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THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE



A. Bertram Chandler

First Book Publication

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Bill Maudsley

He had knowledge of the unknown—and it destroyed him.

Levine

His psionic powers could span galaxies, but he refused to read the mind of a dead man.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

by

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

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BEYOND THE GALACTIC RIM

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I

IT WAS ON Stree that Calver, Master of the star-tramp *Rimfire*, received the news. He was in his day cabin at the time and he and Jane Calver, who was both his wife and his Catering Officer, were trying to entertain the large, not unhandsome lizard who acted as Rim Runners' local agent. It had been heavy going; the saurians of Stree are avid for new knowledge and delight in long-winded and woolly philosophical discussions. Both Jane and Calver tried hard not to show their relief when there was a sharp rapping at the cabin door.

"Excuse me, Treeth," Calver said.

"Most certainly, Captain," replied the agent. "Doubtless one of your officers bears tidings of great import."

"I doubt it," said Jane Calver, with a slight shrug of her shapely shoulders. "It'll be no more than some minor problem of stowage, or something."

"Or something," agreed her husband. He raised his voice. "Come in."

The agent, who had been sitting on the deck, rose gracefully to his feet, his long tail skimming the afternoon tea crockery on the low coffee table with a scant millimeter of clearance. Jane, when the expected crash failed to eventuate, heaved an audible sigh of relief. Treeth looked at Calver and grinned, showing all his needle teeth. Calver said nothing but wished that a childish sense of humor did not, as it so often and too often does, go hand in hand with super intelligence.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

Levine, the little Psionic Radio Officer, bounced into the cabin. For a moment Calver thought that the man had been drinking, then rejected the idea; Levine was well known for his abstemious ways. But there are other euphorics than alcohol.

"Captain," he babbled, "I've picked up a message. An important one. Really important. Donaldson, the P.R.O. at Port Farewell, must have hooked up every telepath and every dog's brain amplifier on the whole damn planet to punch it through at this range."

"And what is this news?" asked Calver.

"The *Thermopylae* salvage case," cried Levine. "It's been settled at last."

"So Rim Runners get their new ship," said Calver. "So what?"

"To hell with Rim Runners!" exploded Levine. "*We* get our whack—all of us who were in the poor old *Lorn Lady* at the time."

Treeth sat down again. He showed that he was interested by forgetting to repeat his infantile joke with his tail and the tea things. He said, in the well-modulated voice that held only the suggestion of a croak, the merest hint of a hiss, "I trust that you will forgive my curiosity, Captain. But we, as you know, were utterly ignorant of commercial matters until your Commodore Grimes made his first landing on our planet. What is salvage?"

"Putting it briefly," Calver told him, "roughly and briefly, it's this. If you come across another ship in distress you do all that you can to save life and property. The lifesaving is, after all, it's own reward. It's when property—the other vessel, or her cargo, or both—is saved that the legal complications creep in. There are so many interested parties—the owners of the ships involved, the owners of the cargo and, last but not least, Lloyds of London, who carry the insurance. . . ."

"Last but not least," corrected Jane, "the crew of the ship that carries out the act of salvage, the people who've done all the work."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Anyhow," went on Calver, "the whole mess is dumped on the lap of an Admiralty court. The court decides who gets paid how much for doing what."

"And this *Thermopylae*?" asked Treeth. "We heard something about her from Captain Vickery, of the *Sundowner*. It happened shortly after *Lorn Lady's* last visit here, if I remember rightly. I shall be obliged if you will apprise me of the relevant facts."

"All right," said Calver. "*Thermopylae* was—and, so far as I know, still is—one of the Trans-Galactic Clippers, a large passenger liner. She was making a cruising voyage out along the Rim. She got into trouble off Eblis. . . ."

"A most unpleasant world," said Treeth. "I have seen pictures of it."

"As you say, a most unpleasant world. Anyhow, *Thermopylae* was putting herself into orbit around Eblis so that her passengers could admire the scenery and—things always seem to happen at the worst possible times—she blew her tube linings. As a result of this she was doomed to make a series of grazing ellipses until such time as she crashed to the surface. We, in *Lorn Lady*, picked up her distress calls and just about bust a gut getting there in time. We tried to tow her into a stable orbit. We succeeded—but wrecked our own ship in the process. Then *Thermopylae* used our tube linings to make temporary repairs to her own reaction drive units. As you can see, it was the sort of case that brings joy to the hearts of the lawyers and large wads of folding money into their pockets; in addition to the straightforward salvage there was the sacrifice of one ship to save the other."

"And you have, at last, been rewarded by the owners of *Thermopylae*?" asked Treeth.

"So it would appear," answered Calver.

"And how!" cried Levine, who had been waiting for a chance to get a word in. "And by Lloyds! A cool three quarters of a million to *Lorn Lady's* crew! I haven't got the individual figures yet, but . . ."

"This," said Jane, "calls for a celebration. Luckily we're well stocked with liquor. . . ."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

The agent got to his feet again. "And now I must depart," he said gently. "For me, a stranger, an outsider, to be present at your thanksgiving would not be fitting. But there is one thing about you beings that never ceases to mystify me—the need that you feel to deaden the effects of the exhilaration that comes with good news by the ingestion of alcohol. . . ." He paused. "Good afternoon to you, Captain and Captain's lady, and to you, Mr. Levine. I am sufficiently familiar with your vessel to be able to find my own way ashore.

"Good afternoon—and my sincere congratulations."

There was Calver, tall and gangling, and there was Jane Calver who, as "Calamity Jane" Arlen, had been Catering Officer of the lost *Lorn Lady*. Calver sat at the head of the table in *Rimfire's* saloon and Jane, tall and slim, and with the silver streak in her glossy dark hair gleaming like a slender coronet, sat at his right hand. Very much Captain and Captain's lady they had been when the other officers had been with them, the officers who had not served in *Lorn Lady*. But now these others had retired to their several cabins and the party was for *Lorn Lady's* people only.

There was the painfully thin Bendix, with the few remaining strands of black hair brushed carefully over his shining scalp, who had been Interstellar Drive Engineer in T.G. Clippers before coming out to the Rim for reasons known only to himself. There was Renault, the Rocket King, swarthy, always in need of depilation, Reaction Drive Engineer—he, like Jane and Calver, was out of the Interstellar Transport Commission's ships. There was little Brentano, in charge of Electronic Radio Communications, highly competent and capable of standing a watch in the control room or in either of the two engine rooms should the need arise. There was Levine, another small man and also competent—extremely so—but only in his own field. There was old Doc Malone, looking like a jovial monk who had, somehow, put on a uniform in mistake for his habit.

The decanter was passed around the table.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"A toast," said Bendix harshly. "A toast. We'll drink to you, Calver. It's thanks to you that this good fortune has come our way."

"No," demurred the Captain. "No. We'll drink to us, to all of us. We were all in it together, and we all of us did our best." He raised his glass. "To us," he repeated quietly.

"And to hell with the Rim!" Brentano almost shouted. "To hell with Lorn and Faraway, Ultimo and Thule and the whole damned Eastern Circuit!"

"And are you going home, Brentano?" asked Doc Malone. "And are you going home? To the warm Cluster Worlds, to the swarming suns and their attendant planets? Won't you feel confined, shut in? Won't you miss the empty sky, the call of it, the mystery of it? Won't you miss this freemasonry of ours?"

"And what about you, Doc?" countered Brentano. "Aren't you going home?"

The old man was silent for what could have been only seconds, but it seemed longer. He said at last, very softly, ". . . and home there's no returning."

"I'm afraid he's right," murmured Bendix, breaking the sudden silence.

"He is right," Renault said.

And Calver remembered how he and Jane had stood in the Captain's cabin aboard *Thermopylae*, and how her hand had found his, and how he had said, "But we belong on the Rim."

He said it again.

"So we belong on the Rim," said Jane briskly. "We seem to be in complete agreement on that point, with the exception of friend Brentano. . . ."

"Why make an exception of me?" demanded the Radio Officer plaintively. "I'm as much a Rim Runner as any of you."

"But you said—," began Jane.

"What I say isn't always what I think, or feel." His face clouded. "Old Doc put it in a nutshell. *And home there's no returning*—not unless we want to face what we ran away from, not unless we want to reopen old wounds. All

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

the same, there must be more in life than running the Eastern Circuit."

"What if we ran it on our own behalf?" asked Calver.

"You mean . . . ?" queried Renault.

"What I said. With what we've got we shall be able to buy an obsolescent *Epsilon* Class tramp and have enough left over for the refit. We know the trade, and there's quite a deal of goodwill on the Eastern Circuit planets that's ours rather than the Company's."

"The Sundown Line didn't last long," quibbled Levine.

"Perhaps not," said Bendix, "but they didn't lose any money when Rim Runners bought them out."

"It was never in my thoughts," said old Doc Malone, "that I should be a shipowner in the evening of my days."

"You aren't one yet," remarked Brentano.

"Perhaps not. But the idea is not without its charm. Now, just supposing that we do buy ourselves a ship, what do we call ourselves?"

"The Outsiders," said Calver.

II

CALVER WAS relieved that it was not necessary to make a voyage all the way to Terra to pick up a suitable ship. The return to Terra would have brought back too many memories—for Jane as well as for himself. When he had come out to the Rim he had said goodbye to Earth, and he liked his farewells to be permanent.

It was Levine who, spending his watches gossiping with his opposite numbers in ships within telepathic range, learned that the Commission's *Epsilon Aurigae* had been delivered to Nova Caledon for sale to a small local company, and that the sale had broken down. It was Levine who succeeded in getting in touch with the P.R.O. at Port Caledon and persuading him to pass word to the Commission's agent there that buyers would shortly be on the way.

The stickiest part of it all, of course, was the mass resig-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

nation of all *Rimfire's* senior officers when she set down at Port Faraway. Commodore Grimes—back in harness as Astronautical Superintendent after his exploratory jaunts—stormed and blustered, threatened to sue Calver and the others for breach of contract. Then, when he saw that it was hopeless, he softened.

"You're all good men," he said. "Yes—and one good woman. I don't like to see you go. But, with all that money coming to you, you'd be fools to stay on the Rim."

"But we are staying on the Rim, sir," said Calver quietly.

"What? If you intend to live on the interest of your salvage money, Captain, there are far better places to do it."

"Commodore," said Calver, "you're an astronaut, not a businessman. I'm talking to you now as one spaceman to another, and I'll be grateful if you respect the confidence. We intend to set up shop as shipowners. You've often said yourself that there's a grave shortage of tonnage on the Eastern Circuit."

Grimes laughed. "You know, Calver, if I were in your shoes I'd probably be doing the same myself. But I warn you, there won't always be a shortage of ships, Rim Runner ships, out here."

"But there is now," said Calver.

"There is now. We may be willing to charter you. But when there's no longer a shortage. . . ."

"You'll run us out of space," finished Calver.

"Too right," promised Grimes. "We will. . . . Meanwhile, Calver, the best of luck. Let me know when you're due back out here and I'll see what I can do for you—provided that it doesn't conflict with Rim Runners' interests, of course."

"Thank you, sir," said Calver, shaking hands.

So they booked passage for Nova Caledon, all of them, making the lengthy, roundabout voyage that was inevitable in this poorly serviced sector of the Galaxy. From Faraway to Elsinore they traveled in the Shakespearean Lines' *Miranda*, and from Elsinore to van Diemen's Planet in the Commision's *Delta Sagittarius*. On van Diemen's Planet they

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

were lucky enough to find that the Waverley Royal Mail's *Countess of Arran* had been delayed by engineroom repairs, otherwise they would have been obliged to wait a month on that world for the next connection.

At last they dropped down through the inevitable misty drizzle to Port Caledon. Calver, as a shipmaster, could have enjoyed the freedom of the *Countess's* control room, but he preferred to stay in the observation lounge with his own officers and, of course, with Jane.

There was, they saw, only one other ship in the port—obviously an *Epsilon* Class vessel.

"Ours," Jane murmured.

"Ours," repeated Bendix.

"She looks a mess," said Brentano glumly.

"No more a mess than the poor old *Lorn Lady* was," said Bendix.

"She's a ship," said Calver. "She'll do. She'll have to do."

"She's *our* ship," stated Jane firmly. "Of course she'll do."

Conversation lapsed as they settled down into the acceleration chairs, adjusting their seat belts. Calver felt the apprehension that he always felt when he was traveling as passenger, knew that the others were feeling it too. It was not that he was a better ship handler than *Countess of Arran's* Captain, it was just that unless he knew what was happening he was acutely unhappy.

There was the usual slight jar and quiver, the subdued creaking and whispering of the shock absorbing springs and cylinders. There was the usual spate of instruction and information from the bulkhead speakers. And, shortly thereafter, there were the dragging customs and immigration formalities, the filling in of forms and the answering of questions. And then, when this was finished, there was the problem of the disposal of their not inconsiderable baggage. The Master of the *Countess* was very helpful and introduced Calver to the Deputy Port Captain who, in his turn, arranged temporary stowage in the spaceport's gear store and also put through a call to the Commission's agent.

When the agent arrived, Calver and his people were al-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

ready aboard the ship and had commenced their inspection of her instruments and machinery. And she was, Calver had decided, a good ship. She was overage, and obsolescent, but the Commission looks after its vessels well. After the weeks of neglect at Port Caledon there was much to be done before she would be habitable, but there was no doubt as to her spaceworthiness.

Finally Calver stood with the agent and Jane in the control room.

"You're getting a good ship here, Captain," said the agent. "It was lucky for you that Caledonian Spaceships folded before they ever got off the ground."

"I know," said Calver.

"There's one thing that I don't like about her," said Jane.

"And what is that, Mrs. Calver?"

"Her name. As you know, most ships have fancy names and their crews are able to twist them round into something amusing and affectionate. But *Epsilon Aurigae* . . ."

"Don't listen to her," said Calver. "In any case, we shall be changing the name."

"Of course," agreed the agent. "And what are you calling her?"

"*The Outsider*," said Jane.

"And how in the galaxy can you twist *that* into something affectionate and amusing?" asked the puzzled agent.

So *The Outsider* she was.

When the new, shining, golden letters of her new name had been welded to the sharp prow—a romanticizing of the drab legalities involved in changing name and port of registry—Jane went up in the cage to the top of the scaffolding and there, with the others watching from below—smashed a bottle of champagne over the gleaming characters. And then, with this last ritual performed, *The Outsider* was ready for space. She was fueled and provisioned. Hydroponic tanks and yeast and tissue culture vats were functioning perfectly. She had, even, already begun to earn her keep. Her

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

cargo compartments were tightly stowed with casks of whisky and bales of tweed for the Rim Worlds.

Manning the ship had been the biggest problem.

There is no shortage of spacemen at the Centre; neither, oddly enough, is the shortage really acute out on the Rim. It is on halfway worlds such as Nova Caledon that it is hard to find qualified personnel. In the end, however, Calver was able to engage a Chief Officer of sorts, a drunken derelict who had missed his ship on Nova Caledon. He found a Second Officer—a Nova Caledonian who, tired of space, had come ashore to raise sheep and who now, tired of sheep, was willing to make the voyage out to the Rim provided that repatriation was guaranteed. Then there were two junior professors—one of physics and the other of mathematics—from the University of Nova Caledon who wanted to see something of the Galaxy and who were willing to sign on as junior engineers. There were no pursers available—but Jane and the two communications officers would be able to cope with that side of things quite easily.

After the brief christening ceremony Jane returned to ground level and the scaffolding was wheeled away. Slowly, with dignity, a parade in miniature, *The Outsider's* people marched up the ramp to the airlock, Calver in the lead. Once inside the ship, they dispersed to their stations. Spaceport Control gave the final clearance, the conventional good wishes. Renault's rockets coughed and sighed gently, then gave tongue to the familiar screaming roar. *The Outsider* lifted, slowly at first, delicately balanced atop the lengthening column of her incandescent exhaust. Faster and faster she climbed through the misty skies of Nova Caledon until the pearly overcast was beneath her and ahead of her was the star-spangled blackness of space.

Once she was well clear of the atmosphere Calver put her through her paces. She was a good ship and responded sweetly to her controls. She was a good ship and, with one exception, she had a good crew to serve her. The two scientists made up in intelligence and enthusiasm for what they lacked in practical engineering experience. The ex-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

sheepman demonstrated that he had forgotten very little about ships in his years ashore. Of the capabilities of the old crew of *Lorn Lady* there was, of course, no doubt. The Mate was the weak link in the chain; his reactions were painfully slow and he seemed to have no interest whatever in his duties. Calver decided to have Brentano rig up duplicate, tell-tale instruments in the Master's cabin at the first opportunity. There is little risk of mishap to a well-found, well-organized ship in deep space—but on the rare occasions that mishaps do occur they are liable to be disastrous unless the officer of the watch is alert. Calver also made up his mind to instruct Jane to keep Maudsley's liquor ration to the bare minimum and to impress upon old Doc Malone not to give the Mate any of his homemade Irish whisky. Furthermore, he would read the Riot Act to the Mate on the first suitable occasion.

The first thing to be done, however, was to set course for the Rim. Her rocket drive silent, *The Outsider* rotated around her humming gyroscopes to the correct heading, checked and steadied. For the last time the rockets flared and she pushed off into the black infinity, the pale-gleaming sphere that was Nova Caledon dwindling astern of her. There was free fall again as the Reaction Drive was cut, there was the familiar—yet never familiar—gut-and-mind-wrenching twist, the uncanny feeling of *déjà vu* as the Mannschenn Drive built up its temporal precession fields.

And then, outside the control room ports, the hard, brilliant stars flickered and faded, and were replaced by the hypnotically coiling whorls of luminosity, the shifting colors known only to those who have made the Long Drop, who have ridden to the stars on a crazy contraption of precessing gyroscopes through the warped fabric of the continuum.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

III

TIME—objective and subjective—passed.

It passed fast and not unpleasantly for most of *The Outsider's* people. There was much to do, many things that were not quite right and that could be, and were, tinkered with until they were brought to the state of perfection that gladdens the heart of an efficient officer—especially an efficient officer who is also an owner. Cappell, the Second Mate, and Lloyd and Ritter, the two junior engineers, had no shares in the ship but were infected, nonetheless, by the general enthusiasm. Maudsley was the odd man out, the malcontent. He refused to mix with the others, bolting his meals in silence and then retiring immediately to his own cabin.

Calver discussed him with Jane. He said, "I'm sorry that we had to ship that unsociable bastard. Unluckily, Cappell has only a Second Pilot's ticket, and Maudsley's a Master Astronaut. Even so. . . ."

"We were stuck on Nova Caledon until we could find two certificated officers," said Jane. "We had to take what we could get. In any case, Maudsley's improving."

"Is he?" asked Calver. "Is he? I can't say that I've noticed it. He's as much a mournful bloodhound walking on two legs as he was when we signed him on. More so, in fact. Then he was able to maintain the normal alcoholic blood content, and it did give him a little sparkle."

"But he *is* improving," insisted Jane. "He's looking healthier. He's putting on weight."

"All right, all right. We know that you're a good cook. It's his manner that I don't like."

"And I didn't like yours when I first met *you*. Remember? There you were, an ex-Chief Officer out of the Commission's big ships, joining a scruffy little Rim Runners' tramp as Second Mate and hating every moment of it. After all, Derek,

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

Maudsley has come down in the world too. He *has* sailed as Master. . . .”

