "-I never ex-pected to meet you again, Derek. I knew that your ship called here, but you should have been out and away before we dropped in."

"We should have been," he said, "but we had de-lays *en route*, and now we're grounded for repairs."

"What sort of repairs?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm only the Mate. What the low mechanics do to justify their existence is a mys-tery."

"Only the Mate?" She looked at the braid on his epaulettes. "Yes. You have riz in the world. You were Second Officer the last time I saw you."

"Yes," agreed Calver, unwilling to joke about the circumstances of his promotion.

"But it must be fascinating, being Chief Officer of a ship on this trade. The Eastern Circuit you call it, don't you? All these new worlds, unspoiled. Grollor, and . . . and ..."

"Yes," admitted Calver. "We get around." He sipped from his glass. "This is more like brandy than the coffee is like coffee . . . But there's not much re-semblance."

"No," she agreed. "There's not." She brightened.

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"But there's no need for us to drink here, is there? We have a well-stocked bar aboard the yacht." Her voice fell almost to a whisper. "And there'll be no-body aboard now ..."

"But what about your brother? And the crew?"

"My brother has a business meeting ..."

"Business?"

"Oh, stores and such. Clearances, Inwards and Outwards. *You* should know the sort of thing ..."

"And the crew?"

"There're only a couple of engineers. And they're sight-seeing. Somebody asked them to visit a *lasheleq* factory. What are *lasheleqs*?"

"Search me."

She got to her feet. "Come on, then. Let's get out of this dump."

Calver rose and took the bill that the waitress pre-sented to him. It was made out in an approximation to English, and he saw that it included the meal eaten by the girl and her brother, as well as his own. He wondered if he would be able to charge it up as expenses to whatever Government department

it was that handled counter-espionage. He had every intention of trying to do so. He paid, followed the girl out into the street.

A cruising taxicab stopped for them. Calver did not recognize the driver-to him all Grollans looked the same. The driver recognized him, however. (But he was in uniform, and marks of rank are a means of identification.) He grinned, showing his jagged teeth. "Goodnight, boss. New lady tonight." (But Jane Arlen was brunette and Sonya Verrill was blonde.)

"The spaceport," said Calver brusquely.

"Sure, boss. To *Star of Er*?"

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"Yes."

"*Star of Er*?" queried the girl.

"That's what they're calling your ship."

"Oh." Then, "What's this about a new lady? I thought I was the only Terran female on this planet, and I can't imagine you doing a line with any of the locals."

"We have one woman aboard the ship. The Catering Officer. We take her ashore sometimes."

"What is she like?"

"Plain," lied Calver. "Dowdy. Just what you'd expect in our class of ship—a dear old duck." He added, "She's a good cook, though."

"So am I," Sonya Verrill told him. "I do all the catering aboard *Star Rover*. I've had no complaints yet."

"I'd like to try it, some time."

"Perhaps you will, Derek."

The cab swept through the spaceport gates, swung to the right and rolled towards *Star Rover's* berth. Calver looked to the floodlit tower that was *Lorn Lady*, wondered what Jane was doing, wondered what Jane would think if she knew what he was doing. Not that he was *doing* anything. Not that he would do anything. Or if he did do anything, it would be in his honorary capacity as a Rim Worlds counter-spy, not as a private individual. And, in any case, it would be all Jane's fault. If she hadn't flared up and called upon all the odd gods of the Galaxy to deliver her from a blundering space-oaf who would insist on getting in her hair when she had a job of work that had to be done . . .

The taxi slowed to a stop by *Star Rover's* ramp. Calver got out, handed the girl to the concrete. He

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paid and dismissed the driver. He looked up at the little ship—little, but large enough, carrying, as she did, only her own machinery and personnel, to circumnavigate the Galaxy. He felt envy for the people who could afford to own such a vessel, wondered where the money came from that had purchased her—from the sale, most probably, of something quite useless and, almost certainly, at least slightly injurious. *Or from the pockets of the Federation taxpayers*, he told himself.

"No gangway watch?" he asked. "This is a rather expensive hunk of iron-mongery to leave loafing around unattended."

"We've everything that opens and shuts," she told him. "Including a sonic lock on the outer door. My brother's voice will operate it, and the voices of the two engineers. And my own, of course."

"What if you're in a hard vacuum?"

"There are such things as suit radios," she said. "In any case, in such conditions, there would almost certainly be somebody inside the ship at all times."

"And the key? Or the combination? The words?"

"Go away," she told him. "Out of earshot. Oh, it's nothing personal, but I just don't know you well enough. Yet."

He retired a few paces, watched her mount the ramp and stand before the circular door. He heard her saying something, but too softly for him to distinguish the words. He saw the big valve swing open. She turned and stood there, the light in the airlock chamber striking through her thin dress. Calver

found himself staring at her, He remembered in de-tail, quite suddenly, what he had thought on the oc-casion of their first meeting, how he had quoted to

himself the words of an ancient poet:

No beauty doth she miss When all her robes are on; But beauty's self she is When all her robes are gone . . .

"What are you waiting for?" she called. "Come on up."

Come up and see me some time, he thought. Who was it who used to say that? Some notorious courtesan of the Eigh-teenth or Twenty-first Century or thereabouts? Come up and see me some time . . . I've already seen plenty, but I shouldn't mind seeing more . . .

He climbed the ramp to the airlock.

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calver had served aboard crack liners and had ex-pected that the yacht would be at least as luxurious as such vessels. But she was not. The keynote of her interior fittings was efficiency, with luxury con-spicuous by its absence. Oh, she was comfortable enough-but a certain standard of comfort is essen-tial if efficiency is to be maintained. (It has taken shipowners and ship designers millennia to grasp this obvious fact.) The general impression presented, Calver decided, was that of a small fighting ship, some minor unit of the Federation Survey Service. Until now he had been willing to believe that a mis-take might have been made, that Sonya Verrill and her brother might just possibly be what they claimed to be-tourists with more money than sense. Now he was sure that they were not. Now was the time to demonstrate the not quite infinite resource and sagacity that Captain Engels had attributed to him. There was no elevator-in a vessel this size such a fitting would have been the extreme of luxury-but

there was the usual spiral companionway in the axial shaft. Calver followed the girl up to the living quar-ters, admiring the play of the muscles under the smooth, golden skin of her calves, becoming excited by the glimpses of the gleaming, lovely length of her legs.

He followed her along the short, curving alleyway, paused as she stopped to open a door.

"Come in," she said. "This is where I live, Derek."

He looked around the sitting room, obviously part of a suite. The walls were panelled with plastic in pleasant pastel shades. There were two deep chairs, and a settee. There were bookshelves and a big, all-purpose receiver and player. The only note of luxury, as opposed to solid comfort, was struck by the low coffee table, the top of which was a slab of the fabulously expensive opalwood from Fomalhaut VI.

She waved him to a chair, went to the little bar beside the player and produced a bottle and two balloon glasses. He was amused to see that the bottle contained French brandy. She poured drinks, said, "To us."

"Here's mud in your eye," he responded.

She said, "Amuse yourself while I get changed into something more comfortable."

He remained standing until she had gone through into her bedroom, then walked to the player. He looked through the records, selected a tape called *Soft Lights And Sweet Music*. He inserted it into the ma-chine, threaded the end of it through the playing head and onto the empty spool, switched on. He sat on the soft settee, nursing his glass, settled down to enjoy the nostalgic melodies and the play of soft, ab-stract color patterns on the screen.

She came back into the room. She was wearing a gown of Altairian crystal silk, the material of which it is said that the wearing of it is more naked than actual nudity-provided, of course, that the right woman is wearing it. Sonya Verrill was the right woman.

She sat down beside Calver. He could feel the warmth of her through the fabric of his uniform. He could smell the heady scent that she was wearing. He was aware of her in the worst (or the best ?) way.

She said, "You must be hot in here. Why don't you take off your jacket?"

He said, lying without conviction, "I'm quite comfortable, Sonya."

She said, laughing gently, "You'll not find anything like this aboard your ship."

"No," he admitted. "Not quite."

Her fingers were playing with the buttons of his jacket, loosening them one by one, were undoing the buttons of his shirt. Her hand was cool, soft yet firm, on his chest, was warmer as it slid around to his back. Her face was close to his, her lips parted. Her eyes seemed enormous. And his arms were around her, and he felt the yielding firmness of her as he pressed her to him.

She pulled away suddenly.

She said suddenly, coldly, "I'm sorry, Derek. I thought that you'd have had rather more control of yourself than this."

He said, "I may be only a simple spaceman, but I thought that I was asked up here for this."

She said, "I may not be the type of woman to which you are accustomed, Derek, but I find something impossibly sordid about these brief affairs. Before I give myself I must have some illusion of permanence ..."

"Give yourself? I rather gained the impression that you were throwing yourself at me ..."

She said in a hurt voice, "That was unkind, Derek. You are an attractive brute, you know. And I'm afraid that I rather lost control. You should have had more control ..."

"Oh."

"Of course, if we got to know each other better . . . But there's so little time ..."

"Our repairs should be finished soon," he said.