“And he lost his ship, and was very lucky not to lose his Certificate.”

“You lost your ship.”

“In rather different circumstances, my dear. And nobody—neither Rim Runners nor ourselves—lost out on the deal.”

“What about Lloyds’ and Trans-Galactic Clippers?” quibbled Jane.

“They can afford it,” Calver told her. He carefully filled and lit his pipe. “Anyhow, we shall be getting rid of our Mr. Maudsley as soon as we make Port Faraway.”

“Even though you are Master and part owner,” she flared, “there’s no need to be so hard. With the exception of Cappell and Lloyd and Ritter—and, I suppose, Levine—we’re all of us outsiders here, throw-outs from the Centre and the big ships, outsiders on the Rim. Maudsley’s like us—or, if you prefer it, like what we used to be. He’s had his troubles, and he’s running away from them, and he’s just about hit rock bottom. This is his chance of rehabilitation. Would you deny it to him?”

“This,” said Calver evenly, “happens to be a shipping company—even though it is only a one ship company—not a charitable organization. When and if Mr. Maudsley stops behaving like a first trip cadet with a bad fit of the sulks and starts behaving like a Chief Officer, I’ll consider keeping him on. Until then. . . .”

“I still think that you’re far too harsh,” she told him.

“And I still think,” he said, “that I have the best interests of the ship and her owners at heart.”

That was all that was said then—but more, much more, was said later. That was when Maudsley—who possessed other attributes of the bloodhound beside the appearance—discovered old Doc Malone’s secret cache of whisky and drank himself into insensibility. Calver’s first reaction was annoyance, his second was disgust. He did not start to get worried until Malone came to see him in the control room

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

where, because of the incapacitation of the Chief Officer, Calver was keeping a watch.

"Captain," said Malone, "we've a very sick man on our hands."

"Doctor," said Calver coldly, "we have a drunken, irresponsible wastrel on our hands and I, personally, shall see to it that he is first out of the airlock when we reach port."

"He'll be first out of the airlock all right," said Malone, "but it'll be long before we reach port."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he's dying. He was as weak as a kitten when we pushed off from Port Caledon and this last bout, coming as it did after a period of enforced abstinence, has been too much for his system."

"In this day and age?" scoffed Calver.

"Yes. In this day and age. In any day and age all that the physician has ever done has been to help the patient to recover. When there's no will to live, what can any doctor do? Jane's with him now, but I think that you'd better come along yourself."

"Wait till I call Brentano up to Control," said Calver, reaching for the telephone. And then, when the indispensable little Radio Officer was in charge of the watch, he followed Malone to the officers' flat.

Maudsley's cabin reeked of vomit and decay and stale liquor. Maudsley was strapped in his bunk and Jane, quietly and efficiently, was cleaning the air of the disgusting globules of fluid with an absorbent cloth. She looked around as her husband and the doctor entered. She said, "He's unconscious again." She grimaced. "Just as well—although I'm sure that there's nothing left in his stomach now."

Calver looked at Maudsley. The man no longer resembled a bloodhound. He no longer resembled anything living. His head was a skull over which dirty white parchment had been stretched. The rise and fall of his chest was barely perceptible.

"He talked," said Jane briefly. "He had a lucid moment, and he talked. He told me that he was running away. But—

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

and this was the odd part—he said that he was running from the Rim.”

Calver saw Maudlsey's eyes flicker open, saw the dry lips twitch, heard the creaking, almost inaudible whisper. “Yes, damn you all. From the Rim, and from the Outsiders. If I'd been sober, I'd never have signed on aboard your stinking ship. You're taking me back, you bastard, but I'll not go.” His voice rose to a shriek. “I'll not go! You can't force me.” He laughed then, wildly and frighteningly, and his voice dropped again, to a low, confidential whisper. “There's wealth there, and power and knowledge, and it was almost in my grasp, but I was afraid. I'm still afraid. If you take me back to the Rim I shall know, all the time, that it's out there, waiting for me, and I'll be afraid to go and find it again, and that will be the worst of all, knowing that it's there. . . .” He looked at Calver and Jane and Malone with burning, pleading eyes. “You must see that. Even you must see that. . . .”

“What is it that's out there?” asked Calver quietly.

A cunning expression flickered over Maudsley's ravaged face. “I'll see you in hell before I tell you. It's mine, *mine!* If I told you, you might get past the Outsiders and then it would be yours. It wouldn't be fair. I lost my ship, and I lost my commission. I lost the *Polar Queen* and that was the price I paid. Yes I paid, and I paid too much, and I'm still paying. But I shall go back to the Rim when I'm ready, and not before, and I'll go back Outside to find again what I've paid for, but I shan't go until I want to go. You can't carry me back against my will. You can't. Doctor, tell him that he can't. Tell him!”

“You'd better leave him to me,” said Malone to Calver. “He's frightened of you, and he hates you.”

“What about getting Levine in here?” whispered Calver.

“I'd like to, but the little man's too bloody ethical. He takes his oath too seriously. He'd never enter the mind of a non-telepath unless invited. . . .” He took Maudsley's limp wrist in his hand. “And now you'd better leave him to me. Both of you.”

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

IV

THEY SAT IN *The Outsider's* saloon, their seat belts giving the not very convincing illusion of gravity. Calver was there, and Jane, and Doc Malone. And Renault, who kept no watch in deep space, and Bendix, who had no qualms about leaving his Mannschenn Drive in the competent hands of a Doctor of Physics. And little Brentano was there, and Levine.

Calver waited until pipes and cigars and cigarettes were under way and was amused to note that the ever efficient Brentano watched the drifting eddies of smoke until satisfied that the air circulation system was working properly.

He said, "As you all know, we have made a deviation from our trajectory. The doctor advises me that only by landing Mr. Maudsley at the first convenient port can we save his life, that his psychological condition will grow progressively worse as we near the Rim. So we shall put him ashore at Dunsinane in the Shakespearean Sector.

"However, let us forget the technicalities of navigation, let us forget that we are spacemen and regard this as a shareholders' meeting. We don't own this ship just for the fun of it—well, I suppose that in a way we do, but skip that—but to make money. Our present intention is to run the Eastern Circuit on Time Charter to Rim Runners and then, eventually, to compete with our late employers on the same trade. I don't think that any of us are really happy about the prospects of competing with a company that is, after all, as near as, dammit, government owned. Some trade of which we should have the monopoly would be the ideal set-up."

"That," said Bendix, "is a blinding glimpse of the obvious. But what trade?"

"*Outside*," suggested Calver quietly.

"But there's nothing Outside," objected Bendix. "Nothing. Not until some genius comes up with an intergalactic drive."

"There's *something*," said Calver. "There's something. There're the odd artifacts that drift in from time to time.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

You've seen the one in the museum at Port Farewell. A ship's boat—or it could be a ship's boat, or a life raft. Whatever it is, or was, it could have been made by none of the spacefaring races in this galaxy. We've got intelligent fluorine breathers—but none with the physical characteristics of an oversized flatworm. . . .”

“And so what?” asked Bendix. “There's bound to be intelligent life in the next galaxy, and in the one after that, and in the one after that. If we could make contact with 'em, we'd trade with 'em. But it's one helluva big if.”

“It is that,” agreed Calver. “However,” he went on, “let's start at the beginning. As we all know, our Chief Officer was dead drunk when we signed him on at Port Caledon, so much so that he could hardly have cared less where the ship was bound. He did sober up, after a fashion, but something was eating him. And then he managed to find old Doc's private stock of what he calls Irish whisky. . . .”

“And ye'd never tell the difference!” interjected Malone.

“That's a matter of opinion. Anyhow, our Mr. Maudsley hit the bottle again to drown his fears, and the more he tried to drown them the worse they got. What he's frightened of is something, or *somebody* called the Outsiders. When we picked him up he was running away—just as we all have done. But he was running *from* the Rim, not towards it.”

“Something threw a scare into him,” agreed the doctor. “It's likely that I'll have to keep him under sedation all the way to Dunsinane.”

“Jane?” said Calver.

“I've been nursing him,” she said. “I felt sorry for him from the very start. I feel even sorrier for him now. I've listened to his ramblings, his ravings. His ship was the *Polar Queen*, one of those odd tramps that drifts out to the Rim from time to time. He was Master of her. He lost her, smashed her up when making an incredibly bad landing at Port Farewell. Then he was with Rim Runners for a while; the Court of Enquiry suspended his Master's Certificate for six months but granted him a First Pilot's one for that period. When the six months were up he reclaimed his Certificate, left Rim Run-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

ners and has been trying to make his way back to the Centre Worlds ever since."

"I've heard of him," said Bendix. "He was Second Mate of the *Rimstar*. They called him Windy Maudsley. He used to be in a state of near panic from blast-off to touch-down. Everybody thought that it was the aftermath of the loss of the *Polar Queen*."

"And what about the rest of *Polar Queen's* crew?" asked Brentano.

"It was a bad crash," said Bendix. "I remember old Captain Engels telling me about it. He was in Port Farewell in *Lorn Lady* when it happened. It seems that Maudsley was in the Control Room and escaped with only slight injuries. His Chief and Second Officers weren't so lucky. They weren't killed outright but they died in the hospital without recovering consciousness. The rest of the crowd were . . . mashed."

"Can you remember anything else, Bendix?" asked Calver.

"No. After all, I only got the story at second hand."

"I was just a kid when it happened," contributed Levine. "But I was crazy to get into space, and anything about spaceships or spacemen in the news I just lapped up. As I remember the reports, Maudsley's breath stank of whisky when they dragged him out of the wreckage. Luckily for him, the investigation proved that a tube lining had burned out, otherwise he'd have lost his ticket instead of getting away with a six months' suspension."

"And you've managed to get in touch with Port Farewell?" asked Calver.

"Yes, Captain. There are ways and means of stepping up the psionic amplifier, you know, although I fear that I shall have to indent for a new dog's brain when we arrive. Anyhow, I got in touch with Donaldson. He looked up the records for us. He tells me that *Polar Queen* was making a relatively short hop between Ultimo and Thule, and that at the time of her arrival at Port Farewell she was well overdue. Maudsley said at the Enquiry that the Mannschenn

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

Drive had been giving him trouble. He was, of course, the only witness from the ship. . . .

"And now, Levine, what do *you* know of the Outsiders?"

"You know as much as I do, Captain. . . ." The telepath paused and grinned. "Sorry, you don't. Even if we leave my . . . talent out of it, I was born and brought up on the Rim, and none of you were. So I'll just assume that you know nothing.

"Well, they've always been a sort of legend out on the Rim, these Outsiders. Some say that they're supernatural beings, even that they're the old gods of mankind, and of other intelligent races, driven outside the galaxy and waiting there to come back when, at last, faith and belief return. And others say that they're intelligent beings, not unlike ourselves, that have made the voyage across the gulf from some other galaxy. There are the wild tales about strange ships in the sky—and there have been the strange artifacts found on some of the Rim worlds and in our sector of space. . . .

"But I haven't heard the Outsiders as much as mentioned for years now."

"Just suppose . . ." murmured Calver. "Just suppose . . . Just suppose that there's a big ship hanging out there, somewhere . . . A ship that made the crossing. . . . Just suppose that her crew discovered intelligent life on the Rim worlds—but discovered that life in the anti-matter systems. . . . Or, perhaps, our systems are anti-matter to them. . . . Just suppose that they've assumed that our entire galaxy is composed of anti-matter. . . ."

"People with enough curiosity and know-how to make the crossing wouldn't give up that easily," said Jane sharply.

"I don't suppose they would, my dear. I was just playing with ideas, feeding them into the computer to see if two pairs of them made four. But I've this strong hunch that there *is* something out there, and that Maudsley stumbled on it. I've got this hunch that it, whatever it is, is worth finding again."

"There *is* something out there," said Jane. "Maudsley found

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

it, and it drove him to drink, ruined his career. Whatever it is, it's dangerous."

"Not necessarily. As far as we know, Maudsley's ship was undamaged until the crash. All his crew were accounted for, and they were all alive until the smash-up killed them. I grant you this—there is something out there that's frightening. But . . . How shall I put it?"

"I was raised on Earth, a country boy, in a farming district. Earth, as you know, is very old-fashioned and doesn't believe in using tanks of chemical nutrient to grow food when there's good, honest dirt on hand. So there were the crops out in the open, cereals, and there were the birds that regarded the fields as huge free lunch counters. And there were the scarecrows . . ."

"What are they?" asked Levine.

"A rough figure of a man, mansized, made of old clothing stuffed with rags or straw, held erect by a post. If it's so constructed that the arms will wave in the wind, so much the better. The birds take it for a man and sheer off. Oh, some of the smarter ones spot the deception after a while and dig in, but the majority stay clear.

"Well, I'll get back to this hypothetical ship of mine. For some reason she's been abandoned. Her owners, however, have set up some sort of scarecrow that was good enough to scare off poor Maudsley, but not good enough—or bad enough—to do any actual physical damage to *Polar Queen* and her people. But we, expecting a scarecrow and, furthermore, possessing the right psychological and emotional make-up for life on the Rim, are far less liable to be scared off and just might find something worthwhile.

"This, then, is my proposal. We pump Maudsley of all he knows about the Outsiders, using every means of persuasion short of actual torture. We pay him well for what he tells us. Then, when our present cargo is discharged, we go hunting Outside to find whatever it was that Maudsley found."

"Derek," said Jane firmly, "you may be Master, but you are also no more than one of the shareholders. In all matters pertaining to the actual running of the ship your word is

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

law—but in all matters pertaining to her future employment *we*, all of us, the owners, decide.”

“Then,” asked Calver stiffly, “what do you propose?”

“That we put the matter to the vote. I move that we do not set off on any wild goose chases and that we put the ship on the Eastern Circuit on the Rim Runners time charter. We’ve been into all this before, and we all agreed that, the way things are at present, we shall need Rim Runners’ repair, office and agency facilities. *When* we’re well enough established we can set up our own shoreside organization.”

“I second that,” said Brentano.

“A show of hands,” said Bendix.

“As you please,” said Calver. “A show of hands. All in favor of Jane’s motion?”

His own hand was the only one not raised. He looked rather ruefully at the others around the table.

“Derek,” said Jane, “we must be sensible. We’ve all rehabilitated ourselves to an extent that, not so long ago, would have seemed impossible. Are we to throw it all away for a wild dream?”

Calver filled his pipe again carefully, used one of the old-fashioned matches that he affected to light it. He said slowly, “Even so . . . how shall I put it? I came out to the Rim as all of us did—because of the mess I’d made of my life in the Centre. But there was more to it than that, much more. After all, you can drink yourself to death anywhere in the Galaxy where there are human vices—even those communistic bumble bees, the Shaara, make and use alcohol. I came out to the Rim because it was, I thought, the last frontier. Now I’ve learned that it’s not, that there’s still another one beyond it.”

Bendix puffed a cigarette into glowing life. He said, “I see what you mean, Calver. And I think that it applies, to a greater or lesser degree, to all of us. But Jane is right. We must consolidate. We must make the ship pay for herself before we think of anything else. But,” he turned to Jane, “we must face the fact that Rim Runners will just be making

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

a convenience of us until such time as their own fleet is built up, and then they'll lose no time in running us off the Eastern Circuit and the Shakespearean Sector trade. But if we have some sort of ace up our sleeve."

"If you can call it an ace," grumbled Brentano. "Old legends, with no basis of fact, the ravings of a drunken derelict."

"There's *something* out there," said old Doc Malone. "And I, for one, would like to find out what it is before I'm dragged off the stage. But there's no rush, no hurry at all, at all. It, whatever it is, will keep. After the ship has paid for herself, after the Time Charter's expired and we're on our own, will be time enough."

"All right," said Calver. "So that would seem to be that. Meanwhile, we must find out all that we can from Maudsley. I don't suppose that you could help, Levine?"

"I could, Captain," said the telepath, "but I won't. My oath . . ."

"If you'd agreed," said Jane, "I'd have lost the rather great respect that I hold for you."

"Bless you, my children," murmured Calver sardonically. "So it's up to you, Doc."

"Yes," said Malone, "it's time that I had another look at the patient."

He left the saloon with the peculiar, unhurried grace of a fat man in free fall. He returned with more speed than grace. He reported that Maudsley must have more or less recovered, had left his cabin and found, somewhere, a bottle of cleaning alcohol. Drifting in the air of his cabin were mingled globules of the crude intoxicant—what was left of it—and blood from his slashed throat.

V

So, ON CHARTER to Rim Runners, they ran the Eastern Circuit—Tharn, Grollor, Mellise and Stree, with occasional side trips to the Shakespearean Sector. Cappell—the space-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

man turned sheep herder turned spaceman—stayed with them, and, after intensive coaching by Calver, managed to scrape through the examination for his First Pilot's Certificate and was promoted to Chief Officer, replacing in that rank yet another drunken derelict whom Calver had been obliged to sign on in Dunsinane. And both Lloyd and Ritter liked the life and, with their already high academic qualifications, found no trouble in adding engineers' Certificates of Competency to them. Bendix, to everybody's surprise, married, and Julia, his wife, was a highly efficient secretary who became, in a very short time indeed, a highly efficient Purser. And Brentano married—a biochemist who was able to take over the care of the hydroponic tanks, the yeast and algae vats and the tissue cultures from Doc Malone. Tanya Brentano was of Slavic stock and, in the opinion of everybody but the doctor, her vodka was far superior to Malone's "Irish" whisky. Brentano, as well as changing his marital status, changed his rank, sitting for and passing, without any trouble, the examination for his Second Pilot's Certificate, thus making room for Elise Renault, who was a qualified radio technician.

They ran the Eastern Circuit for two years, for twenty-four busy, happy months. *The Outsider* was a home rather than a ship, her people a family rather than a crew. Maudsley had been forgotten, Calver often thought, by everybody but himself. He had not forgotten. He still felt the lure of Outside, the magnetism of the unsolved mystery out there in the darkness. He tried to tell himself that this was romantic foolishness, that when the Time Charter expired *The Outsider* could make a stab at running in competition with Rim Runners and, should this be unsuccessful, could go tramping through the galaxy. He tried to tell himself this, but failed to convince himself. Every voyage he brought with him old books and records, and carefully went through them all to try to find some sort of a clue.

So, for two years, they ran the Eastern Circuit, and then the Charter expired. For six months they tried to function as a private company and learned, the hard way, that good will

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

is all very nice as long as there is no financial loss involved. Calver's friends on Tharn would have liked to have shipped their cargoes in *The Outsider*—but, with Rim Runners' freights only sixty percent of those asked by Calver they did not feel justified in spending money on carriage that would be better spent on imports. The drably efficient humanoids of Grollor were without sentiment. They had worked out for themselves the principle of buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest long before Commodore Grimes' survey expedition had landed on their planet. For a little while there was trade to be done with both Mellise and Stree—but even the happy amphibians and the philosophical lizards had begun to acquire, from contact with humanity, a sordid commercialism.

At the end of six months of independent trading—the ship was at Port Forlorn, discharging a pitifully small consignment of Mellisan dried fish and a smaller one of parchment rolls from Stree—there was a shareholders' meeting. All hands were present. (Cappell, Lloyd and Ritter had been offered, and had taken, the opportunity of receiving some of their pay in shares, and the new wives had been given shares as wedding presents.)

"Julia?" said Calver from his seat at the head of the saloon table.

The Purser rose to her feet.

"You all know how things have been going lately," she reported in her cool, pleasant voice. "You'll not be surprised when I tell you that we're in the red. I have the figures for the last half-year. . . ."

"You needn't bother with them, dear," said Bendix. "Even I can see that running costs have been far in excess of income."

"I take it," said Calver, "that we're all in agreement on that point. Thank you, Julia." The Purser resumed her seat. "As I see it, we have little control over what happens next, as long as we stay on the Rim. I have a letter here from Commodore Grimes. It seems that Rim Runners are prepared

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

to buy the ship from us, the price to be determined after a survey. Alternatively, they'd offer us a one way charter to Nova Caledon, the implication being that it's as good a way of getting us out of their hair.

"Of course, if we sell the ship we shall do more than break even."

"But we don't want to sell," stated Jane firmly.

"Then there's the old business of Maudsley and his Outsider." went on Calver.

"No," said Jane. "No. We're shipowners, not explorers. I propose that we accept the Nova Caledon charter and play by ear from then on."

"Let me finish," Calver told her. "This Outsiders business has stuck in my mind, if not in yours. I've been doing a deal of research on it. I managed to get hold of a pile of back numbers of the *Port Farewell Argus* covering the *Polar Queen* disaster and the subsequent enquiry. At last I found what I was looking for. It was a typical Sunday Supplement article, written with his tongue in his cheek by some journalist who'd passed a few hours getting drunk with Maudsley. It was mainly a rehash of all the old legends about the Outsiders and it contained the statement, alleged to have been made by Maudsley, which I'll quote: 'Put Macbeth and Kinsolvings' Sun in line, and keep them so. That's the way that we came back. Fifty light years, and all hands choking on the stink of frying oil from the Mannschenn Drive . . .'

"It's a lead."

"Is it?" queried Jane. "And, if so, to what? But tell me, why didn't Grimes follow it when he made his last survey voyage in *Faraway Quest*?"

"Because Grimes, as I shouldn't have to tell you, is apt to be pigheaded. He's made up his mind that there's nothing—and I mean *nothing*—Outside. He was one of the assessors at the Court of Enquiry before which Maudsley appeared, and said that in his opinion all Maudsley's talk of the Outsiders was no more than *delirium tremens*."

"As it probably was," said Jane.

"I don't think so," said Doc Malone.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"And neither do I," said Calver. He paused. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, we own a ship. The ship is temporarily out of employment. We can sell her, and show a good profit on our venture. We can accept the one-way charter and then go tramping—and, as you know, quite a few tramps still get by on the leavings of the big lines and the various government-owned services. Or we can push off from Port Forlorn as soon as the cargo's out and the stores are aboard, and run west until we have Macbeth and Kinsolving's Sun in line, and then. . . ."

"The Nova Caledon charter," said Jane. "Show hands." And Calver's hand was the only one not raised.

VI

"WHERE ARE you going?" asked Jane.

"Ashore," said Calver.

"If you'll wait a few minutes it won't take me long to get ready."

"I'm sorry," he told her. "But I'd rather go by myself."

"Sulking?" she demanded.

He favored her with a wry grin. "Sort of. But I want to get off the ship, by myself, to have a few drinks and think things out."

"Things," she told him, "have already been decided."

"Not everything," he said.

"Derek," said Jane quietly, "listen to me. Please. I know that this Outsider business has become something of an obsession with you, and I can, to a certain extent, appreciate the lure of it all. To a certain extent. But remember that women are different from men—and, after all, it was the women's vote that decided in favor of the Nova Caledon charter. Bendix and Renault and Brentano voted along with their wives."

"And the others? Doc Malone and Cappell and Lloyd and Ritter?"

She shrugged. "They're realists, I suppose. Just as we

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

women are realists. Even though we're accepted in space, even though we take the same risks as you, we have that basic longing for security. We'd hate to see the security that we've achieved thrown away on a wild goose chase."

"Security . . ." repeated Calver. "What security is there in tramping from star to star, hungry for the crumbs that fall from the tables of the rich corporations?"

"And what security," she countered, "is there in blasting off into the utterly unknown, into that illimitable expanse of sweet damn all?"

He said, "There's something there."

"Is there?"

"Yes. Maudsley found it. And he managed to convince you at the time."

"A Rim ghost," she said. "That's what it must have been. Remember the one that we saw, in *Lorn Lady*, all those years ago?"

"I do," he agreed. "But . . ."

"Oh, go ashore," she told him. "Go ashore and have a few drinks, or too many drinks if you like. It will do you good, help you to get over your sulks."

He said, "All right. I'll do that."

He kissed Jane perfunctorily, then took his cap and his uniform cloak from their hooks. He left his quarters and clattered down the spiral staircase in the axial shaft, feeling a little better after the physical exercise. Outside the airlock it was cold, with a bitter breeze that stirred the gritty dust that lay, as always, on the fire-scarred apron, and drove before it a rustling flurry of dead leaves and old newspapers.

Calver tried to wipe a speck of grit from his eye, then looked around him with distaste at the untidiness and decrepitude revealed by the glare of the spaceport floodlights. He thought, *After all, I shan't be sorry to leave the Rim worlds for good.*

He asked himself: *But shall I?*

He shrugged, pulling his cloak more tightly about his body, then walked rapidly to the main entrance. As he approached the edge of the field, away from the bright lights, he could

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

see the sky—the black emptiness, with the faint, far and few nebulosities that made it seem so much emptier and, low in the west, the pale-glowing arc of the Galactic lens. But it was the distant nebulae that caught and held his attention. From which one had the Outsiders come?

If there were any Outsiders.

"Shall I call you a cab, Captain?" asked the gatekeeper.

"No, thank you," Calver told him. "It's not far into town, and the walk will do me good."

"I hear that you'll be leaving the Rim shortly," said the man.

"Yes," said Calver.

He walked on briskly, along the shabby street with the tall warehouses on either side. He went into the first tavern—*The Jolly Rocketeer*—sat at the bar and ordered a pink gin. There were a few spacemen—from *Rim Galleon* and *Rim Caravel*, as both vessels were in port—in the place, but nobody whom Calver knew. There was the foreman stevedore who was in charge of the loading of *The Outsider's* cargo for Nova Caledon. Calver bought him a drink and had another one himself. He decided after the second gin that he was hungry, and decided, too, that nothing on display in the tavern's snack bar looked very tempting. He said good-night to the stevedore and went out.

He had heard that the food at the newly opened Rimrock Hilton was good and decided to put it to the test. He doubted if the hotel's chef would be as good as Jane, but a change, after all, would be refreshing. And he did not want to return to his ship for a while yet.

Twenty minutes' brisk walk brought him to the floodlit tower of the hotel. He returned the salute of a doorman whose stylish livery made his own uniform look like that of an Apprentice Spaceman Third Class. In the foyer another obsequious Galactic Admiral asked his pleasure. Calver said that he would like a meal. The Galactic Admiral recommended the Captain's Cabin. Calver said that he had come ashore to get away from ships and that he would prefer to eat

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

in surroundings that some ingenious interior decorator had not tried to make as much like a ship as possible.

"Then, sir," said the functionary, "might I suggest the Chop House?"

"The Chop House?" queried Calver. "Chinese?"

"No sir. Strictly period. Nineteenth Century Anglo-Terran. Sawdust on the floor, rough wooden tables and benches . . ."

"Real sawdust?" asked Calver sardonically.

"Of course, sir . . . Confidentially, for reasons of hygiene, we did use synthetic sawdust, but it hasn't the aroma."

"You could have used a synthetic aroma too," said Calver.

He allowed himself to be guided to an elevator whose pilot, a mere Commodore, delivered him to the correct floor. He went into the Chop House. It looked, as far as he could judge, authentic enough. There was the sawdust, as promised. There were the rough tables and benches and, overhead, genuine seemingly oaken rafters. On the walls were ancient sporting prints and from the walls protruded flaring gas jets.

A waiter in a rusty black dress suit, over which he wore a stained, once-white apron, guided Calver to a table. Calver wondered if the man's mutton chop whiskers were synthetic or genuine, almost asked and then thought better of it. He sat down and studied the menu which, in keeping with the decor, was scrawled on a slate.

He made his decision, ordered his meal.

It was not a good one.

"I thought that I should be playing safe by having something simple," murmured a hauntingly familiar voice. "*Steak Diane* . . . that wasn't asking too much, was it?"

"One would think not," admitted Calver, turning to look at the woman at the neighboring table.

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

"Mixed grill," he told her. "My guess is that the various animals contributing their bits and pieces to it must have died of old age."

"Last time," she said, "it was *Lobster Thermidor*, wasn't it? Perhaps this breaking of the pattern is a good omen."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"For what?" he countered.

He thought, *She hasn't changed. Except that she's dyed her platinum hair green. But she's still damned attractive. Too attractive.*

She shrugged. "Well, the last two times we met were rather disastrous, weren't they? The first time was on Far-away, wasn't it? And your girlfriend turned the local cops on to me. And the second time was on Grollor, and there was that most unfortunate clash between the Federation Survey Service, Intelligence Branch, and the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve. . . ."

Calver got up and joined the girl at her table.

"Still playing Olga Popovsky, the Beautiful Spy?" he asked.

"And are you still playing Lieutenant Commander Calver, R.W.N.R.?" she countered.

"I had to resign my commission," he told her.

"Were you a naughty boy, or something?" she asked lightly. "No, don't tell me. After all, I'm still in Intelligence, so I may as well use some." She started to tick off points on her slim fingers. "One: You've risen in the world. You're a big, fat Captain. Two: Those buttons on your uniform aren't Rim Runner buttons. Three: That pretty badge on your cap isn't the Rim Runner badge. Intriguing design, isn't it? A gold ring with silver stars inside it, and a conventional silver rocket outside. May I ask which company's uniform it is?"

"M.O.B.C.," said Calver.

"M.O.B.C.?"

"My own bloody company."

She laughed, and there was still that tinkling quality to it. "All right, Derek, I'll come clean. I know about *The Outsider*, and what you've been doing and how you've been doing. As a matter of fact I was going to call on you, officially, tomorrow."

"Were you, now? Wouldn't that be rather risky?"

"Not this time. I wouldn't say that your local cops are wildly in love with me, but they've nothing against me. The Federation has bowed to the inevitable and has recognized the right of the Rim Worlds Confederacy to go its own

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

sweet way. As far as we're concerned you can make whatever alliances and treaties you please. I'm here by permission of your government—who, also, has promised to help me in my investigations."

"And what," asked Calver, "are you investigating this time?"

"To begin with," she told him, "the psychological breakdown and eventual suicide of one of our people."

"Did it happen here?" he asked. "On the Rim?"

"No," she said. "in deep space. Between Nova Caledon and Dunsinane."

"Between Nova Caledon and Dunsinane." echoed Calver, shivering slightly with a premonitory chill.

"Yes. His name was Maudsley. Commander Maudsley."

VII

THEY ADJOURNED to Sonya Verrill's suite where the girl, producing her own percolator, brewed coffee. There was brandy too, the authentic product of far away France, in fragile inhalers. There were soft lights and, after Sonya had adjusted the controls of the hotel's playmaster, sweet music. But the atmosphere was not one of seduction, despite the fact that Sonya Verrill had, in her own words, changed into "something more comfortable." Calver realized, with something of a shock, that the flimsy semi-transparency that did little to hide her lovely body was failing to register.

He thought, *Blast the Outsiders. When I'm more interested in them than in a beautiful woman, there's something wrong with me.*

He said, "So Maudsley was one of your people."

"He was," said the girl. "He was a good man. He found that being a tramp Master was an excellent cover for his real activities. Frankly, he was running a sort of economic and political survey of your Rim Worlds Federation when he became interested in the Outsider legends."

"He found something," said Calver. "I'm convinced of that. He found something—and it ruined him."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"He wasn't a coward," said the girl. "He'd never have risen to the rank of Commander in Intelligence if he had been. But did he give you any clues? Did he drop any hints at all as to what it was that he'd found?"

"Hints," said Calver. "Hints—but that was all. There was something out there. Something important. Something that could make its discoverer rich, or powerful, or both. Something that terrified him."

"But why didn't he report?" asked Sonya, as much of herself as of Calver. "Why didn't he report to H.Q.? God knows we've enough specialists loafing around to be able to handle anything."

"How loyal was Maudsley to your Service?" asked Calver. "I could be wrong, but my own analysis is this. He found this thing—and he wanted it for himself. It was too big for him to handle—but he clung to the hope that sooner or later he'd be big enough to handle it. Of course, the way that he was going he never would be—but, after all, many men allow completely illogical hopes to dominate their lives."

"And what about you, Derek?" she asked. "Do you think that you could handle it?"

"I don't know," he told her. "I don't know. If I knew what it was, I'd be able to give you an answer. But I just don't know."

"But would you want to try?"

He said, "Sonya, that's been my ambition ever since I first heard of Maudsley's Outsiders. As you know, I'm a ship-owner—but, unluckily, I don't own the ship outright. When our Time Charter expired I wanted to go exploring, wanted to find whatever it was that Maudsley found. But the others voted me down. Now, as you've probably learned already, we're loading a cargo for Nova Caledon and it's unlikely that we shall ever return to the Rim. . . ." He sipped his brandy. "But it would be so easy to find . . . *it*. Macbeth and Kinsolving's Sun in line, and push out for fifty light years. . . . But I shall never do it now. And I suppose that your people will have a survey vessel out here shortly, and they'll find

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

the Outsiders while I'm tramping from system to system, picking up cargoes when and where I can."

He realized that she was sitting on the arm of his chair, felt the warmth of her lightly clad body. Her fingers were gently stroking his head, disarranging his hair.

She said, "At the moment we can't spare any ships. They're all tied up in Wilkinson's Cluster."

"What's happening there?" he asked.

"There's a dispute between our colonies and the Shaara ones. It's very complicated. The humans are objecting to the subjection of a native humanoid race by, I quote, a bunch of communistic bumble bees. And the Shaara Regent has been trying to stamp out alcoholism in the worlds under her control and is objecting, not unreasonably, to the large scale bootlegging being carried out by certain humans. There's been shooting, and one or two minor invasions. Both the Survey Service and the Royal Shaaran Navy are trying to sort things out before they develop into a large scale war."

"Interesting," he said.

"Yes. And rather dangerous. Although we've always gotten along reasonably well with the Shaara Empire, there's still the hostility that must always exist between the mammal and the arthropod."

"We mammals must stick together," said Calver—and wondered if it were the brandy or himself talking. Not that it mattered.

"Not so fast, spaceman, not so fast," admonished Sonya Verrill. She disengaged herself, was back in her own chair before Calver realized what was happening. She went on, "I admit that there's unfinished business between us—and this time, now that politics aren't in the way, we may just get around to finishing it. But there's other business as well."

"Such as?" asked Calver.

"The future employment of your ship. You have the one way charter out to Nova Caledon, and then you're on your own. Isn't that so? Well, I can offer you a charter."

"Go on."

"It would mean that you and your people would have to

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

accept temporary commissions in the Survey Service, and that one of our people—possibly myself—would have to travel aboard. You would have to sign an agreement to the effect that anything found—any artifacts, any new knowledge—would be Survey Service property.”

“I’m sorry,” said Calver, “but I’m still a Rim Worlder, and I think that this . . . this *thing* is Rim World property.”

“But your own government isn’t interested. They know what I’m out here for. I’ve even tried to persuade your Commodore Grimes to recommission his *Faraway Quest*, but he regards the Outsider legend as just a legend, and nothing more. He regards poor Maudsley as no more than a hopelessly unreliable alcoholic who’s better off dead.”

“Thanks for the offer,” said Calver. “I appreciate it. Perhaps I’m selfish, but I want the discovery, when it’s made, to be my discovery, or *our* discovery . . .”

“You mean . . . ?” she murmured.

“I’m sorry, Sonya. I don’t. When I said *our*, I meant *our* in the sense of belonging to *The Outsider* and her people. ”

“It seems to me,” she said, “that I’m the outsider as far as you’re concerned. I must be slipping. Where’s the fatal charm before which Admirals, Generals, Prime Ministers and Dictators have fallen?” Her wry grin sat oddly on her perfect features but was far from unattractive. “And now here’s a mere tramp Captain turning me down.”

“I’m not turning *you* down,” said Calver, “only your kind offer of a charter.”

She said, “Then all is not lost.”

She was standing now, facing him, and her hands were fluttering at the fastenings of her robe. It fell from her, slowly, a lacy froth that slipped down her golden body, exposing breasts and gently rounded belly and full thighs, collapsing at last to a gossamer foam about her slender ankles.

She said simply, “There are no strings, Derek. This is just us, the two of us, and nothing to do with your ship or the Survey Service. . . .”

His jacket was off, thrown carelessly to the floor, but he was having trouble with his necktie.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Let me," she said, helping him.

Jane stirred uneasily in the double bunk in the darkened cabin.

"So you're back," she muttered.

"Yes."

"Have a nice evening?"

"Yes, thank you. I ran into an old shipmate," he said, not too untruthfully, "and we had dinner and a few drinks together."

"What is that smell?" she asked sharply.

"What smell?" he countered.

"*Fleur de floosie*. A somewhat expensive version, I admit . . ."

He said, "Sydney—Sydney Small, that is, he's in *Rim Galleon* now—was showing me a bottle of perfume that he'd picked up from the Captain of some tramp whom he met at Port Fortinbras. Some got spilled."

"Oh," he said. "Oh. It reminded me, somehow, of that little tow-haired trollop that you got entangled with years ago. That spy wench, whatever her name was."

"Odd," said Calver.

He went through to his bathroom and showered carefully and thoroughly.

VIII

The Outsider, her holds stowed to capacity, lifted from Port Forlorn, climbed slowly through the cloud strata and, clear of the atmosphere, turned on her humming gyroscopes until the cartwheel sight built into the transparency of her stem was centered on that portion of the Galactic Lens in which lay the Empire of Waverley.

"Goodbye to the Rim," said Brentano, a little glumly.

"We shall be back," Calver told him.

"Perhaps," admitted the Second Mate. "Perhaps. I sup-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

pose that there'll be the odd charter or so to bring us out this way."

"Goodbye to the Rim," said Jane. "And goodbye to . . ."

"To what?" asked Calver.

"Or to whom?" she countered.

"Well, then, to whom?" he demanded.

"To your dear shipmate Sydney Small," she sneered. "The one with the expensive but somewhat vulgar taste in perfume. Remember?"

Calver ignored this. He gave the necessary orders, saw to it that with no waste of time his ship was falling down her long trajectory, her Mannschenn Drive unit whining softly, the Galactic Lens ahead distorted like a Klein flask produced by a drunken glass blower in a moment of extreme mental aberration. Then, when there was nothing further that he could do, he went down to his quarters, leaving the watch to Brentano.

Jane was not there, but he thought nothing of this. She would be in the galley, probably, preparing the next meal, or in the pantry making a fresh brew of coffee in the percolator. And then, with more than a slight shock, he noticed a certain bareness about the cabin. The little clock—its case a beautiful example of the Aldebaranian metal workers' art—was gone from its usual position on the bulkhead. And the sphere of transparent crystal in which was embedded a Vegan moonflower was missing from the desk, as was the elaborate little silver mobile from Tharn. Calver slid open the wardrobe doors. All of Jane's clothes were gone from their stretchers.