"Are you really happy in that old wreck of yours?" she asked. "A man like you, used to big, well-found, well-run ships?" She assumed a pensive attitude. "I don't suppose for one moment you'd consider the idea, but we, my brother and I, need a navigator . . . No, not exactly a navigator-Bill's quite competent in that respect. But a pilot, a pilot for this sector of the Galaxy. For the Eastern Circuit ..." She splashed fresh brandy into their glasses. "The pay would be generous, ..." she added, as she moved close to him again.

He laughed with genuine amusement. "By all the odd gods of the Galaxy, are you the best that the Federation can do? This corny routine . . . Beautiful blonde spy and oafish victim . . . *I'll surrender the body beautiful, darling, if you will let me have the plans of the Borgenwelfer Disintegrator Mark XIV . . .*"

Anger flared over her face and her hand-the hand that he had thought was so soft-came swinging round in a vicious smack. He caught her wrist before she could strike him again, caught her other wrist, pressed her back on the settee so that she could not use her feet.

Surprisingly, she started to laugh. "You'd be surprised," she told him, "how many times the corny

old routine does work. It was worth trying . . . Any-how, the offer still stands. Sign on her as Eastern Circuit Pilot and you'll be well paid. And when we get back to Earth there'll be a permanent commission for you in the Survey Service-perhaps in the Naval Intelligence Branch ..."

"And the body beautiful?"

"That part of it is up to you-and me. And I may not struggle too hard."

He got to his feet, pulling her with him. He said, "Thanks for the party, darling, but I must go. I should not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honor more. Quote and unquote."

"Not so fast, Calver," said a man's voice.

Calver let go of the girl, turned. He saw Sonya Verrill's brother standing in the doorway of her bedroom. He was in uniform, with the trappings of a Commander in the Survey Service. He was holding a heavy pistol in a negligent yet somehow competent manner.

"Not so fast," he said again. "As Sonya's not very subtle methods have failed, the time has come for more direct ones. A revival, say, of the press gang. Or would this be classed as a Shanghai?"

"Press gang," said Calver, eyeing the pistol, wondering what his chances would be if he used Sonya as a shield. "Press gang. Brute force. The Shanghai specialists were a little more subtle. They used to dope their victims' drink. I'm surprised that you never thought of that."

"One volunteer," said Verrill, "is worth ten pressed men. And we rather hoped that you might volunteer."

"There was considerable inducement," admitted

Galver, "but I have other commitments."

The girl struggled in his grasp. "So you were lying. So this Catering Officer of yours isn't the old duck you said she was."

"But she is a good cook," said Calver, tensing himself, getting ready to throw the girl at her brother.

"I shouldn't if I were you," said another voice.

Resignedly, Calver turned slowly. Standing in the doorway to the alleyway were two more men, like Verrill in Survey Service uniform. They wore the rank and branch badges of engineer officers, but it was obvious that the automatics they held were as at home in their hands as less lethal working tools would have been.

Calver sat in an acceleration chair in the yacht's control room. He was not uncomfortable—Sonya Verrill, when she had lashed his arms and legs to the piece of furniture, had done so without unnecessary brutality. He was not uncomfortable, but after experimental strainings and twistings he had been obliged to admit that he would stay where he was until released.

Verrill was in the pilot's chair, the co-pilot's seat being occupied by his sister. The two engineers were at their stations, as Calver well knew. He had felt a sudden hope as he watched the spaceport police running, with their odd hopping gait, towards *Star Rover's* berth—and who, he wondered, had instigated the raid?—had lapsed into despair as warning up blasts had sent a sheet of vicious fire rippling out over the concrete, forcing the policemen to retreat.

"All ready below, Commander," reported Sonya in an expressionless voice.,

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"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"You can't get away with this," said Calver.

"But we are getting away with it," Verrill told him.

"This is an act of war," said Calver, regretting the pomposity of the words as soon as he had uttered them.

"War, my dear sir? Surely you know that you Rim Worlders are still Federation citizens, and that we, of the Survey Service, are the Federation's policemen."

"Shouldn't we be getting upstairs, Commander?" asked Sonya.

"Unless they have artillery here—and they haven't—we're quite safe, Lieutenant."

"Illegal arrest, then," went on Calver doggedly.

"Illegal arrest? Rape, Mr. Calver, is a serious crime when a civilian is the victim. But when the victim is a policewoman . . ."

"I wish that there had been rape," said Calver bitterly.

He allowed his attention to stray from the mocking face of the Commander, turned to stare for the last time (but he still hoped that it would not be the last time) at *Lam Lady*, at the old *Forlorn Bitch*. He

stiff-ened as he saw the brightening flicker of blue flame beneath her stern. But perhaps the engineers had finished their repairs and were testing the reaction drive. Even so, somebody must have told the space-port police—who were still standing stupidly just clear of the blast area—of his abduction. Captain Engels must know. And Jane. (And had they written him off as an impressionable fool who would fall for a pretty face and body and a head of blond hair? What would Jane be thinking?) Somebody must

have given the alarm. That taxi driver . . . Could he be a Rim Worlds agent?

"Commander Verrill!" Sonya's voice was sharp. "I think that we should blast off."

"I'm glad that I never had a back seat driver for a sister," said Calver.

"Lieutenant Verrill," ordered the Commander stiffening, "give the engineers their count-down."

"Ten . . ." she said. "Nine . . . Eight . . ."

Calver glanced out of the port again. Yes, the blue exhaust flame from *Lorn Lady* was much brighter.

"Seven . . . Six . . . Five . . ."

But surely Verrill would know. Surely his ship carried a Psionic Communications Officer, a trained tele-path who would warn him. But perhaps she did not. One drawback to psionic radio is its complete lack of privacy. A telepath aboard a ship on a secret mission would betray that mission to every other telepath in the area.

"Four . . . Three . . . Two . . . One . . ."

And the fools were intent on their instruments, were not looking out through their viewports, did not see the sudden blossoming of intolerable fire below *Lorn Lady's* stern.

"Fire!"

Acceleration pressed Calver deep into his seat, thrust his chin down to his chest. Slowly, painfully, he turned his head, saw nothing of *Lorn Lady*. Even more slowly and painfully he elevated his line of sight, saw that the old ship was already well above the yacht, was streaking for the sky like a bat out of hell. He heard Sonya gasp and swear, heard her say, "You and your damn silly regulations! You and your count-down at a time like this!"

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"Switch on the radio!" ordered Verrill. "Tell those fools to give us space room!"

"*Star Rover to Lorn Lady*," said the girl coldly. "Federation Survey Ship *Star Rover to Lorn Lady*. Clear space. This is an order. I repeat, this is an order."

There was a pause, during which Verrill swore, "Are the swine deaf as well as daft?" Then Jane's voice came through the speaker of the receiver.

"Rim Worlds Auxiliary Cruiser *Lorn Lady to Star Rover*. Land at once. We cannot be responsible if you stray into our back-blast. Land at once. This is an order."

Verrill was a competent ship handler and his small ship was maneuverable. Yet, as Calver knew, *Lorn Lady* was a powerful brute and Captain Engels, as a ship handler, was more than merely competent. Verrill, as he climbed, threw his little craft from side to side, bruising her people with the sudden changes of acceleration. Hanging above *Star Rover*, *Lorn Lady* seemed to anticipate her every move, and all the time the distance between the ships decreased. In spite of the polarization of the viewports, the light in the yacht's control room was blinding. In spite of the insulation the heat level was rising rapidly.

"Take her down," sobbed Sonya Verrill, her composure broken.

"Then tell them," said Verrill tiredly.

"*Star Rover to Lorn Lady*," she said. "We are landing."

"*Lorn Lady to Star Rover*. Return to your berth. We shall hang over the spaceport until we see all of you, all four of you and the prisoner, leave the ship and surrender yourselves to the police. If you do not comply within a reasonable time we shall drop on you,

and reduce you to a puddle of molten slag."

"And is that your girl friend?" asked Sonya Verrill.

"It is," said Calver.

"What charming people you know, darling," she said with a return to her old manner.

So they landed and, after Calver had been untied, marched out of the ship into the arms of the police. Above the spaceport hung *Lorn Lady*, a strange, ominous comet in the black sky, a thundering meteor that did not fall. And then the roaring of her was drowned by sudden, more imminent thunder. Calver turned, as did the others, and saw a column of flameshot smoke where *Star Rover* had been. Some-body, before leaving her, had actuated the time fuse of the demolition charge.

Calver let his hand fall onto Commander Verrill's shoulder, knew that the other man appreciated the comforting pressure. He did not know (yet) what it was like to lose a ship, but could imagine how it felt.

And not far from them *Lorn Lady*, slowly, carefully, somehow tiredly, settled to her berth.

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Two days later, *Lorn Lady* lifted from Grollor.

Star Rover's people were in prison and there they would remain until, eventually, the Federation Government paid the bill for the repair of the damage to the spaceport apron caused by the destruction of the yacht. Captain Engels had promised Commander Verrill that he would see to it that a report was sent to Federation Survey Service H.Q. But, he pointed out with wry humor, the tide flows sluggishly through official channels. And Calver felt rather sorry for his late abductors. The jail was not uncomfortable but the food, good enough by Grollan standards, was deadly dull. Jane was not pleased when he visited the prisoners on his last evening ashore, leaving them a parcel of luxuries.