"Janel" he called irritably. "Janel"

Her reply came faintly from somewhere outside. "There's no need to shout."

He went out into the alleyway. He was not surprised to find that his wife had moved into the spare cabin. He followed her inside, shut the door firmly.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded.

"In the circumstances," she told him coldly, "I thought that I'd like to sleep alone."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"What circumstances?"

She said, "I suppose you thought that you were quite safe when you told me about the mythical Sydney Small, especially since *Rim Galleon* blasted off the same morning that you came back reeking like a whore's garret. But, when I had occasion to go to the shipping office on some business of my own, I saw the copy of *Rim Galleon's* Articles lying on the desk. I browsed through it. I need hardly tell you that there's nobody by the name of Sydney Small in the crew."

"So?"

"So. So I decided to make a few more investigations. I rang the Rimrock Hilton. (I was going to ring all the hotels but, knowing the style in which these Federation spies seem to live, I thought I'd save time by ringing the most expensive ones first.) The girl at the desk was most obliging. "Yes, there was a Miss Verrill staying there. A Miss Sonya Verrill. A Terran citizen."

"But . . ." began Calver.

"No, Derek. It's no use trying to explain—and it's certainly no use trying to lie again. You know that I'm not possessive and that I've never tried to keep you in a cage. If you'd spent the night with some little casual pick-up it wouldn't have mattered, it wouldn't have really mattered. But Sonya Verrill, of all people. Are you incapable of learning? The first time that she got her claws into you, you almost fell foul of the police, and that would have been the end of your career in Rim Runners. The second time, on Grollor, was even worse, and Captain Engels had to risk his ship and all our lives to get you out of the stupid jam you were in. Can't you learn, won't you learn that as far as you're concerned, that woman is poison."

"Even so," said Calver.

"Even so my left foot. You're behaving like some spotty-faced adolescent who's got his ideas about women from the most meretricious so-called stars of the most inanely juvenile tri-do shows."

"Even so," said Calver coldly, "Miss Verrill and I talked business. She made me an offer, and I turned it down."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Like hell you did!"

"I did," stated Calver virtuously. "But I can change my mind. And I'm sure that the other shareholders will back me up, even though it will mean having Miss Verrill along as an observer." He added unkindly, "That will mean, of course, that she'll have to bunk in the spare cabin, unless she cares to . . ."

"And what was this famous offer?" she sneered. "I don't mean the one that you so obviously didn't turn down, but the other."

Calver pulled himself into a chair and adjusted the belt. He filled and lit his pipe, said nothing until it was drawing to his satisfaction. He watched the play of emotions on Jane's face—hurt anger, wounded pride and, finally, curiosity. He could not help but feel that he had behaved and was still behaving shabbily. But he could see, now, a way whereby he could get what he wanted.

He said, "Miss Verrill and I enjoyed a very interesting conversation."

She flared, "I'm sure you did!"

Calver fiddled with his pipe and relit it.

She said, "Go on, damn you. Go on."

"It seems," said Calver slowly, "that our Mr. Maudsley was really the Survey Service's Commander Maudsley. Intelligence, of course."

"Where in the galaxy do they get their officers from?" marvelled Jane. "Nymphomaniacs, alcoholics . . ."

Calver played with his pipe again.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Maudsley wasn't an alcoholic until after he'd found the Outsiders. It seems that he wanted to keep the knowledge to himself; in any case, he made no reports back to his H.Q. Understandably, his superiors want to know just what's been happening. So they sent Miss Verrill . . ."

"They must think a lot of her. All the ships and people at their disposal, and they send her."

"There's a spot of bother in Wilkinson's Cluster—practically a state of war between human and Shaara colonists."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"That accounts for it," said Jane. "There'll be no demand for her peculiar talents there. She wouldn't get very far trying to seduce a Shaara drone."

"Will you shut up," exploded Calver, "and let me finish? The Survey Service is convinced that there's something in the legends about the Outsiders. They can't spare any ships to make an immediate investigation. But they'd like to charter a ship, no doubt on very advantageous terms to the owners concerned, and I've had the offer. I've no doubt that if and when I tell the other shareholders they'll be all in favor of accepting the charter. It won't matter to them that there'll be a Survey Service observer travelling with us. And I've already told you who the observer will be."

"No," said Jane. Her face was white. "No."

"But why not? A charter's a charter."

"No," she said again.

"Then can you suggest any future profitable employment, my dear?"

"Can you?" she countered.

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps. It will be a risk, a gamble. We might lose everything, the ship and our lives. But we might be rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

She said, "I admire this melodramatic line of speech. You must have caught it off some of the charming people you know—these cloak-and-dagger types."

"Melodrama," he said, "is often much more true to life than understatement. Anyhow, this is my proposal—that we carry out my original plan of trying to find the Outsiders, for ourselves and not for the Survey Service."

"And how do you propose to persuade the others?"

He said, "That's where you will help. You'll have to talk the women into going."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I tell them about the offer of the Survey Service charter."

She looked at him with cold hostility.

She said softly, "You bastard."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

IX

CALVER NEVER found out how his wife talked the other women around to the idea of a private expedition in search of the Outsiders—but talk them into it she did. Her manner with him remained cold, hostile—and he knew that this hostility was as much the consequence of his blackmail as of his brief affair with Sonya Verrill. But he did not care, he told himself. He hoped that he would soon be in a position to achieve his real ambition, would soon be able to lead his crew out and away from the galaxy, to fame (perhaps) and fortune (possibly). But it was neither fame nor fortune that was the real lure. He would repeat to himself two lines of archaic poetry that, somehow, had stuck in his memory, that somehow, during these last few days had come to the surfacel

*For lust of knowing what should not be known
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand . . .*

But the voyage, he knew, would be no golden journey. It would be a long, sickening drop into the Ultimate Nothingness, a protracted fall through the Night, away from warmth and light and humanity. It would be a weary search for the unknown, possibly the unknowable. And when it—whatever it was—was found, would anybody be the better off? Maudsley had found it—and it had destroyed him.

But Maudsley, thought Calver, was a weakling. . . .

But Maudsley, Calver told himself, daring at last to admit doubt, was not a weakling. The Survey Service does not promote weaklings to Commander's rank.

But Maudsley, Calver insisted, must have been a weakling. Not overtly, but in some subtle way. There must have been some fatal flaw in his character.

And what guarantee, Calver asked himself, have I that there is not some fatal flaw in my character?

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

But his doubts were passing ones and his determination to see the thing through remained. While Jane, whom he rarely saw now, did her work with the women, he worked on the men. He did not tell them about the offer of the Survey Service charter, but he did hint that he had learned that the Survey Service was interested, and that it would be a feather in *The Outsider's* cap if her people beat the Survey Service to the discovery. Old Doc Malone was his first convert, and an easy one. Said the old man, "Believe it or not, Calver, I've never been a one for tossing my bonnet over the windmill. But I'd like to be doing it just once."

"Now's your chance, Doc," Calver told him.

"Could be, could be. But the rest of you . . . You're young, all of you, and you run the risk of losing both the ship and your lives."

"And don't we," countered Calver, "every time that we push off into deep space, every time that we make a landing?"

"Yes, but . . ." Then the doctor grinned. "As far as the ship's concerned, she's covered by Lloyds."

"And as far as our lives are concerned," said Calver, "we shall be doing something useful with them."

"You hope," said Malone. "We hope."

"We hope," agreed Calver.

"But the others," persisted the Doctor.

"Lloyd and Ritter are both scientists. They're coming round to my way of thinking. Levine will follow the majority."

"And Renault and Brentano and Bendix?"

"I think they'll vote the way their wives tell them."

"And just what the hell is going on, Calver?" demanded the doctor. "I always thought that I had my fingers on the pulse of this ship, but now I'm not so sure. There's some sort of trouble between you and Jane—but then, all marriages pass through the My-God-how-the-hell-did-I-ever-get-shackled-to-this? stage. And yet this same Jane is doing her damndest to persuade the other wives that we should drop everything and push off for Outside."

"I am not without influence," said Calver carefully.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"It seems not. And Cappell?"

Calver's face clouded. "Now that we're nearing his home planet he's feeling the call of the land again. He's already worked out that with his back pay and the resale of his shares to us he'll be able to buy and stock a sheep run. This was before the Outsider business was mentioned. I'm afraid that we shall have to let him go."

"H'm. And Brentano has only a Second Pilot's ticket and hasn't got his time in yet to sit for First. And the Port Authorities on any of the Empire of Waverley planets are sticklers for regulations. Whatever we do after Nova Caledon—tramping or our own private venture—we shall strike a snag there."

"There's bound to be somebody," said Calver, "with either a Master's or a First Pilot's Certificate."

"Is there? And if there were, would you ship another one like Maudsley on what could well be a hazardous voyage?"

"If I have to, yes. As long as we have the minimum number of tickets shown on the Articles we shall be able to blast off, and after that I can stand a watch myself if I have to."

"We shall see," said the Doctor. "We shall see. And it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that we shall be able to get a permit, in any case."

"There's bound to be somebody," said Calver, "with either a Master's or a First Pilot's Certificate."

"Is there? And if there were, would you ship another one like Maudsley on what could well be a hazardous voyage?"

"If I have to, yes. As long as we have the minimum number of tickets . . ."

Calver looked at the doctor, and the doctor looked at Calver. Both men knew what was wrong. Both men, now, could hear the irregularity in the whining note of the Mannschenn Drive and knew that the temporal precession fields were fluctuating wildly. And then, to confirm their fears, the alarm bells started to ring.

Slowly, carefully, Calver unbuckled his seat belt and rose to his feet. It would not be wise to try to hurry. On such occasions in the past he had, now and again, tried to move fast

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

and, as he put it later, finished up not knowing if it were breakfast time or last Thursday. Slowly, carefully, he left his cabin and went out into the alleyway and carefully, slowly, climbed the short ladder to the control room.

Brentano was on watch. There was nothing that he could do but sit there and watch the unreliable instruments. He saw Calver and said, his words coming at carefully spaced intervals, "This does not make sense."

"And what does not?" queried the Master.

"Interference effect. No other ship should have passed closely enough to us to cause it. But one has."

"Opposite trajectory?" asked Calver.

"No."

Bendix's voice came over the intercom speaker. "Captain, we must shut down. We must shut down and restart."

"Then shut down," ordered Calver. He said to Brentano, "It's a good thing that we aren't in a hurry."

Two objective weeks overdue, *The Outsider* dropped through the drizzle to Port Caledon. She fell gently through the steam generated by her flaring exhausts and grounded with a faint jar on the apron. Calver rang *Finished With Engines* then stared out through the big viewport and watched the beetle-like groundcar, from the bonnet of which fluttered the Port Administration flag, making its way over the wet concrete to the ship. Cappell unbuckled himself from his chair and went down to the airlock to receive the officials.

Calver left Brentano to make all secure and then followed his Chief Officer from the control room. In his own day cabin he found that Jane—although she was no longer in evidence—had laid out all that would be required, the decanters and glasses, the box of cigarettes and the box of cigars, the folder containing Manifest, Bill of Health and the clearance from the last port, and the crew list.

Calver sat down at his desk, filled and lit his pipe. He got to his feet again when Cappell ushered in the Customs and Immigration boarding officers and motioned them to chairs after shaking hands with them.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Ye're late, Captain," said the Customs official. "Ye should ha' been here afore *Rim Caravel*. She's a'ready discharged an' loaded an' oot again."

"Mannschenn Drive trouble," said Calver. "But I'm sorry that *Rim Caravel's* away. I'd have liked a word or two with her Master."

"An' whyfor, Captain?"

"The Drive trouble was due to interference. It's stretching the long arm of coincidence rather much when two ships pass closely enough for interference effect." He paused. "In any case, I didn't think that *Rim Caravel* was all fast, although she was *Delta* Class when she was under the Commission's flag."

"She's no' a' that fast," admitted the Customs man. "But her Captain—a verry pleasant wee man—was sayin' that there was some urgency . . ."

"And how was it that he didn't have to shut his Drive down?"

"Ah'm no' an engineer, Captain, an' ah ken little about such matters. But mebbe his Drive's a later model, or mebbe his engineers were a' ready to adjust their controls. . . . But ah'm no' a technician."

Grimes, thought Calver. *The old bastard. He must have given Rim Caravel's Master instructions. It wouldn't be all that hard for his navigator to work out our trajectory and to follow it, although it must have been rather risky to push the Drive to the limits of safety. . . . But what the hell has he gained by it? He's inconvenienced us, but it's done no good to either Rim Runners or himself.*

Remembering his hostly duties, he poured drinks and offered cigarettes.

X

"THE MEETING," said Calver, "is called to order."

The buzz of conversation around the saloon table ceased and his officers—and fellow shareholders—turned to look

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

at him. Jane's regard was cold, but the others, he could see, were all prepared to be friendly.

He said, "I have no need to tell you that discharge will be completed at about noon tomorrow. Mr. Bendix and Mr. Renault have assured me that their machinery is in perfect working order. There is the question of stores."

"What little we require in the way of preserved provisions can be loaded tomorrow before noon. As you know, we have not found it necessary to touch our present stocks," reported Jane.

"Thank you. Well, once again we are faced with the problem of future employment. I have made enquiries, but there are no cargoes offering out of Port Caledon in any direction. And as far as Rim Runners are concerned we're just a nuisance."

Julia Bendix removed the spectacles from her high bridged nose and used them as a signal to attract and hold his attention. She said, "I understand that the Skoda Corporation on Carinthia is chartering tonnage to lift ore from the Sokolsky System to their smelters at New Prague."

"That is correct," confirmed Levine.

"I have given the matter some thought," said Calver, "but have come to the conclusion that every tramp with a halfway efficient psionic radio officer will already be homing on New Prague."

"And that is correct, too," said Levine.

"Carinthia is quite a way from here," went on Calver. "And we're liable to be making a long voyage and getting nothing for our pains at the end of it." He said, after a pause, "And I don't think that that's sound economics."

"It is not," agreed Julia, "but I thought it right that all of us here should be informed of the only faint hope of possible employment."

"Thank you," Julia," said Calver. "Now, all of you have been thinking me rather a monomaniac on the subject of the Outsiders. But I think you will agree that our late Mr. Maudsley did find something out there—something with which he was unable to cope. But I have faith in you, and

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

myself, and am quite sure that we shall be able to handle it. And knowledge is not only power, it is also money."

"And knowledge," said Lloyd, "is worth acquiring for its own sake."

"Definitely," grunted Ritter.

"But how can you be sure that there is something?" quibbled Elise Renault. "Oh, I know that Jane's made it all very convincing—she nursed Mr. Maudsley during his final illness and had to listen to his ravings. But hallucinations are not unknown."

"Especially after too much alcohol," added her husband.

"I think that I can recognize the truth when I hear it, Elise," said Jane coldly.

"Yes, Jane. But an hallucination is real to the person concerned."

"Let's put it this way," said Calver. "We have two choices—a wild goose chase to Carinthia, where we shall find a traffic jam of star tramps scrambling for charters by the time we get there. Or, even more probably, the scramble will already be over and we shall just have thrown away time and fuel for sweet damn all. The second choice is another wild goose chase to Outside—but at least there'll be no cut-throat competition."

"And that's rather strange," said Renault. "Maudsley's story must be well circulated by now. How is it that nobody else has thought of investigating it? Why hasn't Grimes re-commissioned *Faraway Quest* and pushed off on another of his wild goose chases?"

"As far as I can gather," Calver said, "the Commodore has some sort of a bee in his bonnet about the Outsiders. He's made up his mind that there ain't no such animals—so, as far as he's concerned, there just ain't no such animals. But I've kept my ear to the ground and, while exploring every avenue, have left no stone unturned."

"I'm sure that you've explored some fascinating avenues, Derek," commented his wife, rather too sweetly.

He favored her with a forced grin. "Anyhow, I've kept

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

my ears flapping. I know for a fact that the Survey Service people are very interested in Maudsley's story."

"Then why don't they send a ship?" demanded Renault.

"Because, at the moment, they have no ships to spare. Their entire force, except for vessels required for essential guard duties elsewhere, is tied up in Wilkinson's Cluster. There's some sort of a squabble between the Federation and the Shaara Empire. No doubt, when things simmer down, they will be sending a ship. But it would be rather nice if we got there first."

"Agreed," said Lloyd. "Speaking as scientist, I have often deplored the way in which the Survey Service classifies practically every discovery made by its own people as Top Secret, To Be Destroyed By Fire Before Reading."

"You can say that again," grunted Ritter.

"So I can take it that nobody has any real objections to the search for the Outsiders?"

"It's a wild goose chase," said old Doc Malone. "Ye're all of you callin' it that, an' ye're all of you right. But that's what I like about it."

"I suppose we have to go somewhere," contributed Bendix. "I just supply the motive power."

"I thought that I did," argued Renault. "You just put the clocks back."

"Brentano?" said Calver.

"Frankly, Captain, the idea appeals to me. We shall, at least, be getting off the tramlines."

"But the tramlines give at least an illusion of security," his wife objected, although not very strongly.

The little man grinned, "But our tramlines have been torn up, now, anyhow."

Julia Bendix went through heliographing motions with her spectacles again. She said, "We may as well put the matter to the vote, although I don't think there's much need. We've all of us talked it over among ourselves, and I think I'm right in saying that we've all agreed to let Derek have his own way for this once. After all, we can afford it. It's a gamble—but we have to be in to win. But . . ."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"But . . . ?" echoed Calver.

"There's this small matter of a replacement for Cappell."

"All part of the gamble," said Calver airily. "I think it will be a calculated risk if we just lift without clearance. We shall be breaking all manner of laws, both local and galactic, but if we find what we hope to find, what will it matter? After all, we've done our best. We've tried to find an officer with the right qualifications, but there are none available. We've tried to get a permit to sail shorthanded, and if the local Shipping Master won't play, that's not our fault. After all, this is our ship and we're quite capable of taking her anywhere with the people we have."

"Up the rebels!" cried Doc Malone.

"I'm sure that I like it," said Julia.

Somebody was rapping sharply on the saloon door. "Come in!" called Calver irritably, expecting that the intruder would be a stevedore or a port official. But it was not. It was a kilted giant who strode into the compartment with a certain arrogance, the three gleaming, silver chevrons of a Sergeant of Police prominent on his sleeve. He was followed by four constables and by two men in blue overalls.

He said, "Captain, ye'll excuse me for breakin' up this meetin', but ah've a job o' work tae dae."

"Indeed?" said Calver coldly.

"There's rumors, Captain, an' Rumoor's a lyin' jade, although she could be speakin' the truth the no. Yon Port Captain's been told that ye're thinkin' o' liftin' ship wi'oot clearance. An' that, on this planet, is classed as a crime."

"Indeed?" said Calver.

"Indeed, Captain. But we, the Police Force o' this world, tak' pride in the way in which we can prevent crime afore its commission. An' that is what we are here for."

"Indeed?" said Calver.

"Ay. An' so if yer Chief Interstellar Drive Engineer will lead the way, yon laddies . . ." he waved a huge hand towards the boiler-suited men, "will removed the governor from yer Mannschenn Drive Unit."

Calver looked at the policemen. They were armed, and his

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

people were not. They were trained in unarmed combat, and his people were not. Furthermore, there were probably reinforcements outside the ship.

He said tiredly, "All right, Mr. Bendix."

XI

CALVER STORMED into the Port Captain's office, ignoring the nervous receptionist who tried to ask him his business.

"Captain MacLaren," he demanded, "what is the meaning of your high-handed action?"

MacLaren looked both embarrassed and apologetic. He said, "Sit down, Captain. Just listen to me long enough for me to tell you that it was no action of mine. I'm a spaceman, and I'm quite sure that your ship would be better off with her present crew than with some stranger, probably an incompetent soak, added to make up the number. If it rested with me, I'd give you clearance with my blessings."

"So you're a little woolly lamb," sneered Calver, "and there's someone else behind it."

"Calver," said MacLaren, "regulations are regulations. You and I, as practical spacemen, know that they're made to be broken. But you and I both know that there are certain people connected with the shipping industry who, while they are able to quote regulations by the yard, know no more about ships than that fire comes out of one end."

"The Shipping Master," suggested Calver.

"Yes. Old Paul."

"But the way he was talking earlier I thought that I should have no trouble in getting a permit."

"And then," went on the Port Captain, "there are Mr. Paul's superiors."

"What? You mean the Department of Navigation?"

"Yes. Paul and myself may be big frogs in a small puddle in Port Caledon, but as far as the Department's concerned we're very small frogs in a big puddle. When Ministers of the Crown say, 'jump,' we jump."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"But all these bloody policemen clumping in their big boots all over my ship. . . . And immobilizing the ship."

MacLaren smiled thinly. "Come, now, Captain, would you have paid any attention to a writ tacked to the tail fin? For all I know, you have some venture in mind that would enable you to pay, without feeling it, the fine imposed for unauthorized departure—if you ever return to this or any other Empire of Waverley planet, that is. And both Mr. Paul and I were instructed—instructed, not requested—to make sure that you did not make an unauthorized departure."

"Or any other sort of departure?" asked Calver suddenly. "There was that funny business of *Rim Caravel*. We didn't see her—she wasn't in phase with us—but she overtook us and passed so close that our Drive was thrown out of kilter. Who wanted to make sure that we were delayed?"

"I know nothing about that, Captain," said MacLaren.

"And what sort of pull has Grimes got out here? I didn't think that the Rim Confederacy was on more than speaking terms with your Empire, but I must have been wrong. Why does Grimes want us delayed still further?"

"Grimes?"

"Commodore Grimes, then."

"Oh, yes. Your Astronautical Superintendent and commanding officer of your Naval Reserve. . . . But I can assure you, Calver, that Grimes has no standing here. I don't know much about politics, but our Government has always leaned more towards the Federation than to your Confederacy and, furthermore, recognized the Rim Confederacy only with extreme reluctance."

"Something stinks," said Calver.

"Yes. I admit that. As far as I'm concerned you could have blasted off from here, with my blessings, as soon as your port dues were paid. I'm sorry, Calver, but I tell you again that this is none of my doing."

Calver was ready to clutch at straws. "Your assistants," he said. "They all possess qualifications. Would either of them be willing to ship with us as Mate? I'd pay well, considerably above regular rates."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Not a hope," MacLaren told him. "Not a hope. As a matter of fact I've already sounded them on the subject, but they're newly married, both of them, and prefer all night at home in bed to watchkeeping aboard an interstellar tramp."

"I could," said Calver, "even go so far as to sign on an extra woman in some capacity."

"A pregnant woman?" countered the Port Captain.

"Oh." Calver got to his feet. "Well, thanks for what you've told me. I think I'll go and have a word with Mr. Paul."

"He doesn't bully easily," MacLaren told him. "The more you bully him, the less likely you are to get your permit."

Perhaps a small monetary gift, tactfully offered, thought Calver, but he did not say it. He said goodbye to MacLaren and went out into the passage. The Shipping Office was in the same building as the Port Captain's office, but at a lower level. A fast and smoothly running escalator carried him to his destination.

There were the usual clerks behind the long counter doing nothing in particular. One of them looked up. "Oh, it's Captain Calver, isn't it? Mr. Paul would like tae see ye, sir. He'll be in his office."

Calver went into the Shipping Master's little cubicle.

"Sit ye doon, Captain," said Paul jovially. He raised a warning hand. "No, afore ye lose what little temper ye have I'll tell ye that I've guid news for ye. Ay. Verra guid news."

"You're letting me have my permit?" asked Calver.

"Permit, Captain. 'Tis better news than that. Ye'll no be wantin' a permit the no."

"Indeed? So you've found a Mate for me?" He added, "Some drunken bum, I suppose, but as long as he holds at least a First Pilot's license he'll do."

"No, not a drunken bum, Captain—but a maist effeecient officer. Some captains wouldna approve, but the way that ye a'ready ha' the ship manned it'll mak' nae defference."

"You mean . . . ?" asked Calver.

"Ay. A wumman. She came oot here as passenger in *Rim Caravel* on her way back to the Centre Worlds. But she's in

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

nae hurry, an' when she heard ye were held up wi' crew shortage she volunteered."

"A woman." repeated Calver.

"Ye've plenty a'ready. What's yin mair? An' she holds the qualifications. No' a certificate pairhaps, but she has her Commission as Lieutenant Commander in the Survey Service, Executive Branch . . ."

"And her name," said Calver coldly, "is Sonya Verrill."

"Ye a'ready ken the lass, Captain? That makes things easier."

"Doesn't it?" said Calver.

He was waiting for her in the Shipping Office when she arrived from her hotel. She was wearing a severe business suit that accentuated rather than hid her femininity. She smiled enticingly at Paul and his clerks and even more seductively at Calver. She murmured, "Aren't you going to say, 'Welcome aboard,' Derek?"

He said, "You aren't aboard yet."

"But I shall be—otherwise you don't lift ship."

He said, "I'd like to see this commission of yours."

"But of course." She pulled out the document from her handbag. "Here."

"I thought you were Intelligence," he said.

"I am—but all of us hold commissions in the Executive Branch. We have to be able to handle ships should the need arise."

"I see." He handed the paper back to her.

Mr. Paul had the ship's Articles open on the counter. He coughed to attract attention. "If ye'll let me have some details, Miss Verrill . . . Year o' birth." She told him, adding, "Earth Standard." Calver tried to work out her age but failed. He had been so long on the Rim that he had lost touch with Terran measurements of time. Paul's stylus scratched busily. "Address of next of kin?"

"Still your brother?" asked Calver before she could answer.

"Yes, Derek. I'll give him your regards when next I write." She gave Paul the full details.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Rank or rating . . . ? Pay . . . ?" These questions Calver answered. "Number and grade of certificate or commission?"

Then it was over and Calver was looking at his new Chief Officer with something short of enthusiasm. He said, "There's a bar on the next deck down. Could you use a drink?"

"I'd rather like to get myself and my gear on board, sir."

"I'm in no hurry," said Calver, with a short, apprehensive laugh. "Come on. A drink first. That's an order."

"And will it be poisoned?" she asked.

"Unfortunately," he said, "it's all at rather short notice. Had I been warned I might have arranged it." He laughed again. "I'd better warn you, while we're on the subject of poisoning, that my wife's the Catering Officer."

Old Mr. Paul chuckled tolerantly. "Anyone can see that ye're old shipmates," he said.

"Yes," admitted Calver. "We were once. Briefly."

He remembered his kidnaping on Grollor by Sonya Verrill and her brother, and the subsequent destruction of the space yacht *Star Rover*. That had been a sticky situation—but not one half so sticky as this one promised to be.

XII

"NAME YOUR POISON," he said, as though the words were to be taken literally.

"Scotch on the rocks," she said. "The local variety isn't too bad."

He said, "I'll have the same," and gave the order to the barman.

When the drinks had been placed before them he raised his glass but was at a loss for a suitable toast. Finally he muttered, "Mud in your eye."

"And in yours," she responded.

They sipped in silence.

She said, "You don't like me, Derek."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

He looked at her, finally admitting, "That's not altogether true, Sonya, but . . ."

"But you like to keep your wives and your popsies in airtight compartments."

"Too right," he admitted. "And furthermore . . ."

"Furthermore?"

"I certainly don't like what you've been doing."

"What have I been doing?" she asked sweetly.

"What haven't you been doing?" he exploded. "You traveled out here in *Rim Caravel*. You persuaded her Master to calculate our trajectory and to follow it, knowing that interference effect would throw our Drive out of kilter and knowing, too, that his engineers, being ready for it, would be able to make the necessary adjustments to their own Mannschenn Drive Unit. So *Rim Caravel* beat us to Port Caledon by a handsome margin, leaving you to make all your arrangements. Come to that, I suppose that you got at Cappell before we shoved off from Port Faraway."

"No," she told him. "I didn't. Although I must confess that I considered Cappell the weak link in your chain."

"And the rest?" he persisted.

"Could be." She shrugged. "Could be not. I'm not saying."

"It doesn't much matter." He shrugged in his turn. "I know that you were behind it all. What I do object to is being used as a cat's paw by your blasted Survey Service."

She said, "I suppose that it does rankle more than somewhat. But try to look at it sensibly, Derek. Oh, I know damn' well that your ship is staffed by a team of exceptionally competent spacemen and spacewomen, but none of you has Survey experience. I have."

"Yes, that's all very well. But if—when—we find the Outsiders, for whom will you be working? For the ship, or for the Federation? Will you be Miss Sonya Verrill, Chief Officer of *The Outsider*, or will you be Lieutenant Commander Verrill, Federation Survey Service, Intelligence Branch? That's what I want to know. That, both as Master and as Chairman of the Board, I have every right to know."

"You have," she admitted. "You have, Derek. And it's

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

only right that all this should be ironed out before I set foot inside your airlock."

"It should have been ironed out before I let you sign," he growled.

"It should," she grinned. "You slipped up there. But if I hadn't been allowed to sign you'd have had a long, long wait for either a Chief Officer or a permit to sail shorthanded. However, I'm prepared to be quite honest with you. Cards on the table and all that. And if you aren't satisfied we'll go back to Mr. Paul and I'll tell him that I've changed my mind and that you've agreed to pay me off by mutual consent. I shan't even claim the day's pay to which I shall be entitled. And I promise you, too, that you'll be getting your permit within a couple of days at the outside."

"Fair enough," he grunted. "Fair enough. All right, Sonya, go ahead and satisfy me."

"I've already raised the point," she said, "about my being experienced in exploration and survey work."

"It's a good one," he conceded.

"It is. But I think that what really worries you is my ambiguous status. In more ways than one."

"You can say that again," he told her.

"Let's skip the personal side of it," she said. "For the time being, anyhow. . . . All right—I'm a commissioned officer of the Federation's armed forces. As such, I'm bound by oath to make a full report on anything discovered. But, as you already know, it will be some little time before we, the Survey Service, are able to release any ships for exploration, and whatever claim you may make on whatever is found out there will be valid. The Service has always honored the old principle of finders are keepers. But they like to know just what has been found, and it will be up to me to keep them informed."

"H'm," he grunted.

"And always bear in mind, Derek, that I'm bound just as much by my signature on your Articles as by my oath to the Service. I'm on your books as Chief Officer, and I'll do the job to the best of my ability. Should I be required to draw

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

upon my experience as a Survey Service officer on your behalf, I shall do so cheerfully. I'll earn my keep. Have no doubts about that."

"I haven't," he said. "But . . ."

"All right." She gestured as though throwing playing cards down to the polished surface of the bar. "Here's the rest of my hand, such as it is. This business is personally important to me. Very important."

"That," he said glumly, "is what I was most afraid of."

She laughed rather bitterly. "Men!" she flared. "The supreme egotists! And you, my dear, are no exception to the rule. Oh, I like you, Derek, make no mistake about that. But please give me credit for enough intelligence to be able to refrain from throwing your beloved ship into a state of turmoil. You can tell your everloving wife that, as far as I'm concerned, the policy will be strictly hands off." Her face clouded. "But this is a personal matter. Rather more years ago than I care to remember, Bill Maudsley and I were lovers. We broke up, but we shouldn't have done it. There were faults on both sides—as aren't there always—but we . . . matched. And it was in the cards that we'd be coming together again; there was no hurry, but the first feelers had already been put out. And then the reports came in about his disgrace—I wanted to come out here then, but I couldn't be spared—and then, eventually, about his death. . . .

"And I want to find out what killed him."

He killed himself, thought Calver. But did he? But doesn't any man, no matter how he dies, kill himself?

"You can't blame me," Sonya Verrill was saying. "You can't blame me for wanting to know."

"I can't," he said.

As they approached the ship, following the truck upon which Sonya's baggage was loaded, they saw that it was almost ready for space. Gantries and conveyor belts had been withdrawn, and on its slender mast, an extension of the needle-pointed stem, the intensely brilliant red light, the so-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

called Blue Peter, was blinking. The only side port remaining open was that at the airlock.

"You have good officers," commented Sonya.

"We have good officers," he corrected her.

"So you've accepted me," she said.

"What choice had I?" he countered, grinning.

There was somebody standing in the airlock. Calver could see who it was, and his brief mood of cheerfulness abruptly departed. At first, when he had seen the state of readiness of his ship, he had berated himself for indulging in two stiff drinks almost immediately prior to blast-off, now he was sorry that he hadn't taken three.

"So you're back," said Jane coldly. "We're all ready for space."

"Formalities can't be hurried," he replied, with equal coldness.

"But I thought that you'd found and signed on a Chief Officer," she said.

"I did," he said.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Jane," he said, "meet Miss Sonya Verrill—or Lieutenant Commander Sonya Verrill—who'll be shipping with us as Mate."

"The word 'Mate'," she said, "is capable of several interpretations."

"Mrs. Calver," said Sonya, "I assure you that I'm qualified for the job."

"Which job?" asked Jane.

"Miss Verrill," ordered Calver, "will you get aboard, please?" He saw the Second Officer fidgeting behind Jane. "Mr. Brentano, will you please attend to the Chief Officer's baggage and show her to her cabin? And Mrs. Calver, I shall be obliged if you will go to your blast-off station."

"Is this how you keep your word, Derek?" she asked quietly.

"Circumstances beyond my control . . ." he began.

"You should learn to control yourself," she told him.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Jane," he said, "go to your station. Please. I'll explain everything as soon as we've got this bitch upstairs."

"I hope that you can," she said.

Inside the ship intercom speakers had come to life. It was Sonya's voice, crisp, authoritative with a real Survey Service crackle to it. "Secure all! Secure all for space! Secure all!"

"Doesn't waste much time, does she?" asked Jane bitterly.

XIII

So *The Outsider* fell through the twisted blackness, the warped infinity, out from the Empire of Waverley towards the Rim. But it was not only the continuum that was warped and twisted. There was warping and twisting in the personalities of her people, hostilities and jealousies and frustrations. There was Calver, leading a lonelier life than he had ever led before as Master, keeping to himself, living alone and not liking it. There was Sonya Verrill, given the respect that was due to her by virtue of her rank, no less but no more. There was Jane, discharging her duties with a certain bored efficiency but determined not to mingle socially.

There was the rest of the crew, all of whom knew, by now, how things stood and all of whom were determined, even old Doc Malone, to keep their own yards clear. They resented Sonya's presence aboard the ship and resented still more that machinations that had resulted in her being signed on as Chief Officer—but, as Malone put it, they would give her a fair crack of the whip. She was Mate and she was doing her job as such. And Calver was Master, and he was doing his job. And Jane was the Catering Officer, and nobody was going hungry. As long as things did not blow up between the three of them, the ship would run, would arrive, in the fullness of time, at her destination. Malone said cynically, "I don't give a damn who does what to whom as long as I don't have to pay."

But nobody was doing anything to anybody. Calver kept

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

himself to himself, and Sonya Verrill kept herself to herself, and Jane, in her off-duty hours was unapproachable. And the ship functioned as well as she had ever functioned, watch succeeding watch in control room and engine room, seemingly independent of the tangled lives of her senior officers.

Until . . .

It was Sonya Verrill's watch and Calver had occasion to visit the control room to make a routine check of the ship's position. The girl watched him as he stood before the big chart tank, as he set up the extrapolation of the trajectory from the latest fix.

She said, "Derek, this can't go on."

Calver adjusted the controls until the luminescent filament had firmed, looking like a fine, incandescent wire in the blackness of the tank. Then he looked up and around. He asked, "What can't go on?"

"This," she said. "This situation. Damn it all, I shouldn't mind all the disapproval so much if we were doing something. But we aren't. You're leading the life of a monk, and I might as well be in a nunnery. So, come to that, might your wife." She grinned wryly. "There's nothing so annoying as being punished for uncommitted crimes."

"But we aren't being punished," he said.

"Aren't we? I've sailed in taut ships, Derek, really taut ships, commanded by the more notorious martinets of the Survey Service. But none of them could hold a candle to this one. Everybody growled, but, compared to this set-up, everybody was happy. The game's crooked and you know it."

"So the game's crooked," he agreed. "But what can we do about it?"

"You're Master," she told him.

"So I'm Master. And you, my dear, are Mate—and, as such, responsible for the smooth running of the vessel."

She said, "But she is running smoothly. That's the worst part of it all. She's running too smoothly. I'd welcome some sort of a blow-up."

"No ship can run too smoothly," he said stiffly.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"But too much is being bottled up," she said. "The longer it's bottled up the worse it will be."

"And what do you expect me to do?" he asked. "Give the order, 'All hands unbottle'? What was the orthodox technique in the Survey Service in situations such as this?"

"In the Survey Service," she told him, "such situations would never be allowed to arise."

"No? Well, I suppose when you have a large pool of officers you can make sure that incompatibles aren't allowed to ship together. But you, my dear, made sure that we had no large pool of officers to pick and choose from."

She said, "I suppose that we, you and I, are incompatible."

He said, "That's just the trouble. We aren't, and everybody knows it."

She said, "Why the hell can't you and Jane make it up?"

"Jane doesn't like you," he told her. "She never has, not from the very start. And that was when she and I were just getting acquainted."

"Spare me the details. She didn't like me when you and she were no more than casual shipmates. She dislikes me still more now."

"She has her reasons," said Calver.

"All right, she has reasons. But I, as you know, have my reasons for being aboard this rustbucket of yours. I'm not here for love of you."

"Thank you. And I never asked to have you here. All I wanted was a permit so that I could get the hell off Nova Caledon without delay."

"But I am here," she said.

"Too right you are," he agreed. "Too bloody right."

"Well," she demanded, "what are you doing about it?"

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that I could push Jane out through the airlock without a spacesuit—although I doubt if the others would back me up. Or I could do the same to you. Or, better still, to both of you."

She told him, "You are a sadistic bastard, you know."

He said, "That's the way that I feel just now."

"Then why don't you do something about it?"

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"About what?"

"About this bloody absurd situation, you fool."

He said, "I just might, at that."

"What, master mind?"

"We can, at least, take the strain off ourselves. To hell with everybody else."

"Including Jane?"

"Including Jane."

She said, "I'm a woman, and what you suggest runs counter to the rules of the lodge to which all women belong. But if she won't see reason . . ."