"I wouldn't mind so much," she flared, "if I didn't know that everything's really for that tow-haired trollop!"

But *Lorn Lady* lifted and once she was again on the Long Haul the planet-bred hostilities were forgotten.

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The officers slipped back into Deep Space routine, thankful to be on their way once more. Calver and Brentano settled down to the monotony and broken sleep of watch and watch, four hours on and four hours off. The hours of duty were long-and they were the longer for the lack of anything to do whilst in the control room. It was essential that the officer of the watch stay alert-and this desirable condition was achieved and maintained largely by the ingestion of huge quantities of black coffee. And Calver- once Jane had forgiven him, although she still taunted him about his infinite resource and sagacity -was lucky. When her own duties permitted it she would share his watch with him. At first Captain Engels was inclined to frown upon the practice-and then he, himself, admitted that in view of *Lorn Lady's* shorthandedness it was as desirable that as many of-ficers as possible were capable of standing a control room watch. And so Brentano, to his great disgust, found himself having to put up with Fender as an apprentice watch officer.

For day after day, week after week, the old ship fell through the distorted continuum, the outer darkness on one hand, the fantastic convolutions of the Galactic Lens on the other. She dropped down the dark infinities, through the blackness that was blacker than blackness should be, through the emptiness that was, somehow, not empty, for watch after watch, day after day, week after week.

It was on one of Calver's watches that it happened.

He was sipping from the bulb of coffee that Arlen had brought him, was nibbling at the sandwich. He was saying, "I'll always love you, darling. You never forget the mustard ..." when she interrupted him,

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asking sharply, "Derek, what's that?"

Sandwich in one hand, coffee bulb in the other, he looked first at her, then in the direction along which she was pointing. He saw a faint light, a light where no light should have been. It was faint but clear, too clear, hard against the vagueness, definite against the faint, far nebulosities that, with the Interstellar Drive in operation, seemed even fainter and more distant.

"Jane!" he ordered. "The radar!"

While she went to the console he unbuckled him-self from his chair, pulled himself to the telescope. He swiveled the powerful instrument, adjusted the focus. The long, slim shape swam into view-the gleaming, metal hull, the big vanes at the stern, the dim light from the control room ports at the forward end. It was a ship-and that was, or should have been, im-possible.

"Jane!" he snapped. "Bearing? Range?"

He heard her reply, "Nothing on the screen ..."

"Damn it, wench," he growled. "There must be ..."

"There's *not*."

He left the telescope, went to stand beside Jane at the radar. As she had told him, the screen was blank. But, he told himself, it had to be blank. For there to be anything showing on it, the temporal precession rate of the target would have to be synchronized with that of *Lorn Lady*-and the odds against any two ships using the Mannschenn Drive achieving tem-poral synchronization are astronomical. But, without temporal synchronization, how could there be direct vision?

"Go to the telescope," he said, "and tell me what you see."

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Without waiting for her report he called the Cap-tain on the telephone. "Chief Officer here," he re-ported. "Unidentified vessel to port ..."

"Bearing? Range?" he heard the cracked old voice demand.

"I don't know, sir. Radar seems to be inoperable."

The Old Man, as always, was in the control room almost immediately. He went first to the radar con-sole, wasted no time there, then to the telescope. He ordered quietly, "Mr. Calver, call out Mr. Brentano and Mr. Levine. We will try to communicate."

Calver picked up the telephone, buzzed the two communications officers. Brentano, alert in spite of his short rations of sleep, answered his call at once. Levine, typically, was far from alert, insisted that the situation be explained to him in words of one syllable -and then demanded a repetition.

When he had finished he heard Captain Engels say, "She's closer, Mr. Calver. Seems to be a con-verging course ..."

"How do you know, sir?"

The old man grinned. He said, "One can manage without radar, Calver. When I first came up here the image of that ship extended over three graticules- now it extends over five . . . But what about the radio officers? Are they up?"

"Brentano is, sir. He'll be in Electronic Com-munications now. Levine was hard to wake ..."

"He always is. You'd better go and make sure that he's functioning. I shall be all right here, with Mrs. Arlen. If I want you in a hurry I shall sound the Gen-eral Alarm."

"But, sir . . . Could it be pirates, do you think?"

"Pirates, Mr. Calver? There are many wonders on

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the Rim-but pirates have never been among them. What ship plying between these poverty-stricken planets is worth the pirating?"

The telephone buzzed. Calver picked up the instrument, heard, "Electronic Communications here. No signals audible on any frequency. Am transmitting on all frequencies."

"Brentano, sir," reported Calver. "He's trying- but there are no results."

"Drag Mr. Levine out," ordered Engels.

Calver pulled himself through the hatchway into the officers' flat, went to Levine's cabin-which was also his place of duty. He found the Psionic Radio Officer out of his bunk, strapped into the swivel chair by the table upon which was the glass globe in which lived the psionic amplifier, below which was the complexity of tanks and pumps and piping that handled nutrition and excretion. He looked with distaste at the gray, wrinkled thing in the globe, while his nostrils twitched at the imagined smell of dog. Like most spacemen, he accepted psionic radio intellectually but not emotionally. It was not the operator himself, the trained telepath, that he found revolting -although there were some who did-but the amplifier, the dog's brain tissue culture, without which it would have been impossible for human thought-waves to span interstellar distances. Revolting, too, was the way in which the majority of Psionic Radio Operators made pets of their organic equipment-rewarding it by visualization of trees and bones . . .

He said, "Levine!"

The little man opened his eyes, had trouble focus-

ing them on the Chief Officer. He muttered, without much interest, "Oh, it's you, Calver ..." •

"What do you receive?"

"I hear the P.R.O. of *Thermopylae* . . . She's one of the T.G. clippers . . . Don't know what she's doing out here ..."

"Could it be her within sight?"

"Oh, no. She's off Elsinore. Making arrangements for disembarkation of passengers ..."

"Do you hear anybody close?"

"No. Why should I?"

"There's a ship," said Calver patiently. "Within sight. Her temporal precession rate is synchronized with our own. Her velocity matches. *Who is she? What is she?*"

"I don't know," replied Levine mildly. "All I can pick up at close range is the usual babble from the minds of all you people-and, as you damn well know, I never eavesdrop on my shipmates. Apart from anything else, I should be breaking my oath if I did . . ."

"Then eavesdrop," said Calver, "if it's the only way that you can do any short range listening."

"Oh, all right. But don't blame me. . ." Levine stiffened suddenly. "This is damned funny. First time I've ever struck anything like it. A sort of echo effect . . . You're thinking, *Why do we have to be at the mercy of this teacup reader*, and, at not quite the same time, you're thinking, *Why do we have to be at the mercy of this crystal gazer?*"

The telephone buzzed. Calver said, "I'll take it." He heard Captain Engels say, "That you, Mr. Calver? Has he got anything?" "No," Calver replied, "But . . ."

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"Come back here," ordered the Old Man. "We're going to try visual communication."

Back in the control room Calver found that a lamp had been rigged by Brentano, a portable searchlight with a key and shutters. He gave it only a hasty glance, looked from it out through the viewports, saw that the strange ship was much closer. The Old Man had been right. She was on a converging course. A collision course? But there was no real danger. All that was necessary was for one or other of the vessels to vary her rate of temporal precession by as little as one micro-second and, thereby, to drift (although drift was far too slow a word) out of the common frame of reference.

The Captain was back at the telescope so Calver pulled a pair of powerful prismatic binoculars from their clip, focused them. He could see the shape of the stranger plainly now. He had read, somewhere,

that a ship operating her interstellar drive is a source of photons; this was the first time that he had been given the opportunity of checking the validity of the hypothesis. The gleaming hull was faintly luminous -as, no doubt, was the hull of *Lorn Lady* to the 6b-servers in the other control room.

He heard a rapid, rhythmic clicking, looked around, saw that Brentano was operating his key. By ear as much as by sight he read the symbols and the letters-the AA, AA of calling up, BT, the break sign, then again AA. He heard Brentano complain, "She doesn't answer . . ."

And then there was a bright light flashing from the stem of the other, a staccato blinking, the repetition of letters and symbols that made no sense.

"Alien . . ." Calver heard Brentano mutter.

And yet the strange ship was not alien. Her design proclaimed the fact that she had been built by human, not by merely humanoid hands. There was a . . . a humanness about her. She could almost have been the sister of *Lorn Lady* . . . Could she, wondered Calver, be a mirage, an odd mirror image, produced by some freak bending of Space and Time? But the name-he could not yet quite read it-on the bows and on the big stern vanes was too long . . .

He realized that Captain Engels had left the tele-scope, had gone to the telephone. He heard the Old Man say, "Mr. Bendix, stand by. When I buzz twice, cut the Drive. Cut *and* brake."

He felt rather than saw Jane standing beside him, heard her whisper, "If there should be a collision . . . It would be my fault . . ."

He tried to laugh. "Don't worry about your catastrophes, Calamity Jane, until they've happened. There'll be no collision."

He wished that he felt as confident as he had sounded. He considered the advisability of reaching out to the telephone selector board, giving the two short buzzes that would be the signal for Bendix to cut the Drive, remembered that once before he had been on the verge of mutiny. He thought wryly, *Father knows best* . . .

The other ship was still closer. Calver could see the figures of those in her control room, could begin, by the intermittent flashes of Brentano's lamp, to make out details. They looked human enough. They *were* human. And they were, somehow, familiar . . . Un-easily, he shifted his regard. And the name . . . ? Could he read it now? There were two words . . .

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And the letters . . . ? Terran script? *T...//... E...* "The . . ." he said aloud. "*The Outsider* . . ." He knew of no ship so called on the Rim-and yet it was a name that belonged to the edge of the Galaxy.

He looked back to the control room. He could see the people there more plainly still. He could see the tall man in a uniform not unlike his own, but with the four golden bars of command on his epaulettes. He could see the woman beside him-the tall wom-an, also in uniform, tall and slender, with the star-ting streak of silver in her black, glossy hair. He could see the small man behind the other signalling lamp, the dark, compact, competent little man who was still, as was Brentano, striving in vain to establish visual communication.

The shutter of Brentano's lamp jammed, the bright beam of light shone directly into the stranger's control room. Calver cried out aloud. The man behind the other lamp was Brentano, the tall woman was Jane. And the other Captain was . . . himself

And the distance between the two ships was diminishing rapidly, too rapidly, and Calver, turning, saw old Captain Engels pushing himself away from the telescope, reaching out a skinny hand for the tele-phone selector board. From the ports of the other control room the white faces stared into their own. He could see, plainly, the horror on the other Jane's face, knew that it must be a reflection of that on the face of his own Jane Arlen.

He tensed himself for the crash, for the scream of tearing metal, for the shriek of explosively escaping air. His arm went about Jane and he pressed her to him tightly. There had been times when he would have been willing to go out in such a disaster-but

those times, thanks to Arlen, were now past. It was ironical that disaster should come now that he had found something-someone-to live for.

He heard Engels gasp with relief-and knew that the signal could never have reached Bendix in time. He was conscious of a . . . a merging, a merging, a merging and, almost simultaneously, a separation. He tried to capture the strange memories that, brief-ly, had existed in his mind-utterly absurd and im-possible memories of shipwreck and salvage, of the salvage money that had made possible the running of the Rim as an independent trader.

He listened to the dying whine of the Drive as the precessing gyroscopes slowed to a stop, experienced the inevitable sense of temporal disorientation. He looked out of the ports-saw on the one hand the too familiar nothingness, on the other the Galactic Lens. Of the strange ship there was no sign.

Engels said tiredly, "Tell Bendix to restart the Drive."

"But, Captain, what was it?"

"I've heard of them," whispered the old man. "I've heard of them, but I've never quite believed in them. Until now . . ."

"But what was it?"

"You can ask our friends on Stree that question," said Captain Engels. "They might be able to tell you. But we, on the Rim, know such apparitions as Rim Ghosts . . ."

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slowly, cautiously, through an overcast sky, *Lam Lady* dropped down to Stree. With tired, bored efficiency she drifted in to the clearing in the jungle that was the spaceport, fell through the clouds of steam of her own generating until her big stern vanes touched the ground (mud before her coming, now baked hard) and the Reaction Drive was cut. Calver looked out through the drizzle-dimmed viewports, through the slowly thinning steam, to the towering trees, the trees that marched on all sides to the limit of vision, whose ranks faded into the gray mists.

He heard Captain Engels say, "Mr. Calver, please go down to the airlock to receive the Agent . . ."

"The Agent . . ." he echoed, looking at the green form that lumbered lazily into the clearing, at the great lizard that walked, kangaroo-like (or dinosaur-like) on its two hind legs. The Commission's trade was limited to planets with human or humanoid dominant races; Calver felt somewhat shocked at the prospects of having to extend the usual courtesies to

a reptile. He knew, too, that Captain Engels did not like lizards; it was a phobia with him. He had been told that Engels, whenever possible, left any and all dealings with the natives of Stree to his Chief Officer.

He found Jane Arlen waiting for him at the air-lock. She said, "I know the drill, Derek-and Treeth is quite a good fellow once you get used to him."

"Treeth? That dinosaur outside?"

"Yes. That's his name."

"I suppose he can speak English."

"Of course. He speaks and reads English, as you should know. After all, when the bulk of our cargo for here is books . . . And he likes tea. Be sure to ask him up to partake of a pot of the horrid brew with us."

Calver operated the manual controls of the airlock. Both doors sighed open. The warm air that billowed in, that mingled with the stale ship's atmosphere, was too humid to be refreshing, but the scent of it was far from unpleasant. Calver looked out, pressed the button that controlled the ramp. Like a

tongue of metal it extended itself from the hull, quivering slightly, sought and found the ground.

Treeth came slowly up the inclined surface, smiling horribly, displaying rows of needle-sharp teeth. He said-and the hissing undertones were hardly noticeable-"Mrs. Arlen. Salutations. And to you, sir, salutations."

"Salutations," replied Calver.

"Treeth," said Jane, "this is Mr. Calver, our new Chief Officer."

"And where is my old friend, Mr. Maclean?"

"Dead," said Jane briefly.

"I am sad-as, no doubt, you are. But remember that nothing dies, that the Past still exists, must exist.

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You people, with the ingenuity of your Interstellar Drive, have come so close to a solution of these problems-and yet, somehow, you are incapable of taking the final step. But that final step is a matter for the mind, not for the machine. You have bound yourselves to your machines, to your intricacies of glass and metal, magnetic fields and electron streams. You . . ."

"Some tea, Treeth?" asked Jane brightly.

"But of course. It is a matter of great regret to us that the climate of our planet is unsuitable for the planting of tea, and that shipping space is so severely limited. No doubt, in the future, more tonnage will be available and then, perhaps, greater imports of the herb will become possible . . ."

He was inside the ship now-and Calver was not, as he had feared that he would be, repelled. Treeth was a lizard, and a fearsome looking lizard-but about him was an aura of amiability. He was a lizard-and, as are representatives of his breed on most other worlds, he was a clean lizard. There was a very faint muskiness hanging about him-but a dog coming in out of the wet would have smelled far worse.

Jane led the way up to the messroom. Treeth followed. Behind the native Calver marvelled at the skill with which he negotiated the spiral stairway-and at his ability to maintain a non-stop conversation during the entire ascent. He stopped only when, seated on the messroom deck, his legs and tail a stable tripod, he took the cup of tea that Jane had poured him between his two claws, sipped appreciatively. Calver took the opportunity to talk business.

He said, "We have the usual consignment of books -some on microfilm, some bound. There are the

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latest treatises on philosophy, also the latest contemporary novels. There are also music tapes. And, of course, tea . . ."

Treeth extended his cup to Jane for a refill. He said, "Good. And we, Mr. Calver, can offer you the usual cargo in exchange. The *sissari jewels*. There are three dozen cut to your requirements. Fourteen rolls of parchment, upon which is the translation of Sessor's philosophical works . . ."

Calver remembered what Engels had said- "Their jewels-they're diamonds, actually, but the lizards have a fantastic way of cutting them-are fabulously valuable; but those parchments of theirs may hold all the secrets of the Universe ..." He wondered what questions would be answered by Sessor's philosophy-then recalled something else that Engels had said: "You can ask our friends on Stree that question. They might be able to tell you..."

He said, abruptly, "We had an odd experience *en route* from Grollor."

"Indeed, Mr. Calver? And what was it?"

Calver told him-and told him of Captain Engel's reference to Rim Ghosts.

Treeth was silent as he sipped his tea, then held out the cup for yet another refill. He said then, "It is as I remarked when I first boarded, when you told me of poor Mr. Maclean's death. The Past, I said, is still living-and that applies to all the Pasts, not only to the immediate Past. We, on this planet, have lived for ages on the Rim-you, on your four colonized worlds, are only newcomers. Even so-you have known for

centuries that the Universe is expanding, have suspected that new matter is in the process of

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continual creation, fills always the void left by the expansion of the old.

"Once-and was it in the Galaxy before this one, or the Galaxy before that, or before that?-there was an Earth that was almost the exact duplicate of your Earth, an Earth whose culture spread out among the stars, as yours has done. Once there was another Der-ek Calver, another Jane Arlen, another Louis Bren-tano-and they ran the Rim in a ship not called *Lorn Lady*, but *The Outsider* . . . And we, on our Rim, are expanding through the space once occupied by that long ago Rim, and there was empathy between your-selves and your other, earlier selves . . ."

"But we found it impossible," said Calver, "to es-tablish communication. Levine, our Psionic Radio Officer, did say that he picked up telepathic trans-missions that were, as near as dammit, echoes of our own thoughts, but that was all. And we rigged a sig-nal lamp and tried to flash a message-just as they did. But all we received was gibberish."

"That earlier Earth could not have been quite identical," said Treeth. "Perhaps it was not Samuel Morse who invented the telegraph and the code that bears his name. Perhaps it was somebody called, say, Taylor, who decided that A in the Taylor Code would be one dot, not dot dash . . ."

"Hm," grunted Calver. "That's possible, I sup-pose. But my predecessor was luckier than me. I have memories of the memories I . . . shared when the two ships merged briefly. The other Calver was Master-Master *and* Owner. He'd got the money to buy his ship as a reward for some piece of salvage . . ."

"You might yet do the same," said Treeth.