"She won't," said Calver.

"All right."

"You come off watch at twenty-hundred hours," said Calver, "and there's no reason why the Chief Officer shouldn't have a quiet drink with the Master in her watch below."

"There's not," agreed Sonya. "But . . ." She went on after a pause, "Oh, damn the stinking atmosphere aboard this ship! There are so many people, interesting people, charming people, whom I'd love to meet and to talk with. But all of them treat me as though I were an ambulatory case of Ven-
usian Purple Rot. And I know whose fault that is."

"Not altogether," objected Calver, trying hard to be fair. "After all, just bear in mind that everybody is scared of getting involved in a nasty mess. They just refuse to take sides."

"Could be. But that's all the more reason why we untouchables should stick together."

"Twenty-hundred hours, then," said Calver, leaving the control room.

It was good, thought Calver, to be able to enjoy female company in his cabin once more, even though it was not Jane. He looked at Sonya as she sat in her chair, as she contrived to convey the impression of graceful relaxation even though she was, perforce, strapped into the piece of furniture by her seat belt. He handed her another bulb of his prized

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

lacrissa brandy and took another for himself from his wine locker.

"Well, Captain," she said, "the voyage progresses. It will not be long before we're on the leads—Macbeth in line with Kinsolving's Sun. And then . . ."

He said, "That will be the hardest part. The leads might have been, by sheer chance, dead accurate when Maudsley brought *Polar Queen* back to the Rim from Outside—but they won't be so accurate now. There's galactic drift, you know."

She said, "I'm a navigator. I know."

"But a few simple calculations," he went on, "combined with a search pattern."

"Yes." She sipped from her bulb. She said suddenly, "I wish that your clever Mr. Brentano had this cabin bugged. I wish that your wife could overhear this conversation."

"Keep her out of it," said Calver sharply.

"Why? She's probably assuming the worst—and here we are, quietly swigging brandy and talking shop."

He said, "That's why I invited you here."

She said, "You're a bloody liar, Derek, and we both of us know it."

Calver said, "So I'm a bloody liar. So what?"

"I like to be frank," she told him.

"But can't you see," insisted Calver, "that it would be quite impossible, here, in this ship? Things are bad enough now; let's not make them worse."

"They couldn't be worse," Sonya said practically. "Everybody knows that the new Mate is the Master's mistress. We might as well be hung for sheep as lambs."

"I'd prefer not be hung," he said, then corrected himself pedantically. "Hanged, I mean."

"Hanged or hung—what's the difference? You still get a sore throat."

"Have some more gargle," suggested Calver.

"Thank you, dear. But isn't this domesticated? Remind me next time to bring my knitting."

"I'll do that," promised Calver.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Seriously, Derek, what's wrong with us?"

"You know. It just wouldn't be decent to do anything here and now."

"My good man," she said patiently, "we've been over all that before. Furthermore, your everloving wife won't let you sleep with her. She's applying sexual sanctions. If she were here, in this cabin, as she should be, I should not be here. Nature abhors a vacuum—and that applies to human nature as well as to physics."

"But . . ."

"Fellow shareholders or no fellow shareholders, you're still the Master. You're the law and the prophets. For example, if you were to say to me, 'Miss Verill, take off your shirt,' I should obey the order."

He said, "Sonya, I didn't say anything of the kind."

"You've been thinking it," she told him. "I've been watching you eying the cleavage ever since I parked my fanny in your best armchair."

She unfastened the last button and shrugged herself free of the garment. She made no attempt to hide her breasts—and, thought Calver, it would have been criminal to have hidden them. She said, "Well?"

"I spent a few weeks on Hygea," he told her carefully. "You know it, no doubt. Nudism, vegetarianism, total abstinence."

"And we aren't vegetarians," she said, "neither are we total abstainers. So any incidental nudism doesn't count. Or does it?"

Calver unstrapped himself from his chair and pushed away from it so that he floated gently towards the door. He snapped the catch on the lock. When he turned he saw that Sonya was divesting herself of her shorts. He felt absurdly—or not so absurdly?—guilty as he started to throw aside his own garments.

But if he was going to be blamed for something he might as well do whatever it was he was being blamed for.

And, in any case, he wanted to do it.

Badly.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"It's been too long." whispered Sonya.

"Too long." he whispered.

"We . . . We needed this . . ."

The intercom phone was buzzing irritably. Reluctantly, Calver let go of the girl, drifted away from her, reluctant to let his attention wander from the pale, lovely body floating there in the semi-darkness. He fumbled along the bulkhead until his hand closed on the instrument. He pulled it from its clip and raised it to his mouth.

"Captain here."

"Acting Third Officer here," said Elise Renault stiffly.

"There is an emergency."

"Well, what is it?" demanded Calver sharply.

"It's your wife. She's locked herself in the Mannschenn Drive Room."

Calver cursed bitterly as he fumbled for his shorts and sandals. He pulled them on and rushed out into the alleyway.

XIV

CALVER DARED to hurry to the Mannschenn Drive Room; as yet there were no indications that the gyroscopes had been tampered with, that the temporal precession field was fluctuating. He hurried, pulling himself hand over hand along the guide rails, kicking off from bulkheads, swimming through the air, through shafts and alleyways, with the speed possible only to an experienced spaceman. He hurried—and yet there were long pauses, too long, the drifting from bulkhead to bulkhead, during which he was able to think, to worry and to blame himself. He had heard stories of what happened to people when they were in too close a proximity to a misbehaving Mannschenn Drive Unit, and they were not pretty stories. Even when turned inside out, literally, a human being will survive for a while, too long a while.

He realized that Sonya was following him. He paused, half turned his head, snarled, "You'd better keep out of this."

"But, Derek, as Chief Officer."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"As Chief Officer you should be in the control room in an emergency—especially when the Master is required elsewhere."

"All right," she said. "You know where to find me."

Calver continued his nightmare fall through the free falling ship, the ship that, at any moment, might fall through and into a nightmare beyond all imagination. *No, thought Calver, not a nightmare, not a bad dream, but an evil reality of hopelessly twisted space and time. . . .*

But outlines were not wavering yet, and colors were not sagging down the spectrum, and there was, as yet, no insane repetition of words and thoughts and actions. There was still time. Almost as clearly as though he were in the Interstellar Drive Room himself he could visualize Jane standing before the gleaming intricacy of spinning and ever precessing gyroscopes, hypnotized by their uncanny motion, mind and will drawn from her, dragged from her and sent whirling down the dark infinities. . . . Or, perhaps, at this moment she was selecting some heavy tool from the rack, some spanner or the like, to send crashing into the heart of the weird, shimmering complexity.

Bendix was there in the alleyway outside the Mannschenn Drive Room, and with him were Renault and Lloyd. Lloyd was stammering, "But, Mr. Bendix, I just slipped out for a couple of minutes to the toilet. . . . How was I to know . . . ?"

"You should have called me," growled his chief.

"But Mrs. Calver had just looked in. . . . She said that she'd stood an occasional M.D. watch in other ships."

"That's true," said Calver. "She knows enough to be able to shut it down in a hurry if things go wrong."

"Oh," grunted Bendix. "You're here at last, Calver. Well, this is your ship, and that's your wife locked in there with my tame gyroscopes—although how long they're going to stay tame I shouldn't like to say. What are you doing about it?"

"Cut off the power supply at the mains," said Calver promptly.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

Bendix swore disgustedly then said, "And do you think I never thought of that? Oh, it'd work all right—as long as there was somebody there able—and willing—to do all the right things. Jane might be able—but is she willing? You know what will happen if the gyroscopes start toppling, don't you?"

Calver knew.

He knew as much as anybody—although that was not much. He had heard the stories of ships lost in time rather than in space, had himself visited planets that must have been colonized by human beings millenia before man sent his first clumsy rockets climbing painfully towards Luna, let alone despatched his first ships to the stars. He had heard and read the stories, and had seen some of the evidence supporting them.

The intercom speaker on the bulkhead crackled sharply and the men heard Jane's voice, "Is my husband there?"

Silently Renault handed Calver a microphone. Calver said quietly, "Yes, I'm here, Jane. Will you come out of the Mannschenn Drive Room, please, and let Mr. Lloyd resume his watch?"

"No," she said.

He asked coldly, "What do you intend doing in there?"

She replied, "I'm not quite sure yet, my dear." She made the term of affection sound like an epithet. "I'm not quite sure. I'm leafing through the manual at the moment. Who knows what ideas I may get from it? But I can tell you one thing I shall do—if there are any attempts to break down or to burn open this door, then I shall take a heavy spanner to the governor."

"This is mutiny," said Calver coldly.

"So it is, my sweet, so it is," she agreed. "And mutiny's a crime, isn't it? And adultery isn't. Unfortunately."

He snapped, "Jane, don't be so absurdly possessive."

"Possessive, is it?" she laughed. "Do you remember how you carried on, Derek, when I went out for a few drinks at Port Tharn with the captain of *Rim Wyvern*? Or was that, somehow, different?"

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Courtney," said Calver, "is one of the more notorious wolves in the Rim Runners fleet."

"But you," she pointed out, "can carry on with one of the more notorious bitches in the Intelligence Branch of the Survey Service."

Calver was silent.

"The double standard," she went on, after a pause. "Convenient, isn't it, for men like you." She paused again. "Of course, it wasn't the blackmail that I minded so much. I know you well enough to realize that you'll stop at nothing to get what you really want. The blackmail was bad enough, but it was the broken promises afterwards that were just a little too much. You forced me into helping you to attain your crazy ambition—and then, *then*, you work things so that your tow-headed trollop sails in this ship—*our* ship."

"That," said Calver without expression, "was none of my doing."

"Wasn't it?" She laughed without mirth. "Wasn't it? Whom do you think you're fooling, Derek Calver? Not I, for a start."

"It was none of my doing," repeated Calver.

"Oh, you poor, little, innocent woolly lamb, helpless in the jaws of the big, bad, bitch wolf. My heart bleeds for you. Or it would, if I didn't despise you so much."

"I would suggest," said Calver, "that you leave all this name calling until later and tell us just what the hell you are playing at."

"But there may not be a later," she told him. "There won't be if I manage to bring back yesterday—or the day before, or the decade before or whenever. What period do you wish to return to, Derek? That sort of honeymoon of ours on Mellise, just before the hurricane? Although the hurricane itself wasn't bad. It was better than this. Or would you prefer that time on Grollor when you got entangled with the commissioned popsy again and were stashed away aboard *Star Rover*? Play the scene over again—and then you can make a few changes. You can sell out to the Survey Service

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

then instead of waiting until now. It will save quite a deal of trouble and ill feeling."

Bendix was whispering, "Keep her talking, Captain, and I'll get the cutting and burning tools along."

She said lightly, "That's a very sensitive microphone you have there, Derek. Not that it matters. As soon as you tried to break in, I'd know—and then we'd all find out what happens when a really heavy spanner is slung into the works."

Calver turned to the Interstellar Drive Chief. "And what will happen if a spanner is slung into the works, Bendix?"

Bendix said, "I'd sooner not find out, Captain."

"These big, strong men," scoffed Jane. "All of you wanting to push out into the unknown, the unknowable—but when you have the unknown on your very front doorstep you shy away from it. This is it, Derek. You wanted the unknown so very, very badly, my dear. Now you shall have it, served up on a silver tray and trimmed with parsley."

"Janel" roared Calver. "That's enough of this tomfoolery. Stop whatever you're doing and come out of there. At once."

"Ay, ay, Captain. Ay, ay, my left foot. But what will you promise if I agree to come out? What will you promise this time? And how long will you keep your promise?"

"She's enjoying making you squirm, Calver," said Bendix, not without a certain glum satisfaction. "The trouble is that she's making us all squirm."

"That's all very well," put in Renault, "but it's time that somebody did something about something."

"You could remember to use your depilatory cream each morning," suggested Jane. "Just for a start, that is." She started to giggle, and Calver felt the beginnings of hope. "Oh, there's so much, so very much that could be done to clean this ship up. You're all of you lazy, untidy. . . ." She giggled again. "How would it be if we went back in time to the Stone Age? Don't you think that you'd all be much happier scratching around on a kitchen midden? Or just gnawing your mammoth bones more or less clean and tossing them out of the cave to fall where they might? Men," she

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

went on, "are quite impossible, really. Untidy, undisciplined, lecherous." She added confidentially, "You know, they drink too. Boozing and wenching—the male's idea of paradise. Slurping up anything that tastes like liquor and carrying on with little blonde trollops. It wouldn't be so bad if they weren't married, of course. But when they are, it's rather much. It's rather too much." There was quite a long silence, and when she resumed her voice betrayed the beginnings of hysteria. "But I'm changing all that. Or punishing it. I'm sending this ship full of swine back to some pigsty in the past. . . . If I can . . . If . . . I . . . can . . . Damn thish print! Why musht the barshtardsh make it sho shmall? An' all theshe blashted shwitchesth an' dialsh an' metersh . . . But why worry? There'sh shpanner, isn't there? Where'sh bloody thing got to? Ah, here. Shpanner, one number, chrome plated, coming up . . . Coming . . ."

. . . *down!* thought Calver with sick desperation.

And nothing happened. The four men, their faces white and tense, stared at each other, but nothing had happened, nothing was happening. The thin, high whine of the Mannschenn Drive, from behind the locked door, did not vary.

Sonya Verrill came along the alleyway. There was a smugness in her expression that Calver did not like. She said briskly, "Mr. Bendix, you can break in now."

"Not so fast," snapped Calver. "Miss Verrill, what have you done?"

"S.O.P. in the Survey Service," she told him airily. "The procedure worked out to deal with situations such as this. It's not unknown for people to go round the bend in the Mannschenn Drive Room—and if we have time we pump anaesthetic gas through the ventilating system. I called out Dr. Malone to supply the anaesthetic, and Mr. Brentano to lend a hand with the isolating valves."

"She's not hurt?" asked Calver anxiously.

"Not phsically. She'll not even have a hangover."

"There are more and deeper hurts than the physical." whispered Calver.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"And if she isn't hurt," growled Bendix, "it will be no thanks to either of you."

They waited in silence while Lloyd went to fetch the cutting torch.

XV

CALVER KEPT to his own quarters, seeing nobody unless required to do so on ship's business. He was thinking too much and he was drinking too much. He hoped that the drinking would inhibit his thought processes, but it did not. He was thinking too much and he was remembering too much, harking back to the old days before the skein of his life became so hopelessly tangled. He could not blame Jane for this, but neither could he blame Sonya. He tried to blame himself, but even this he found difficult. He had acted as he had acted because he was himself, Derek Calver, his personality the resultant of his years of experience both in deep space and on various planetary surfaces. He had reacted to external stimuli as surely as the dogs—still famous after how many centuries?—which had been the subjects of the experiments made by the ancient Russian Pavlov.

Old Doc Malone came to see him.

"Derek," said the ship's physician, his usually jovial face grave, "we have to land Jane."

"Where?" asked Calver, sipping from his bulb of brandy.

"You're the navigator."

"It will mean delay," said Calver.

The doctor exploded. "For the love of all the odd gods of the galaxy, man, snap out of it! The Outsiders—if there are any Outsiders—have been waiting for centuries, or millenia. There's no urgency. A few weeks, or months, are neither here nor there. If you keep Jane cooped up aboard this ship a minute longer than you have to, I'll not answer for the consequences."

Calver squeezed out the last of the brandy from the bulb and toosed it towards the disposer. It missed and drifted

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

aimlessly in the air of the cabin, a tiny, deflated, crumpled balloon. The doctor looked at it and looked at a half dozen or so of its predecessors. He said, "This was a happy ship. Now she's bound to hell in a handbasket."

"Is she?" asked Calver, without much interest.

"Damn it all, you're the Master. Take charge, can't you?"

"I am in charge. And all my officers are highly efficient."

"Your Catering Officer is not. If it's of any interest at all to you—which I'm beginning to doubt—she's been suspended from her duties, and Tanya Brentano's taken over."

"That explains the Slavic flavor to the cuisine," murmured Calver. "I was rather wondering. But why?"

"Because, Captain, none of us want to wake up in the morning to find ourselves dead of poisoning. You may be surprised to learn that it's neither you nor your popsy that's being blamed for the present state of affairs, but your wife. If she'd taken a kitchen knife to either you or Sonya everybody would have said that she was quite justified, but she didn't. Instead she tried to hit at you through the ship, thereby hazarding the lives of all on board. So nobody loves poor Jane, and poor Jane loves nobody. All of which makes any sort of cure quite impossible as long as she remains in this tin coffin."

"Cure for what?" asked Calver. "You assured me that the anaesthetic gas you used was perfectly safe."

"And so it is safe. It did no harm at all to her, either physically or mentally. What did the harm was the period of emotional stress which, under the circumstances, is continuing, and then staring too long into those damned, uncanny gyroscopes. I've always been scared of the bloody things myself."

"Have a drink," offered Calver, extending a long arm to his locker.

"I'd like one, but I'm not having one with you, Derek. Not now. I'll not encourage you. Alcohol's a good staff, but a poor crutch, and you're making too much of a crutch of it."

"Am I?"

"You are. Now, just leave that bulb in the cabinet and

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

talk things over sensibly. We have to deviate from our trajectory, and it's up to you to decide where we deviate to. We have to land Jane so that she may receive proper treatment and attention."

"Of course," Calver pointed out, "if we deviate and make for the nearest port, it might be better to keep Jane on board and pay off Sonya."

"It would not. The ship holds too many memories, unhappy ones, for Jane. Furthermore, I haven't the drugs and the apparatus, even if I knew how to use them. You know as well as I do that ship's doctors are never able to keep up with the latest advances in any field of medicine. Too, I'll admit that I want to get to the bottom of this Outsider mystery as much as you do and I realize that Sonya, with her Survey Service experience, will be very useful indeed."

"I thought," said Calver, "that everybody hated her guts, everybody but me, that is."

"That might have been the case at first," admitted Malone. "But she's a good Chief Officer, and now that she's keeping out of your hair—or are you keeping out of hers? She's proving herself to be a good shipmate. She's got the women eating out of her hand now, and that helps a lot."

"So she's poisoned their minds against Jane," said Calver.

"She has not, Derek. She's frank and honest, and has made it quite plain that she operates according to her own code of morals and that she's never been in the habit of picking anything up unless its been cast aside by its rightful owner."

"I suppose I was cast aside," interjected Calver.

Malone ignored this. He went on, "One result has been, of course, that all the wives have made it quite plain that each of them considers her husband to be the most marvelous man in the universe. Which hasn't been at all a bad thing for the husbands."

"That's what Jane should have done," said Calver.

"Precisely. That's what Jane should have done, and then we shall all have been spared a lot of trouble. But Jane is Jane."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Jane is Jane," agreed Calver, "and I wouldn't want her changed."

"Wouldn't you, now?"

"H'm. I suppose I could suggest a few improvements. . . . If she were a little less possessive, for example. I'm inclined to think that her possessiveness has been the real cause of most of the trouble."

"Go on," urged Malone. "Go on."

"It's a pity that we haven't a couch in here," said Calver wryly, "although it's not really required in free fall, is it? But I'll go on. Yes, she's very possessive. And I think she was jealous—is jealous—of the Outsiders as much as of Sonya. Women who get married and become domesticated when they're past their first youth often are that way."