"Not bloody likely," laughed Jane. "There's not a

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one of the rustbuckets running the Rim that would be worth salvaging." Her face darkened. "Too-if there ever were any salvage operations at which I was present, I should be in the ship requiring salvage . . ."

The Agent made the fearsome grimace that passed for a smile. He said, "Mrs. Arlen, I have told you before that a losing sequence cannot last forever, that the tide must turn some time . . ."

"Sure," she said. "I just stick around and wait for the Galaxy after this one, or the one after that, and the luck will change . . ." She paused, went on bitter-ly, "I thought that it had changed-and then too many people were killed on Tharn . . ."

Calver broke the silence, spread manifest and cargo plan on the table.

He said briskly, "How soon can you commence discharge? The chests of tea will be first out, then the books . . ."

Calver, to his Tegur, had no further opportunities for conversation with Treeth. Captain Engels did not like Stree. He liked neither the climate nor the in-habitants. He enjoined upon his Mate the necessity for a quick discharge, a speedy loading and an un-delayed blast-off. The local lizards could not be hur-ried-but the handful of cargo could be, and was, slung out by ship's personnel with ship's gear and covered with tarpaulins against the drizzle. Treeth, bribed by the gift of a small chest of tea from Jane Arlen's stores, saw to it that the outward cargo-the jewels and the parchments-was down before dis-charge of the inward consignment was finished.

Mellise was the next planet of call.

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Mellise is a watery world, fully four-fifths of its sur-face being covered by the shallow seas. Mellise, with its absence of great land masses and, in consequence, of the conditions producing steep barometric gra-dients, should not be a stormy world. Normally it is not. Normally the only winds experienced are the steady, predictable Trades and Anti-Trades. But there is a long, stragging archipelago almost coinci-dent with the Equator, and at the changes of the Equinox conditions obtain, although briefly, favor-able to the

breeding of hurricanes.

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

Calver let the slight surf carry him in to the white beach, feeling the pleasant heat of the sun on his bare skin. He grounded gently, got to his feet, stood with the water lapping around his ankles, watched Jane making for the shore with long, easy strokes. He thought, irreverently, *Venus on the half shell*, as she stood erect, the droplets of water sparkling on her smooth, tanned skin. He thought, *But that Venus was a carroty cat, and her feet were ugly . . . Why is it that so few artists who paint from the nude seem to have been able to afford or find a model with straight feet? Why is it that so many artists seem to favor that ugly, bunion-like bend at the big toe?*

She came to him, walking gracefully through the shallow water. She smiled and said, "Why so serious, darling? What are you thinking about?"

"Your feet," he said.

"*My feet?* Derek! Don't tell me that I've got myself a fetishist!"

"I worship everything of yours," he told her. "*Everything.*"

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"The ship . . ." she murmured, pushing away from him.

"Damn the ship," he swore-but he glanced in-land, saw the blunt, gleaming spire that was the stem of *Lorn Lady*, just visible above the feathery, purple foliage of the trees. There was little likelihood that there would be anybody in the control room, but it was just possible. And Fender, should he be there, would be quite capable of using the telescope.

Calver walked slowly inland towards the shelter-ing trees. As he walked he felt again his gratitude for the breakdown of the pumps that had caused the de-lay in departure, the grounding that had given to him and the girl what was almost a honeymoon, that had enabled him to convince her that she was loved and wanted, and that her jinx-if there ever had been such a malign influence in her life-was dead.

The unexpected holiday had been good-coming, as it had, after a period of intense activity. There had been little leisure during the discharge-nets and cordage and harpoon guns-and little during the loading, although the great, lustrous pearls that were their homeward cargo had offered few problems in stowage, had been put with the Streean diamonds in the ship's strongroom.

Behind them there was a muffled snorting sound. Arlen turned, looked back towards the sea. She swore, pointed, said, "Company . . ."

Calver looked, saw the black blob that had broken the surface of the water. He echoed the girl's curse.

She shrugged, led the way to the tree under which they had left their clothing. He watched her ap-preciatively as she pulled on her shirt, climbed into her shorts. Reluctantly he put on his own tropical

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uniform. It was not prudery that had caused them to dress; it was the knowledge that to the natives, who themselves always went naked, all Terrans looked alike, could be distinguished only by badges of rank.

The Mellisan waddled through the shallows, his sleek, black 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 super-vised the discharge and loading from the shore end, but could not be sure.

"Meelongee," said the native, his voice 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 mean-ing.

The Mellisan shifted from one webbed foot to the other. He gesticulated with his stubby arms. It was impossible for Calver to read the expression on the black, long-muzzled face-but he guessed that it was one of grave concern. There was anxiety in the yelp-ing voice.

Worry shadowed Arlen's features.

"Derek," she asked. "When shall we be ready for Space?"

"At least another twenty-four hours," he said. "Why?"

"That will be too late. Our friend here tells me that there will be a big blow before tomorrow morn-ing-a gale, or a hurricane ..."

"Not a cloud in the sky," said Calver, looking up-wards.

"Isn't there an old saying," she asked 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 in his own tongue. He bowed clumsily, backed into the water, turned sud-denly and was gone with hardly a splash. The two Terrans walked along the rough path from the beach to the clearing that was dignified with the name of spaceport. Once Arlen stopped, saying nothing, and pointed. Calver stared at the little furry animals, not unlike squirrels, that normally lived in the trees. Whole tribes 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 airlock to the control room. The Chief Officer went directly to the aneroid barometer. It had, he recalled, registered 1020 millibars that morning. The 1010 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. The needle dropped sharply.

He went to the telephone, pressed the selector but-ton for the Reaction Drive 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. "But when we have to make impellers by hand ..."

"How long will you be?"

"Until this time tomorrow."

"Not good enough." He turned, said to the girl,

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"Arlen, wake the Old Man, will you? You know what to tell him." Then, into the telephone, "Can't Renault fake up some sort of jury rig to get us up-stairs in a hurry? 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 always had looked old -but, until recently, there had been an air of wiry indestructability about him. That now was 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 grounded 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 very recently, only on the Ul-timo, Lorn, Thule and Faraway run. Perhaps you..."

"Perhaps ..." echoed Calver. He said, "On my way out from Earth to the Rim I was obliged, at times, to do jobs outside the usual run of a space-man's experience. Once, for a few months, I was Sec-ond Mate of a tops'l schooner on Atlantia. I was no good as a seaman-it was as a navigator that they wanted me-but I did my best to learn ..."

"Speaking as a seaman," said Engels, "where do

you think lies the danger?"

"The trees," said Calver slowly, considering his words, "will break the force of the wind at ground level, but the upper portion of the ship will be ex-posed to its full fury. The situation is analogous to that of a surface ship, a sailing ship, caught in a blow before she has time to shorten sail. A surface ship, in such a predicament, will be driven over on to her beam ends-unless she is first dismasted ..."

"Spare us the nautical technicalities," said Engels dryly.

"Sorry, sir. What I mean is this: The danger is that we shall be blown over, on to our side-and once that happens we just sit here until the next ship comes in. *Lorn Lady* will be a total loss." He gestured towards the barometer. "And, sir, there's real dirt coming ..."

"Never mind the prognostications, Mr. Calver. I believe you. The question is this: What are we doing about it?"

"There's something I read once ..." began Arlen hesitantly.

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

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

"Mars and Venus?"

"Two planets in Earth's solar system," she told the Captain. "Venus is a world very like this, but much closer to its primary. Fierce storms are of very frequent occurrence. Anyhow, in the book, the crew of one of the rockets had to set up stays-I think that's the right word-to prevent their ship from being blown over ..."

"Stays ..." muttered Calver thoughtfully. "Of

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course . . . There are the towing lugs forward, and 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 ..." murmured the *Old Man*.

"It will have to work," said Arlen.

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

Captain Engels tapped the face of 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 presented a dull, smudgy appearance. Overhead the long mares' tails had appeared in what had been a cloudless sky. Faintly audible in the con-trol room was a distant, sighing rumble, rhythmic and ominous. Engels asked, "What is that noise?"

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

"Rig your stays, Mr. Calver," ordered the Cap-tain.

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by nightfall the job was done. Calver, aided by Arlen, Levine, Fender 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 *Lorn Lady's* stem. These wires had been brought down to the boles of convenient, stout trees and had been again shackled to the powerful bottle screws-themselves shackled to the heavy wire strops around the trunks. They had been set up tight-but not too tight. Calver was haunted by a vision of the frail old ship crum-pling 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 sea 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 even 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 se-cure, 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, still working. But there's no hope, now, of our getting away 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 on 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. He took a satisfying swallow of the beer, bit deeply into one of the sandwiches.

He ate and drank slowly, carefully, displaying an outward calmness that he did not feel, trying to ignore the growing tumult outside. The rain was heavy now, torrential, cascading down the weather ports, drumming upon the hull like a swarm of micro-meteorites. The old 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 under the blow, to sag and to 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 Fender 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 that you'd use more mustard when you make sandwiches, Arlen," complained Calver, his voice deliberately casual.

"Mustard with *lamb*?" she demanded scornfully.

"/like it," he said.

"row would," she told him.

"Will this wind get any worse?" asked Fender 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," muttered Fender. "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 Fender's protests, switched off the control room lights, switched on the external floods. The ports to leeward were clear enough, and through them he could see the two lee stays, silvery threads against the darkness, hanging in graceful catenaries. It must be, he realized, the weather stays that now had all the weight, that must have stretched. They were still tight, bar taut, he knew, 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 not to think of 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."

"What?" she asked. "When?"

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

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

"Switch them on, then," Calver told him.

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 false security that comes from familiar surroundings, no matter what hell is raging 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 spacemen should be confronted with a situation that must have been all too familiar to the seamen of the long-dead days of sail on Earth's seas, that was still familiar to the seamen of worlds

upon which wind-driven ships were still employed. How fantastic it was that *Lorn Lady* might well be wrecked by the same forces as had destroyed many a proud windjammer.

As they waited, the air of the control room became heavy with smoke. The fumes of burning tobacco eased the strain on taut nerves, helped to dull the apprehensions even of Fender. Arlen got up from the arm of Calver's chair and went to make coffee, taking some to the Engineers who, with Brentano, 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 coffee cup.

Then-"It's stopped falling!" cried Captain Engels.

"The trough," said Calver. "The eye of the storm. 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."

"By all means, Mr. Galver. Do as you see fit." He sighed. "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 ladder to the airlock. The tools that he had used before were still there, the spanners and the heavy spikes. He satisfied himself that nothing was missing. With the others standing well back, waiting, he opened the outer airlock 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, of course, had been retracted, but

the rungs of the ladder, part of the ship's permanent structure, were still there. He counted the number of rungs visible above the surface, estimated that the water would not be too deep.

He clambered down the ladder, dropped. The water was not cold; it came to his waist. He called to the others. Arlen followed, then Levine, then Doc Malone. Fender stayed in the airlock to pass the tools to them, at last came down himself with obvious reluctance.

They splashed clumsily through the flood to the trees-the trees to which what had been the two lee

stays were anchored. It was heavy going; they could not see what was underfoot and floating debris impeded their progress. Once Arlen screamed faintly as she blundered into the battered body of one of the natives.

Calver left Malone, Fender and Levine at the nearer of the two slack stays, carried on with Arlen to the farther 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 Fender's petulant whine.

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

"Come on," he said to Arlen. "Well give the others a hand. They ..."

The wind tore the words from his mouth, tossed 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 downwind, caught her but could not halt either her or himself, fell with her. They fell, and thrashed and floundered for long seconds under the water. Calver regained his footing at last, struggled to his feet, dragged Arlen with him. He stood there his back to the wind and the almost solid rain, holding her tightly to him, gasping for breath, feeling, against his side, her own tortured gasps. He stood there, and at last was able to look at the tall, shining tower that was the ship. He thought that *he* saw her shudder, begin to shift.

He turned slowly, supported by Arlen as well as supporting her, fighting to retain his balance, to look at the stays. The one that he had tightened was still taut; the other 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.*

Then, before his 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, octopoidal monster at the end of a giant's fishing line. At the other end of the line was *Lorn Lady*, and she was toppling, as she must topple with that dreadful pressure against her, the weight of the wind suddenly unchecked. Over she went, and over. . .

. . . and stopped.

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 fury of the wind, made the thumbs up sign.

And thumbs up it is, thought Calver. *We've licked the storm.* In his relief he failed to notice the suddenly-rising water level until the wave hit him, knocked him off his feet. The force of the sea was broken by the trees but was still not to be underestimated. Calver struggled vainly, managed only to keep his head above the surface. He saw the sheer, steel cliff against which he was being driven, one of the ship's vanes, and flung out his hands to take the impact. And then a swirling eddy pulled him to one side, but not far enough, and his head struck the edge of the vane a grazing blow.

He remembered little thereafter, only the columns of the trees past which he was swept, the trunks at which he grasped feebly, only the floating debris by which he was jostled. He realized dimly that he had been washed off the island, was being carried out to sea. He was still in the lee of the land and the water was relatively calm, and he knew that unless he made some effort to swim back it would soon be too late. But it was too much trouble. Everything was too much trouble.

Then there was somebody beside him, somebody whose body gleamed whitely in the dark water, almost luminous, suddenly bright in the renewed, intermittent flaring of the lightning. There were the strong hands clasped under his chin and the pressure, the feel of firm breasts against the skin of his back, the strenuously kicking legs that sometimes brushed his own, inertly dangling ones. There was the voice saying, gasping, "Wake up, damn you! Help yourself! Don't give up!"

He tried to answer, spluttered as the brackish wa-ter filled his mouth. Abruptly he decided that breath

was too precious to waste on speech. He broke free of the other's hands, turned over, began to swim weakly at first, then more strongly. She kept beside him, matching his pace, murmuring encouragement. But they were too far from the beach and the off-shore set was strong-and he was too weak, too tired.

"Jane," he gasped. "Don't . . . wait . . . Go in . . . Don't . . . worry about . . . me . . ."

"Both of... us ..." she replied, "will make . . . it. Both or . . . neither . . ."

Suddenly realization came, the bitter knowledge that if he ceased to struggle, if he let himself sink into the warm water, she should share this last, ir-redeemable failure. And suddenly he did not want to fail. There was so much that he had done, so much that there was still to do. Automatically his arms and legs moved-and then, consciously, he was making the little extra effort (little, but so much) that enabled him (them?) to move closer, by such pitifully slow degrees, to the beach.

Lightning flared and crackled through the sky but, between the flashes, through the curtain of rain, he could see the floodlit ship, the tower that still stood, raised against the fury of the night. Most of the trees must be down, he thought, for him to be able to see *Lorn Lady* so clearly. Most of the trees must be down, but those that he had selected as anchors for his stays must be, with the exception of the one pulled up by the roots, still standing.

He could see the floodlit ship, still distant, still, in spite of all his efforts, no closer. He called upon the last reserves of his strength, drove aching arms and Jugs through water that seemed to have the consisten-cy of molasses. Jane was still at his side, still keeping

pace-but the sight of her white, strained face in a lightning flash told him that she, too, was tiring.

Then, bobbing just ahead of him, there was a little light and his right hand, in its forward sweep, struck something solid. It was a floating tree branch, and he cursed this obstacle, the necessity for a detour. Then he saw that there was an electric torch lashed to the branch and that from it, to the beach, snaked a long line. Treading water, he helped Jane until she was able to pull herself up onto it, to lie across it. He followed suit, was relieved to find that it supported the weight of both of them. He felt the roughness of bark under his chest, the knotty clump of twigs under his left hand, the wet smoothness of Jane's back un-der his right arm. He shouted, knowing that his voice could never carry against the wind.

Even so, the floating branch began to move, jerkily at first, then steadily, toward the island. Calver could see lights flashing there, moving figures. They were close now. They were close-and suddenly they were all around him, splashing in the shallow water, shouting. There was Malone and there was Levine, and Bendix, and Renault and Brentano, and they lifted him and Jane from the log to which they were still clinging, their kindly hands loosening the stiff, clutching fingers from their desperate grasp on bark and twigs. They supported Jane and Calver, holding them up against the still considerable weight of the wind, half carried them towards the ship.

Calver knew that thanks were unasked for, would, in any case, be inadequate. But he was curious. "How . . .?" he began, gasping, trying to make him-self heard above the storm. "How did you . . . ?* "

"It was Levine!" shouted Brentano. "It was

Levine! I'd never Have dreamed it possible to get a telepathic fix-but he did! Psionic radar, no less!"

Calver wanted them to help Jane into the ship first, but they refused, insisted that he take pre-cedence. A suspicion crept into his mind-a suspi-cion that was confirmed when he had climbed the long stairway to the control room, when he stood there, looked at the body of Captain Engels sprawled on the deck beneath one of the ports. He hardly lis-tened to Malone's explanation, knew what must have happened, could feel the shock that must have stopped the old man's heart when he saw the first of the stays carry away, when the ship began to tilt.

He looked around him at the others.

"And Fender?" he asked.

"He ran, so he did," said Malone. "At the first sign of trouble he ran ..."

"And...?"

"When we knew that the stay would hold," said Levine, "I ... searched. Just as I searched for you later. But there was ... nothing. The wind must have caught him, battered him against a tree, carried him out to sea ..."

Calver walked to the ports, looked out. The re-maining three stays were holding. The wind was moderating. Overhead the clouds were breaking and the lightness of the sky told him that dawn was not far away.

He said-remembering what his first duty as Chief Officer had been-"Mr. Brentano, will you have the Captain's body taken down to the cold chambers? And then you can all of you stand down unless re-quired. I shall stay up here."

"If it's all the same to you, Captain," said Re-

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nault, "we'll carry on with our repairs."

"If you so wish," said Calver.

When the others were gone, taking the body of the old man with them, he collapsed tiredly into a chair, the Captain's chair. So he had his command, he thought. So he had his command-but this was nev-er the way that he would have wished to gain it. So he-naked, bruised, battered-had his command, the captaincy over an old, tired, worn-out rust-bucket ...

He heard Jane coming into the control room. She was dressed, but not in uniform, was wearing a robe that accentuated her femininity. She carried a tray, with coffee, and towels and clothing.

She put the tray and the other things down, knelt beside his chair.

"Derek," she said, "Derek, I'm ... *I'm* frightened ... My jinx ..."