"Go on," said Malone. "Go on. And just study in your spare time and work for a degree or so in medicine and you'll be able to go ashore as a psychiatrist."

Calver grinned. "That's far, very far, from my intentions. But you know as well as I do that anybody who has served for a long time in passenger ships is bound to acquire a rough and ready working knowledge of psychology."

"Then why the hell haven't you used it?" demanded Malone.

"Because," admitted Calver, "I've been too lazy, or too cowardly, or both, to use this knowledge in my dealings either with myself or with my nearest and dearest."

"But there's hope for you yet," encouraged Malone.

"Thank you."

"Now, Derek, listen to me. I know you're the Captain and I'm only the ancient, barely competent quack. I admit that I couldn't take a ship from Point A to Point B—come to that, neither could you without the help of your assorted technicians—but I've knocked around the galaxy for rather more years than you have. And there's one firm conclusion I've come to; slinging blame around never serves any useful purpose. No, not even when you blame yourself. But . . . but you should know yourself, and, as far as it is possible,

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

know others. And the more you know, the less you'll be inclined to blame."

"I have been thinking along those lines," admitted Calver.

"Good. Then you've made a start. And I hope that you'll be able, now, to land Jane to a hospital without feeling too much of a heel about it. And if you want to sleep with your blonde popsy, do so, as long as the ship doesn't suffer. Just be yourself. You're not a bad sort of a bastard, when all's said and done."

"But it's all so . . . so callous," objected Calver.

"I suppose it is. But remember this—in all the millenia of man's recorded history it's been the sentimentalists, the nobly self-sacrificing types, who've done the most damage. Sonya's selfish and honest about it, but she's done far less damage to this ship and this enterprise than you have done."

"I'll do some more thinking on those lines," promised Calver.

"Do just that, but don't brood. And now, if you don't mind, I'll be taking that drink. I've earned it."

"I'll have one with you," said Calver, "and then I must get up to Control to see about this deviation."

XVI

SLOWLY, SLOWLY, *The Outsider* dropped down to her berth at Port Forlorn. It was unfortunate, thought Calver, sitting glumly in the captain's chair in the control room while Sonya Verrill handled the ship, that Lorn had been the most suitable planet to which to deviate, in terms of both distance and medical facilities. It was unfortunate, he thought, and then reproved himself for his egocentricity. He knew how he was feeling, but how was Jane feeling? It must be worse for her.

For Lorn held so many memories, too many memories. Lorn was the world upon which it had all started: his entering the Rim Runners' service, his signing on the Articles of *Forlorn Lady*, his first meeting with Jane. And now the ship

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

was gone, lost off Eblis during her attempt to salvage the Trans-Galactic Clipper *Thermopylae*—and MacLean, who had been her Mate, was gone—killed in a drunken brawl on Tharn. And Captain Engels was gone, his tired old heart having ceased to beat during the hurricane on Mellise.

And now Jane was going.

Sonya was saying something.

"Yes?" asked Calver, snapping out of his morbid reverie.

"Do you wish to take over now, Captain?"

"No thank you, Miss Verrill. You've done a good job so far."

And hasn't she just? he thought. Then—No, *that's unfair. She's been no more than the catalyst, happening along at the right moment—or the wrong one. If I hadn't been so willing to be led astray. . . . And if Jane had tried to hold me in a more intelligent manner.*

He stared out through the viewports to the uninviting scene below, to the vista of barren hills and mountains scarred by mine workings, to the great slag heaps that were almost mountains 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.

He heard Sonya swear, heard her mutter, "A cross wind, blast it."

He said, "It's always windy on Lorn, and the wind is always cold and dusty and stinking with the fumes of burning sulphur."

Brentano said, "What a pity we have to leave Jane on a world like this."

"Doc assured me," Calver told him stiffly, "that the facilities here for dealing with any form of space neurosis are as fine as those anywhere in the galaxy."

Port Forlorn was close now, too close for further conversation, the dirty, scarred concrete apron rushing up to meet them. *The Outsider* dropped through a swirling cloud of coruscating particles, the dust raised by her back-blast and fired to brief incandescence. She touched, sagged tiredly,

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

her structure creaking like old bones. The sudden silence, as the rockets died, seemed unnatural.

Sonya Verrill broke it. "Secure all, Captain?"

"Secure all," he said.

"That looks like the ambulance," stated Brentano.

"Will you go down to the airlock, Mr. Brentano, to see to the arrangements?" said Calver.

The others left the control room. He was alone with Sonya.

She said, a little bitterly, "I suppose you're blaming me."

He said slowly, "No. I'm not sure that I blame myself, even." He shrugged. "Life's a mess, really. You can want too much, and when you get it it's no use to you. No use at all."

She told him, "If you like, Derek, I'll drop off here."

"That will solve nothing, Sonya." He grinned wryly. "After all, we still have to find the Outsiders. And as you pointed out, some time ago, you have Survey Service experience." More to himself than to her he added, "Might as well save something out of the wreck."

"There are times," she whispered, "when I hate you. And this is one of them. You know that I want to find whatever's out there as much as you do, for my own reasons. But . . ." She flared suddenly, "Damn it all, there are decencies."

The intercom phone buzzed. Calver picked up the instrument. "Yes," he said after a pause. "Yes. I'll be right down." His face, when he turned back to Sonya, was old and strained.

Sonya said, "Derek, if it will help at all, tell her that I'm leaving here."

He demanded, "What will that solve? The Mannschenn Drive is as much responsible for her state as any emotional strain. She has to have proper attention, ashore. It is quite out of the question for her to remain on board."

"But for her to know that the ship has blasted off from Port Forlorn, with myself still a member of the crew."

"We need you," said Calver. "And we need your experience. This isn't an ordinary commercial voyage, as you have already pointed out."

The telephone buzzed again.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Are you afraid to say goodbye to her?" asked the girl.

"No," he snapped. He spoke sharply into the instrument.

"Yes, Mr. Brentano. I'm on my way."

He left the control room and took the elevator down to the after airlock. Brentano was there, and Doc Malone, engaged in conversation with the Port Doctor. And there were two white-coated orderlies standing by the stretcher upon which was the blanket-shrouded form of Jane. Calver knew that she was drugged and wondered if she were conscious. He found himself hoping that she was not, and hated himself for his cowardice.

Her eyes opened and her white face turned to him.

"Derek," she said in a dull voice.

"Jane," he said.

She said, "I'm . . . sorry . . ." She formed her words with an effort, her voice seeming to come from very far away. "But you can . . . find the Outsiders . . . It means so much . . . to you . . . more than . . . me . . . more than . . . Sonya . . ."

"No more than you," he lied.

"But . . . it does . . . otherwise . . ." She managed a brief flicker of a smile. "Well, my dear . . . good luck . . ."

He said, "Sonya is willing to leave off here."

"No . . ." she murmured. Then, in a stronger voice, "No. You must have . . . a good . . . Mate . . . We've all put so much into this . . . expedition . . . It must have . . . a chance of . . . success . . ."

"Derek," Malone broke in, "this is doing my patient no good at all. See her again in hospital, before we blast off. But I insist that she be taken ashore without further delay."

Calver took Jane's hand in his. She did not return the pressure. He said, "We'd better do as Doc says. But I shall be seeing you before we shove off."

"If . . . you want to . . ." she whispered.

"Jane," he said inadequately.

And then he had to relinquish her hand, and the white-coated attendants were wheeling the stretcher down the ramp to the waiting ambulance.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

XVII

AS SOON AS the formalities consequent upon the ship's unscheduled arrival had been dealt with, Calver hurried ashore, taking a cab from the spaceport to the hospital. He had not wasted time by changing out of uniform, which made things easier for him as a visitor arriving after official visiting hours. But his visit did little to allay his fears, the anxiety that was increasing as the hour set for departure approached. He was allowed to see Jane, but she could not see him. He could look at her through the thick glass of an observation window, could stare through into the cold chamber in which her motionless body was stretched on the white bed, and that was all.

"Narcotherapy, Captain," the overly cheerful ward Sister told him. "The best cure for any form of space neurosis, even Recession Cafard. When your wife wakes up she'll be as healthy and happy as ever."

"And when," he asked, "will that be, Sister?"

"That's entirely up to Dr. Wilcox. He's taken full charge of the case. He wants to see you before you leave."

"I want to see him," said Calver.

He gazed through the icy glass at Jane. Her face was as white as the sheet that covered her. He could detect no respiratory motion. And he wanted desperately, absurdly, to bring her to life with a kiss, to warm her body with his own. But until matters were resolved, one way or another, there would be little point in restoring her to consciousness.

He looked long and longingly at Jane and then, suddenly, realized that he was envying her. But . . .

He asked abruptly, "Do they dream?"

"Do who dream?" said the Sister.

"The patients. The people who're undergoing this narcotherapy . . ."

"I . . . I don't know." She looked archly up into the face of the tall spaceman. "It could be rather . . . pleasant."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Perhaps," said Calver. He quoted:

*To sleep, perchance to dream,
Ay, there's the rub . . .*

"What was that, Captain?"

"Just something that a Prince of Denmark was supposed to have said once."

"Denmark? Where's that? As far as I know, the only human royalty in the galaxy is in the Empire of Waverley."

"It doesn't matter," said Calver. Then, "Thank you, Sister. And do you think that Dr. Wilcox will see me now?"

"I'll take you right up," replied the girl.

The doctor was too professional, too . . . inhuman. He was, decided Calver, a biological engineer rather than a physician, far too prone to regard a sick man or woman merely as a malfunctioning machine. *It's just as well*, thought Calver, *that in space we get only the relative failures of the medical profession. This man would be as efficient as all hell, but he'd be a lousy shipmate.*

The stiffly white-clad man looked coldly at Calver across the gleaming expanse of his desk top and said, "Please be seated, Captain." He pulled upon a drawer, brought out a folder, and glanced at its contents. "Yes. Your medical officer told me something of the background of the case. Mrs. Calver looked too long at your Interstellar Drive Unit while it was in operation, and as a result her mental balance is upset."

"And how long will the cure take?" asked Calver. "How long will she be sleeping? As you may have heard, this is not a commercial voyage that we are making, and I can hold the ship."

"I'm sorry, Captain. I cannot give you a definite answer. The data has yet to be processed and evaluated."

Calver said, "Surely you can give me some idea."

The doctor regarded the spaceman over his steepled

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

fingers. "Captain," he said, "I take it that you contemplate being by the patient's bedside when she is awakened."

"Too right," Calver told him.

"Has it never occurred to you, Captain, that there are times, even in marriages in which both partners have led strictly moral lives, when loathing ousts love? And in your case. . . ." He picked up the folder, looked at it with a certain distaste. "Your Medical Officer, I fear, is too loyal to his captain ever to make a good doctor. However, I was able to obtain all the background details from Mrs. Calver before she was put into the deep sleep—although she, too, evinced what, in my opinion, was an unearned loyalty."

"You used drugs, of course," said Calver.

"Of course. And, frankly, I was shocked by what I learned. However," he went on, "morals are no concern of mine." He did not add the word "unfortunately," but Calver, watching the cold, narrow face, knew that he was thinking it.

"So?" asked Calver.

"So in my opinion, Captain, it would do little to improve my patient's chances of complete recovery if she awoke to see you."

"You don't approve of my conduct, I take it?"

"No."

"Are you married, Doctor?" asked Calver.

"Your impertinent query has no bearing upon the case, Captain."

"But it has on your attitude." Calver got to his feet. "I take it, then, that you can give me no definite date."

"That is so."

"I suppose I can take a second opinion?"

"And a third if you wish, Captain. And a fourth. And a good day to you."

Malone was waiting for Calver in the entrance lobby of the hospital. He said, "I knew you'd be seeing Wilcox, so I hung on until you were through."

"I've been seeing Wilcox," said Calver grimly.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"A good man," Malone told him. "One of the best in his field. Brilliant. But . . ."

"But what?" demanded Calver. "Look, Doc, I've no intention of leaving Jane in his hands if there's any doubt—"

"There's always doubt," said Malone. "But there's less of it with Wilcox than with anybody else. He's so damn' competent that everybody wonders what he's doing here, on this one horse planet away to hell and gone on the edge of the ultimate night. But he likes the Rim worlds. And he hates people—as people. Patients, as far as he's concerned, are no longer people." He laid his hand on Calver's sleeve. "But this is no place to talk. Too drafty altogether. And the sun's well over the yardarm."

"I should be getting back to the ship," said Calver.

"What for?" demanded the old doctor. "You've a bunch of good officers; they can see that she's all buttoned up for deep space without your hovering over them and getting in their hair."

Calver allowed himself to be steered across the road to the nearest bar. He relaxed a little in the form-fitting chair by the low table and allowed Malone to dial the order. With the glass of whisky in his hand he relaxed a little more.

He said, "I'm still thinking of holding the ship here until Jane's recovery. If the other shareholders are willing, that is."

Malone said, "What do you take me for, Derek? That was the first point that I raised with Wilcox, and he, as you know, advises strongly against it. And he has something there. When we return, loaded with honor and glory, things might be different. Better."

"Honor and glory." Calver laughed mirthlessly. "You know, Doc, now that we're on the last lap I wonder if it's been worth it."

Malone dialed again. He said, "Somebody, some time, had to find out what was behind all the Outsider legends. And it might as well be us."

Calver looked at his watch. "After this drink we'd better be on our way back to the ship."

"But what's the hurry, Derek? This may be our last chance

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

for a drink ashore for one helluva long time, and we may as well make the most of it. I always maintain that no liquor tastes as it should out of a drinking bulb in free fall. And grown men were never meant to take their alcoholic nourishment out of feeding bottles."

Calver ignored this. "Doc," he said abruptly, "now that you've seen Wilcox and know what the treatment is, what do you think of Jane's chances?"

"Very good. I'll even go so far as to say excellent."

"You mean that?"

"Have you ever known me to lie to you, Derek? Even white lies?"

"No."

"Then let's have another drink to Jane's recovery."

Calver looked at his watch again. "And then we must go."

"But what's the hurry, man? It's quite pleasant here, and you and I haven't had a real chance to talk things over, away from the ship, for quite some time. And by things I'm not meaning your own somewhat involved personal muck-up. Let's talk shop."

"Yours or mine, Doc?"

"Yours, of course. After all, I'm the layman who's being shanghaied away on this wild goose chase. I'd still like to know just how you intend to find Maudsley's Outsiders."

"All we can do, Doc, is follow his sailing directions. Put the two leading stars in line, exactly astern, and then run for fifty light years out."

"And there the Outsiders will be, waiting for you."

"There they will not be. As a spaceman you should know, by this time, that everything is in motion relative to everything else—and out here, on the Rim, the mathematicians still haven't been able to plot the relative motions. And the Outsiders themselves are an unknown factor."

"So if they aren't waiting for us at the end of our fifty light year extension of radius, what then?"

"A search pattern, of course. A three dimensional search pattern."

"Radar should help."

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Of course. But the trouble is that radar is useless while the Drive's in operation. I'll try to put it into words of one syllable for you. The principle of radar is no more—and no less—than the accurate measurement of time, the interval between the emission of a radio pulse and its reception after it's been bounced back by the target. But the Mannschenn Drive does funny things to time, as we all know. Its principle is Tempora Precession. So, putting it crudely, the two don't mix."

"H'm . . . I think I can see that. But surely there's some sort of gadget, some sort of detection device that can be used while the Drive's running."

"There is, the Mass Proximity Indicator. It was developed by the Survey Service. Its use isn't restricted to the Federation naval forces, but the Federation high brass has made sure that it's very, very expensive."

"What about *Faraway Quest*?" asked Malone.

"Yes. She's got one. I don't know what strings Grimes pulled to get it. As a matter of fact, the last time we were here, I tried to persuade him to hire me the thing—it's in Rim Runners' store now, gathering dust—but he conveyed the impression that he'd be willing to let me have his right arm, but not the M.P.I. Oh, well, if the late Mr. Maudsley managed without one, we can."

"It would be a handy thing to have, all the same," said Malone.

"Too right it would." Calver made as though to stop Malone as he dialed for another round, then changed his mind. "I'll not say that it would wash out the necessity for a search pattern entirely, but it would help a lot. The most annoying part of it all is that Grimes flatly refuses to admit that there's any substratum of truth in the Outsider legends. If he thought that we should find something, he'd play."

"He can be very pigheaded," said Malone.

"You're telling me." Calver looked at his watch again. "And after this drink we'll pay our bill and go."

When, at last, they boarded a cab for the return to the

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

ship, Calver was beginning to feel suspicious. The effects of the alcohol were wearing off, and it seemed to him that Malone was fighting a strong delaying action. The doctor had thought of all sorts of last minute shopping and was insisting on making his purchases in out-of-the-way establishments. But eventually, Calver's patience having worn dangerously thin, they were driving through the spaceport gates.

And—"What the hell's been going on?" exploded Calver as the vehicle rounded the corner of a tall warehouse and the ship came into view.

There was the giant traveling crane in position, the end of its jib feet clear of *The Outsider's* stem. High on the hull, at control room level, there was the flaring blue incandescence of welding torches. Clustered around the vaned landing gear was a small fleet of Rim Runner maintenance and repair trucks.

"What the hell's been going on?" he demanded again.

"You'll find out," said Malone smugly.

The cab pulled up at the airlock ramp. A young man marched smartly down the incline and saluted with a flourish. He was wearing a Chief Officer's uniform, but the badge on his cap bore the winged wheel of Rim Runners.

"Vickery, sir," he snapped. "Miss Verrill's relief. Everything's in hand, and we shall be ready for space as soon as the welding's been completed and tested."

"Mr. Vickery," said Calver coldly, "report to me in my cabin please."

"Derek," broke in Malone, "I suggest that you let Mr. Vickery carry on with his job, for the time being. I'll do the explaining."

XVIII

"WELL, DOCTOR?" asked Calver stiffly, officially.

"This will come as rather a shock to you, Captain," said Malone.

"Rather a shock? Really, Doctor, you excel at the art of

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

masterly understatement. I return on board expecting to find my ship buttoned up for space, and I'm met at the airlock by a brand new Chief Officer whom I wouldn't know from a bar of soap, and I find that all sorts of unauthorized repairs have been put in hand during my absence."

"No repairs," Malone told him. "Just an addition. A farewell gift from Sonya."

"Yes. Sonya. Miss Verrill. Why did she leave, and by whose authority?"

"The Purser made up her wages and, quite legally, the Second Mate signed her discharge."

"All right. I'll be having a word with Mrs. Bendix and Mr. Brentano later. But why did she leave?"

"Because she's a woman. Because she's a member of the oldest trade union, the oldest lodge of all. When it came to a real showdown she was on Jane's side—more than any of us men were. She talked matters over with me, and we agreed that if Jane learns, when she breaks surface, that Sonya did not accompany you, it will do much for Jane's state of mind. It could easily make all the difference." He paused. "And even now that the Rim worlds are independent of the Federation, the Survey Service still draws a lot of water out here. She was able to talk Commodore Grimes into releasing young Vickery for the expedition."

"An inexperienced Chief Officer."

"He's not. And he's had far more experience on this class of vessel than Sonya ever had."

"Even so, Sonya's got Survey Service experience. Exploration . . ."