"What jinx?" he asked. "We saved the ship, didn't we?"

"But this was the second thing," she whispered. "First the trouble on Tharn, now this ... Disasters always come in threes ..."

"Calamity Jane," he said softly. "Calamity Jane ... Please don't talk up any more calamities ..."

And he closed her mouth in the most effective way of all.

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the repairs were completed-there was minor dam-age to the hull as well as the original malfunction of the pumps-and *Lorn Lady* lifted from Mellise. Calver was Master and Brentano, orginally Elec-tronic Radio Officer and 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 un-fortunate people to whom machines of any kind are an insoluble mystery, to whom the language of math-ematics is utter gibberish.

But Levine-as they all well knew-pulled his weight. 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 worst cook in the Universe.)

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

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

"It's that T.G. Clipper," said Levine, "the one

that I heard when she was off Elsinore, in the Shakespearian System. *Thermopylae*. I've been yarn-ing with her P.R.O. He wanted the names of the of-ficers here."

"Trans-Galactic Clippers? That's Bendix's old company, isn't it? Anyhow, what the hell is she doing on the Rim?"

"A Galactic cruise, Captain," said Levine, grin-ning. "See the romantic Rim Worlds, Man's last frontier. Breathe the balmy air of Lorn, redolent of sulphur dioxide and old socks ..."

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

"None of the colonized ones. She's showing her passengers that weird planet, Eblis. She's going to hang off it in closed orbit until they've all had a bellyful of spouting volcanoes and lava lakes and the like 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, sound-ing an alarm in the brain of its master at the first hint of some danger imperceptible to the common run of humanity.

Levine's thin face was expressionless, his eyes glazed. He picked up the stylus from its clip on the desk before Calver, began to write in his neat script on the scribbling pad. Calver read the words as they were set down.

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

"Can he hear you?" asked Calver. He repeated the words more loudly, "Can he hear you?"

"Of course," muttered Levine.

"Then tell him," Calver said, "that we're on our way."

He went to the chart tank, studied it, projected a hypothetical trajectory from the spot of light that was *Lorn Lady's* estimated position to the brighter, bigger spark that was the Eblis sun. He studied the picture briefly, read distances off the scales. He knew that Bendix was in the Interstellar Drive Room, went to the telephone, called him. "Mr. Bendix," he said, "I shall want you to push the Drive as hard as you can without throwing us back to last Thursday. One of your old ships is in trouble off Eblis. Yes, *Thermopylae*. Have everything ready. I'll give you the word as soon as we're about to change trajectory." He switched to the Reaction Drive Engineer's cabin. "Mr. Renault, stand by rockets and gyroscopes. We're going to the assistance of *Thermopylae* off Eblis." He switched to Public Address. "This is the Captain speaking. Will all off-duty personnel report at once to Control?"

Levine was writing on the pad again.

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

Arlen and Brentano, followed by old Doc Malone, hurried into the control room. Calver pointed to the

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pad before the silent Levine, then busied hihiself set-ting up the tri-di chart on large scale. It showed the ball of light that was the Eblis sun, the far smaller ball that was Eblis itself and, just inside the verge glass, 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 ma-chine quietly murmured to itself. He looked at the figures on the screen.

"Thirty-five hours ..." he said. "Thirty-five hours -assuming that our D.R. isn't all to hell. But Ben-dix should be able to cut that ..."

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

"We daren't throw away too much reaction mass," said Calver. "We may need every ounce for maneuvering ..." He ordered sharply, "Cut In-terstellar Drive!"

The familiar whine faltered and died. There was the nausea, the brief loss of temporal orientation, the subtly distorted perspective. And then, outside the ports, the Galactic Lens resolved itself from what had been, as poor Maclean had once put it, a Klein Flask blown by a drunken glassblower. There was the hum of the big, directional gyroscope starting up.

"Mr. Brentano," ordered Calver, "a position, if you please. You've the Eblis Sun, and Kinsolving's Star, and the Pointers ..." He turned to the others. "Doc, you'd better secure for acceleration. And you, Jane. Mr. Levine, is your amplifier secure?"

"All secure," said Levine, emerging briefly from his trance.

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

As he spoke he was bringing the Eblis Sun right ahead, centering the ruddy star in the cartwheel sight that was the forward port of the control room. He gave Renault the Stand By signal, then braked the directional gyroscope to a stop. He glanced behind him, saw that Brentano had taken his observations, was feeding the data into the computer. An accurate position now was not necessary for him to determine the line of *Lorn Lady's* flight, but it would be required to help him to estimate time of arrival off Eblis. But that could wait. At his command the rock-ets burst into roaring life, building up 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 had still to be carried out. Too, there would be the question of reserves of reaction mass.

He said, as much to himself as anybody, his fingers tense on the controls set in the arm of the chair, "That will do. Cut Reaction Drive."

He cut the Drive.

He reached for the telephone. "Mr. Bendix, re-sume Interstellar Drive." He added, "It's up to you, Mr. Bendix."

It was a short voyage and, paradoxically, a long one. Bendix drove his machine close to the critical limit, too close, so close that *Lorn Lady* became almost a timeship rather than a spaceship. Time Travel is impossible-in theory. Time Travel is impossible- but everybody aboard the old ship knew that it was all too possible.

Calver went once to the Mannschenn Drive Room.

He stood in the doorway, almost choking on the

fumes of hot lubricating oil, looking into the compartment, watching the engineer who, his face worried and intent, was making minor adjustments to the controls. He felt rather than heard the thin, high whine of the precessing gyroscopes, hardly dared look at the tumbling, precessing wheels, the gleaming wheels that whirled in the glittering haze, that seemed always to be on the point of falling down the dark infinities, always on the point of vanishing and yet, somehow, were always there, always there to pull eye and mind after them down the dimensions, back and back to the primal Chaos.

He wrenched his regard away from the main body of the machine, realized suddenly that something was missing. It was the governor, that comfortingly stable rotor at which he always looked after too long a time spent staring at the precessing gyroscopes. The governor was gone, removed by Bendix, who was controlling the Drive unit by hand.

Calver shrugged. Bendix knew what he was doing. He hoped.

The engineer straightened, looked around. "Cap-tain ..." he said vaguely. Then, more alertly, "How're we doing?"

"Fine," said Calvet.

"Any more word from *Thermopylae*?"

"Yes. They're hanging on. They're all ready to abandon ship, but hope that they won't have to."

"And I ..."

"*Watch your controls!*" shouted Calver.

Bendix stooped again. Calver saw his face pale beneath the grime, saw the long hands flash to the verniers. The high, thin keening deepened in tone ever so slightly, steadied. Bendix mumbled, not looking up, "That was close ..."

"What was?"

"We were almost caught in a Time Cycle ..."

"But all the text books," said Calver, "say that that's impossible."

"You know it's not," said Bendix. "I know it's not.. ."

"Better put that governor back," said Calver.

"It will mean stopping the Drive," Bendix told him.

"Then ..." Calver paused. "Mr. Bendix, will you be able to last out? Remember that we shan't be able to help *Thermopylae's* people if we're thrown back into the remote Past."

"I'll last out," said Bendix stubbornly. "I'll last out. See that I get plenty of coffee and cigarettes, and I'll manage ..."

Calver went back to Control. He was learning the hardest lesson that a shipmaster ever has to learn—the lesson that teaches him not to interfere. He had told Bendix that he wanted maximum objective speed made to Eblis—and Bendix was obeying his orders. So doing, he was hazarding the ship—but this would not be the first time in her long career that she had been hazarded. Calver was conscious that her safety hung upon the ability of one man to keep awake, to stay alert. But how many times had she been at the mercy of a single fuse, a single transistor? What was the difference, if any?

He went back to Control, told Jane to see to it that Bendix had all that he required to keep him functioning efficiently. He stood over the chart tank, looking into the sphere of blackness in which swam the little lights that were suns and worlds and ships, the glow-ing filament that was *Lorn Lady's* trajectory. He saw that Brentano, working from data supplied by the

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crippled *Thermopylae*, had set up the liner's orbit around Eblis. The effect was like that of the "rings of Saturn—but this ring was dreadfully lopsided.

He strapped himself in his chair, tried to ignore the ever-recurrent feeling of *deja vu*, the loss of tempo-ral orientation, tried to push all thoughts of the crazy, fantastic machine, with its almost as crazy keeper, out of his mind. He tried to decide what gear he would require, what his procedure would be. It would have to be a tow. *Lorn Lady* was too small, too ill-found, to accommodate all the people, crew and passengers, from the big ship. It would have to be a tow . . . And then he found himself remembering those memories that were not his, the memories that he had shared when *Lorn Lady*, briefly, had merged with the Rim Ghost.

A tow, he thought.

A tow, all the way from Eblis to Lorn. Propellant will be no problem. Thermopylae won't be able to use any, so I'll be able to take hers. There 'll be the problem, of course, of synchronizing Manneschenn Drive Units—but if Bendix can do what he's doing now, he shouldn't find that beyond him ...

A tow, and the standard Lloyd's Agreement . . .

A shipmaster is businessman as well as spaceman and, whilst ever ready to save life and property, keeps always in mind the interests of his Owners—and of himself.

"A penny for them," said Jane brightly, bringing in coffee.

He said, "They're worth rather more than a pen-ny. They're worth a few million dollars."

Below the two ships hung the burning world of

Eblis, a glowing, crimson affront to the dark. *Lorn Lady* had made the run in less than

thirty-three hours, Terran Standard, but there was little enough time to spare. Already *Thermopylae* had grazed the outermost, most tenuous layers of the Eblis at-mosphere, already the elements of her elliptical orbit were such as to make it obvious, without calculation, that the final plunge could not long be delayed.

Calver, on his arrival off the baleful planet, had been pleasantly surprised to find much in readiness. Before *Lorn Lady* had flickered into sight in normal Space, *Thermopylae's* tow lines had been broken out and shackled to the lugs just abaft her needle prow. Before *Lorn Lady* had ceased to decelerate, while she had yet to match orbits, spacesuited crewmen were leaping the gulf between the ships, trailing the light lines that would be used to pull the heavy wires across.

Orbits matched, Calver put on his spacesuit and went outside. He found *Thermopylae's* people already busy about his stern vanes, already heaving in the first of the heavy wires. He found the liner's Chief Officer, recognizing him by the three gold bars inset into the plastic of his helmet, touched helmets with him, talked briefly and to the point. He realized that the other man knew his job; if he had not, he would not have been second-in-command of a great liner. He realized that the other man knew his job-and knew that the other man was far from realizing the fragility of *Lorn Lady*. He stopped the spaceman who was trying to hammer the pin of a shackle through the towing lug-it was too neat a fit-made the strangers wait until he had brought out shackles from his own stores.

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This took time, just as it took time for Calver, now back in his control room, to jockey his vessel into the best position, to be sure that none of the lines would be cut by his back-blast and then-carefully, carefully-to take the weight. Velocity, mass, thrust, inertia -all had to be considered, all had to be juggled.

Calver juggled them, coming ahead slowly, slowly, his attention fixed on the periscope rigged by Bren-' tano, on the trailing lines, on the blowtorch of the exhaust, all the brighter for the strontium salts added to the propellant. He juggled them, taking the weight gently until all four lines were taut, building up ac-celeration slowly until the main venturi was deliver-ing its maximum thrust. *Lorn Lady* was doing her best -and the radar readings, checked and rechecked by Brentano, made it dreadfully obvious that her best was not good enough.

It was Arlen who looked at the atmospheric pres-sure gauge, who saw that the needle was falling rapidly. She signalled to Brentano, who left the radar to look at the dial.

The little man swore, then whispered fiercely, "She's rotten. She's coming apart at the seams, leak-ing like a colander ..."

"Spacesuits?" she asked.

"Of course. I'll tell Doc and the engineers. You look after the Old Man."

Arlen nudged Levine, who was sitting on the other side of her. She snapped, "Get into your suit," and saw him open his eyes wide in comprehension, go to the rack on which the suits were kept. She turned to watch Calver, hesitating to disturb him in his tricky work, waited until she saw the tense lines of his jaw momentarily relax. "Derek! We're losing air, fast.

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You'll have to get back into your spacesuit!"

He did not answer but glanced hastily at the pres-sure gauge, realized the seriousness of the situation. He pondered briefly the advisability of turning the controls over to Brentano for a minute or so, then rejected the idea. Brentano was a good officer, an outstanding officer, but he had no experience of ship handling.

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

"It will have to wait."

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

"Your suit!"

Reluctantly he looked away from the controls, saw that the others, with the exception of Arlen, were

al-ready wearing the bulky, pressurized garments, the transparent helmets. He glared at the woman.

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

Thrust . . . he thought. Thrust. . .

And for lack of thrust the needle peaks of the hell world beneath them were reaching up through the crimson, 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 skipper should have used his boats and put his passengers into the relative safety of a closed orbit around the planet while there was yet time . . . He would have used his boats, thought Calver bitterly, either to attempt a tow, or for lifesaving, if I hadn 't come bumbling along in this decrepit old barge with my futile promises of assistance . . .

He chanced another sidewise glance, saw that

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Brentano and Levine were forcing Arlen into her suit. That, he told himself, was one worry the less.

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

The speaker of the short range receiver crackled and an emotionless voice, the voice of the liner's Master, said, "*Thermopylae to Lorn Lady. Thank you, Lorn Lady. It was a good try, but it wasn't quite good enough. Stand by to cast off. I intend to abandon ship while there is time.*"

"Wait!" shouted Calver. "Wait!" He was shocked at the thin quality of his voice in the thinning air. "Wait . . ." he whispered.

His hand dropped to the firing keys of the aux-iliary jets. He felt the sudden surge of additional power that pressed him down into the padding of his chair. He saw, on the periscope screen, the sudden blossoming of fire around *Lorn Lady's* stern but for-ward of the main venturi, the vanes, the towing lugs.

Turning, he saw Brentano look up and away from the radar, his dark face behind the transparency one big grin.

Then he felt, rather than heard, the dreadful splin-tering and grinding, the rending, of old, crystallized metal. On the screen he saw the coruscation of blind-ing sparks from the severed parts of one of the wires, saw the whole stern of the ship tilting at an im-possible angle relative to the rest of her. As he looked, hardly comprehending, the air was gone from the control room in one explosive gasp and he was chok-ing on nothingness, suffocating. Somebody was bending over him, trying to do something to him. *Let me alone!* he thought. He realized that it was Jane,

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Calamity Jane. With a flash of empathy he read her thoughts. *It's not your fault*, he was trying to say. *Jane, 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, pulled up his jacket to make a rough, tem-porary seal around the neck of the transparent bowl. Calver heard the sharp hissing of the air, had barely enough sense to take a deep breath, and another. He was dimly aware that the others were pulling him out of his seat, forcing his clumsy limbs into the arms and legs of the suit, tugging and sealing it around him.

For what seemed a long time, to be able to breathe was all he asked. Then, partly recovered, he put his helmet against Brentano's, asked, "What hap-pened?"

"She broke in two, Captain. After that first wire parted. The uneven, unbalanced strain . . . She broke in two. Everybody's safe, but she's a total loss."

"And *Thermopylae*?"

"In a closed orbit. A stable orbit."

Calver should have felt triumphant, but he did not.

He had lost his ship.

through the control room ports they could see the crimson globe of Eblis and, hanging to one side of it, 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 rent and battered stern. Calver watched with a numb feeling. The responsibilities of a ship-master do not cease with the loss of his ship, but after all that can be done has been done, when the safety of personnel and of valuable cargo has been assured, there is an end to responsibility.

Little now remained to be done.

The old ship was dead, but some of her would live on for a while. Her cannibalized tube linings would provide *Thermopylae* with the jury rig that would enable her to reach Port Forlorn.

Calver watched the bright, electric sparks of the cutting torches, the brief stars against the blackness that had never known a star. Somehow, this final dis-

memberment of *Lorn Lady* hurt him more than the actual wreck had done.

Jane Arlen put her gloved hands on his space-suited shoulders, touched her helmet to his. "Der-ek," she said, her voice strange, remote. "Derek, I think that this had better be goodbye. I always bring bad luck with me, wherever I go. Perhaps you'll be-lieve me now."

He shook himself out of his apathetic mood. He said, a little too loudly, "Rubbish! *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 sudden optimism, "I hate to leave her. The poor old *Forlorn 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 huge liner, to the circle of light that was the airlock door. In the little compartment, when the outer door had closed, they divested themselves of their suits, 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 had served in vessels of this class, passengers must be shielded from the harsh realities of Space.

The junior officer waiting to receive them saluted smartly.

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

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"Thank you," said Calver.

They followed their guide along alleyways, through public rooms. The passengers-the plump, sleek men, the expensive women-stared at the man who had lost his ship to save their lives. More than once there were the beginnings of a demonstration, spontaneous outbursts of clapping and cheering. Calver was thankful when they entered the privacy of the axial shaft. Hand over hand, he and Arlen pulled themselves swiftly along the guide rail behind *Thermopylae's* officer.

The Captain of the liner-an old man, a man who had aged many years in the last few hours-was seated in his day room, behind his big, polished desk. He unsnapped the buckle of his seat belt as they entered his cabin, advanced to meet them.

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

"I did what I could," said Calver.

"I shall do what I can," said Hendriks. "Some-times, too often, in wrangles over salvage, the owners of the ships involved are remembered and their crews, who have done the work, taken the risks, are forgotten. But I am not without influence ..."

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

"Have you been Master long?" asked Hendriks.

"No. Only a dog watch."

"There's more to the game than navigation, than ship handling," said the big ship man.

"I guess so."

Hendriks busied himself at his liquor cabinet, brought out drinking bulbs. He apologized. "The best I have isn't good enough . . . This Samian wine?"

The Altairian Angels' Tears?"

"Anything will do," said Calver.

"Perhaps the Angels' Tears," said Arlen.

"As you wish." Hendriks looked at her, at Calver. He said, "You must hate it out here. But you'll be able to return now, perhaps, to the warmth and the light of the Center . . ."

"So we shall," said Calver, with a mild amaze-ment. "So we shall." His hand sought and found Jane Aden's, closed upon it, felt the answering warmth and pressure.

"But I belong on the Rim," he said. "We belong on the Rim."