"And so has young Vickery," went on Malone patiently. "Not actually in the Survey Service, the Federation Survey Service—but he was Second Mate on *Faraway Quest* the last time that Grimes took her out on his own survey work. He's experienced all right. Make no mistake about that. And he'll be able to look after Sonya's farewell gift to you."

"What the hell do you mean?" demanded Calver.

The old doctor gestured towards the Captain's desk. "There's a letter waiting for you. From Sonya. You'd better

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

read it before you start ramping through the ship blowing your top. I'll leave you to it." He got to his feet. "And I think that it will put you in a somewhat better frame of mind."

When Malone was gone Calver picked up the envelope. It was addressed to him in Sonya's bold, almost masculine hand. He tore it open and extracted the folded sheets of paper. He hesitated before reading the letter. What had Sonya to say to him, and what was the mysterious farewell gift about which Malone had been blathering? And there was the faintest suggestion of the perfume that the girl had always worn hovering around the paper. . . . Calver shrugged. And so what? Everything, it seemed, was over now, and he was glad, and he was sorry. But Jane's recovery was all that there was of any importance now, and he would always be grateful to Sonya for doing what she could to ensure it.

He opened the letter. He read:

"Dear Derek,

"I'm sorry that I wasn't around to see your expression when you returned to the ship, to find me gone and all sorts of mysterious works in progress around the sharp end. Frankly, I'm sorry that I wasn't around. Period. But you can see, you must see that it had to be this way. I want happiness, and that knowledge would have poisoned everything for us. With all her faults Jane is far too fine a person to be handed the dirty end of this particular stick. As a woman, I can imagine all too well what it would have been like for her to be revived from that deep freeze to the knowledge that you and I were out beyond the stars together, with all that that implies. As things are, I shall make sure that she is told that I left the ship here, in Port Forlorn. Just one last thing I ask of you—that you write to me and tell me what it is that you find. You know why it's important to me.

"But I have made one last contribution to the venture. I went to beard Commodore Grimes in his den. He's not a bad old bastard—a bit gruff, but susceptible to feminine charm.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

And I turned on the charm, believe me. Olga Popovsky the Beautiful Spy, in person, singing and dancing. And I got what I wanted.

"For you.

"As you know, this *Faraway Quest* of his is his real sweetheart. The best isn't too good for the bitch. She's got gear that's not all that common in the Survey Service. She's got a Mass Proximity Indicator. Or, to be more precise, she had one. If all has gone according to plan, by the time you're able to read this the instrument will already have been installed in your control room—and an officer who's conversant with the workings of the brute will have taken my place. The way I was able to swing things, the Indicator was never purchased outright by Rim Runners, was only on hire from the Survey Service. And as the Service's senior (and one and only) representative in Port Forlorn I was able to bring just a little pressure to bear.

"But I was just kidding as far as that's concerned. It was sales talk more than pressure. I told him that the Survey Service is interested in the Outsider legends, and after I'd proved to him that poor Bill Maudsley was one of our officers he was willing to admit that there might be something in the stories after all. And then I really went to town. 'The Outsiders,' I said, 'are, after all, on the back doorstep of the Rim worlds. And yet you're letting private interests investigate something that might be of vital importance to you.'

"By this time he was toying with the idea of commissioning *Faraway Quest*, but she's in the throes of quadrennial survey and refit. I mentioned the *Quest's* Mass Proximity Indicator, and he said that even if he were willing to let you have it, it was far too expensive and delicate a piece of equipment to be handled and maintained by untrained personnel. I told him that the solution was obvious—to lend you an officer as well as the instrument. That way, I pointed out, the Rim worlds would have a representative along on the expedition. And so, after a lot more talk on this and that, it was decided. My last official act as Chief Officer was to

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

sign, in the absence of the Master, the contract. It's not a bad one. You hire the Indicator for a nominal fee of \$1.00 (Rim currency) per mensem (Galactic standard) and Mr. Vickery is directly responsible, to Commodore Grimes, for its operation and maintenance. On the other hand, you are to allow Mr. Vickery to make full observations of anything worth observing and to make his report to the Commodore. But don't forget that the Federation Survey Service, as represented by myself, has now pulled out, so you're no worse off than you were before. Anyhow, Julia has the contract with all the other ship's papers, so you'll be able to check it all for yourself when you get around to it.

"And so much for business.

"You needn't worry, Derek. I'm not going all slushy on you. Perhaps in one of the alternative universes we're ship-mates forever and all the rest of it, but not in this one. This, as far as we're concerned, is the end of the penny section. Please don't think that I'm not sorry. I am—more so, perhaps, than you will ever know. But, things being as they are, this is the only way. You see that, don't you? This is the only way.

"So, darling, look after yourself. And all the best of luck, always.

Your
Sonya."

So, thought Calver, *this is it. She's right, of course. She's right. But . . .*

He sat there, staring at the letter. He started to crumple it up, intending to throw it into the disposal chute. Then he changed his mind and carefully smoothed the sheets out again, stowing them in the top drawer of his desk. As he was doing so Malone, after briefly rapping on the door, entered the room.

"So you know now," he said.

"Yes. I know."

"She was a good Chief Officer," said Malone.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"Yes," agreed Calver. "She's good." *In many ways*, he thought.

"I shall rather miss her," said Malone.

"And I," said Calver.

"But Vickery's a good lad," went on the doctor. "He's taken charge quite well, and at short notice."

Somebody was tapping at the door. "Come in," called Calver.

It was the new Mate. He stood there at attention, his cap under his arm. He reported, "New installation completed, sir. Hull airtight. Vessel ready for deep space in all respects."

"I hope you're right, Mr. Vickery," said Calver tiredly.

In his somehow deflated mood he did not feel like making any personal inspections.

XIX

AND so *The Outsider* lifted from Port Forlorn, climbed on her thundering jets through the smog-filled sky to the cleanliness of outer space. In her control room the Captain and his officers made their calculations, independently feeding data into the computer, checking and rechecking, then put the ship on to the trajectory that would bring them to within half a light year of Kinsolving's Sun. They ran under Interstellar Drive, with the warped, convoluted lens of the galaxy on their port hand and the Outside emptiness to starboard. They wondered, inevitably, what that aching nothingness held and they talked, often, of the drunken, frightened Maudsley and of the stories and legends that were part of the culture of the Rim worlds. Vickery, at first, had been skeptical but Calver could tell that after only a few days he was as eager to participate in the solution of the mystery as the rest of the crew.

At the appointed time the ship re-entered normal space and time and the navigators congratulated themselves on the accuracy of their work. Clear and distinct against the hazily glowing lens were the lead stars, almost in line. A

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

carefully calculated hop of only minutes' duration, demanding—and getting—the utmost skill on the part of the Mannschenn Drive engineers, put *The Outsider* into position.

Directional gyroscopes whined and slowly the ship swung about her short axis. The lens was directly astern of her now. Calver and Vickery and Brentano checked and double checked, even went out through the airlock in spacesuits to make visual observations. Renault and Bendix stood by in their respective enginerooms, and Levine concentrated his mental powers on the task of punching a message across the light years to his telepathic colleagues in the Rim world spaceports.

The great rockets rumbled and flared, building up acceleration and velocity, roared and flared and suddenly died. And the singing, spinning, gleaming wheels of the Drive blurred and faded, blurred and faded as they resumed their time-twisting precession. Astern of the ship the Galactic Lens took on the appearance of an oddly crumpled Mobius Strip.

Ahead of her the Outside looked as it had always looked—a great, wide expanse of sweet damn all.

For fifty light years they ran, but not, as Maudlsey had put it, with all hands choking on the stink of frying lubricating oil from the Interstellar Drive Unit; Bendix was too good an engineer for that. For fifty light years they ran, and then, with the Drive shut down, fell outwards through the emptiness. Neither radar nor the Mass Proximity Indicator gave warning of anything at all in their vicinity. Levine, shut up in his cabin with his organic amplifier, reported hearing only faint, routine signals from Rim world shipping and shore installations. Elise Renault, who was at least as good an electronic technician and communications officer as Brentano, was picking up nothing of greater interest than signals that were, at latest, half a century old.

Ten light years west they ran, ten light years in, twenty light years east and another twenty out. North they ran and south. There were still no results, and Calver ordered

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

the volume of the search pattern increased. In the tank of the plotting chart the glowing, skeletal cube expanded slowly—hour by hour, day by day, week by week—and still there was nothing.

And, for the first time, Calver was beginning to doubt, although he would not admit it. And with the doubt was a growing bitterness. He had paid so heavily, and others had paid, for the privilege of being able to lead this expedition. Because of his ambition Jane had suffered, was suffering. And Sonya had suffered. And himself. It would be the supreme irony if nothing was found.

But, he told himself unconvincingly, there must be *something*. The legends could not be laughed off. Neither could the weird, ancient artifacts found, from time to time, on the Rim worlds. And there was Maudsley, and the manner of his dying. . . .

But . . .

The stars are fading, he thought.

The stars are fading, and the caravan

Starts for the dawn of nothing. . . .

And Calver, sitting alone in his cabin, grinned wryly at that oddly retentive memory of his, the memory that could and would always dredge up tags of verse apposite to any and every occasion.

And then—it was during the running of their fourth search pattern—they found it. *It* was a pulsing light and a flickering needle on the panel of the Indicator. *It* was a sense of vague unease in Levine's mind that worsened as the range decreased. *It*, at last, was a growing blip on the radar screen, but that was not until the Mannschenn Drive had been shut down and the ship proceeding cautiously under rocket power.

They saw *it* at last, stared at *it* through the high powered telescope in the control room. It was faintly self-luminous, and it was big, and seemingly metallic, and of far too irregular of shape to be a ship—or to be a ship built by any race with a passion for symmetry.

Cautiously, with carefully timed and calculated rocket blasts, Calver nosed *The Outsider* in towards the . . . the

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

wreck? . . . the derelict? He obtained readings of the mass of the thing and gasped his disbelief. But his instruments were not lying, and he was able to throw his ship into a tight orbit about it. Then, with the others, he stared out through the ports at the fantastic structure—the domes and turrets, the battlements and crenelations. It was like a huge castle. It was like a castle where no castle had any right to be.

"Levine," he called into the telephone. "Levine, can you pick anything up? Is anyone there? Is anything there?"

"There's something there . . ." The Psionic Communications Officer's voice sounded uneasy, frightened. "There's something there. Something. But it's not human."

"We didn't expect it to be," said Calver.

"But . . . It's not alive, even . . ."

"Do you believe in ghosts?" asked Brentano suddenly.

"Look at the instruments," ordered Calver sharply. "That thing's too solid and has too much mass to be a Rim ghost."

Vickery's voice was awed, subdued. "Sir," he asked, "a boarding party?"

"Yes, Mr. Vickery."

"Then I'll call for volunteers, and get suited up myself."

Calver said, "I'm sorry, but you'll not be going. You're the second in command. You will stay here, standing by to render aid—or to get the hell out if you have to." He added, more to himself than to the others, "I want to see what it is that I've paid for."

Brentano said, "I'd better come with you. You'll need somebody who knows something about electronics."

"And I," said Tanya Brentano. "There may be work for a biologist."

"You'd better stay here," her husband told her, "until we know whether or not the thing is safe."

"Like hell I will," she said.

Calver let them fight it out. He felt very lonely. He should have been having a similar argument with Jane.

Or with Sonya.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

XX

THE BOARDING PARTY did not leave, however, until after a great deal of discussion, some of it acrimonious. Calver argued that its composition was the concern of the Master, not that of a meeting of shareholders. He managed at last to convince the others of the legality of his stand, and made the point that it would be criminal folly to leave the ship without a large enough crew to take her back to the Rim. He was taking Brentano, he said, because of that officer's known versatility. He was taking Tanya because she was not indispensable. If anything should happen to her, Julia was quite capable of adding the Catering Officer's duties to her own, and old Doc Malone had, more than once in the past, done duty as Biochemist. Even so, he did not like having a woman along, but knew that Tanya would prefer to face any risk side by side with her husband.

Suited up, laden with equipment, the three of them left the airlock together. Together they stood on *The Outsider's* pitted shell plating, waiting for the circular door to close. The curve of the hull hid the control room ports from them, but they knew that the little compartment would be crowded, that all their shipmates would be waiting there to watch them jet across the emptiness to the faintly glowing enigma hanging in the black sky.

"Captain to Chief Officer," said Calver into his helmet microphone. "We are outside."

"Chief Officer to Captain. I hear you, sir. Are there any further orders?"

"No, Mr. Vickery. You have my instructions. Captain to boarding party. Are you ready?"

"All ready," they replied.

"Then follow me."

He kicked the magnetic soles of his boots clear of the plating and activated his suit reaction units. He allowed himself briefly to wonder what it would be like to be lost out

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

there, alone in a suit and with the darkness, unbroken by the friendly stars, all around him. He told himself at it would be no different from being lost anywhere else in interstellar space; the chances of survival would be just the same—infinitesimal.

The bulk of the . . . the *thing* loomed ahead of him. It had seemed huge from the ship, but there had been no yardstick for comparison. He had his yardsticks now—the spacesuited figures of Brentano and Tanya. If this giant construction were indeed a ship, then an *Alpha Class* liner would serve as one of its smaller lifeboats.

Skillfully using their personal rockets, Calver and his two companions made a feet first landing on a flat area of hull that was not cluttered with turrets and sponsons and enigmatic antennae. Calver expected the soles of his boots to take hold by their built-in magnetism, but they did not. There was none of that odd stickiness experienced when a magnetic field is employed as surrogate for gravity. And yet he did not bounce back into space after the impact of the landing, but was maintained in place by a field that could only be gravitational. It was even stronger than those wildly improbable readings taken in the ship's control room.

"Captain to *The Outsider*," he called urgently. "This thing has some sort of artificial gravity that's just been switched on. Adjust orbit accordingly."

"What do you think I'm doing?" came Vickery's aggrieved reply. Calver saw the flare of rocket drive at the stern of his distant ship. He waited for the Chief Officer to get things under control. Then, "Sorry, sir," said Vickery in a more even voice. "That sudden gravitational surge took me by surprise."

"And me," said Calver.

"Something," remarked Tanya Brentano quietly, "is looking at us."

Calver turned, saw that two of the antennae, like slender, flexible masts, had bent so that they were pointing at the boarding party, and were following their movements.

"Mr. Vickery," said Calver, "put Mr. Levine on the phone." There was a brief delay. As soon as Calver heard Levine's

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

voice he said, "There's something here, something intelligent. Are you sure that you can't pick up anything definite?"

"Yes . . ." said Levine slowly. "Yes . . . It's less vague now. . . . The uneasiness is still there. But there's more now. There's curiosity, but it's unemotional . . . And there's a sort of a hope."

"Is there any animosity?"

"No."

"Can you get through to . . . it?"

"I'm trying, Captain. I'm . . . trying." Levine chuckled suddenly. "It's . . . like . . . Have you ever tried to make love to a robot?"

"Have you, Derek?" asked Tanya Brentano.

He laughed, and heard the laughter of the others. Levine's outrageous simile had broken the tension. Then he said briskly, "It knows we're here. If it were hostile it could have dealt with us by now. We're assuming that it's not, anyhow, and we're trying to find a way in."

"Service," said Tanya. "With a smile?"

With no betraying vibration a circular doorway had opened. The three from the ship approached it cautiously. They looked down into what was obviously an airlock. A short ladder ran from its rim to a level deck below.

"Will you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly?" quoted Brentano in a dubious voice.

"To judge from what happened to Maudsley," said Calver, "the worst that can happen to us is to be driven to drink. And it's happened to us before." He saw through the transparency of the girl's helmet her expression of protest. "Sorry, Tanya," he amended. "It's never happened to you." Mentally he added, *yet*.

"I'll take the risk," she said.

One by one, Calver in the lead, they dropped into the chamber. Suddenly, smoothly, the door slid shut above their heads. There were no visible controls for reopening it, but Calver was not unduly worried. He and the others carried equipment that could burn or cut through any known metal

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

or alloy. What did worry him, however, was that with the shutting of the door they had been cut off from radio communication with the ship.

"The chamber's being filled with some sort of atmosphere," said Brentano.

"And I've a hunch," Calver told him, "that it's our sort of atmosphere. But we'll not risk taking off our helmets . . . But there's another door opening. Shall we . . . ?"

"Of course," said Tanya Brentano. "What did we come here for?"

"The lighting," whispered her husband. "It's . . . odd. Not a globe or tube along that great long alleyway, and yet it's like broad daylight. How do they do it?"

"That," said Tanya, "is for you to find out. You're the electronics expert. Remember?"

Calver was only half listening to their amicable bickering. He began to stride along the seemingly interminable alleyway. Although the deck was of burnished metal—as were the sides and the deckhead—his booted feet made no sound. And even had he been walking in a vacuum there should have been vibration, but there was none. He looked down and saw his reflection, as clear as in a mirror. He looked to the side and saw his reflection, with those of the others, in the walls, stretching to infinity, an endless series of diminishing images. It was like one of those mirror mazes found in amusement halls—but it was not amusing.

He walked, and the others walked with him. Accustomed as they were to free fall they found the exercise tiring. Twice they stopped, sitting down to rest and sipping water from their suit tanks. On the second occasion they made a careful check of their air supply gauges, found that it would be all of six hours before it would be necessary to connect up the spare bottles that they had brought with them. Calver was tempted, even so, to sample the air in the alleyway, but decided against it.

They walked, and they came at last to a door. Like everything else it was of highly polished metal. For lack of any visual evidence to the contrary it could have been no

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

more than a bulkhead, but Calver *knew* that it was not. He knew that the alleyway had to lead to somewhere, and that to have it leading to a blank wall would make no sense whatsoever.

"But why should it make sense?" he whispered, puzzled. "Why should it make sense? Why should we assume that our logic is the only logic, that our way of doing things is the only way of doing things?"

But he was not surprised when the door opened.

Stiffly, like a robot, he walked into the huge chamber beyond the door, the compartment that was more like a great cave than any space aboard a ship, and . . .

XXI

I hate her, thought Derek Calver. *I hate her*. His mother was out of the room, busy in the kitchen. The boy glared at his baby sister gurgling happily in her cot, at the little, drooling monster that had robbed him of the love and affection that were his right. *I hate her*, he thought again. He got up from his chair, walked over to the cot, and struck the infant across the chubby face with the magazine that he had been reading. He was back in his seat before the first outraged wail broke the silence.

"Derek," demanded his mother, picking up the bawling child, "what happened?"

"I don't know," he said. "I was reading."

"What are those marks on her face?"

"Where? Oh, I suppose she must have jumped around and hit her face on the side of the cot." He went on in what he now knew to be an insufferable manner, "In any case, mother, most parents send their babies to the robot nursery."

"Bumble bee! Bumble bee! Fly back to your stinking hive, bumble bee!" yelled the children.

The Shaara drone, who had wandered away from his ship, away from the spaceport environs, and who had im-

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

bibed sufficient whisky in several taverns seriously to affect his powers of locomotion, tried to ignore them. But he could not ignore the ill-favored mongrel dog, belonging to one of the boys that, egged on by its master, faced the unhappy extra-Terrestrial, its ugly face creased in a vicious snarl. The drone swiped the dog with one clawed foreleg and then clumsily took to the air, flying only a few yards before tumbling to the ground. He tried to walk, but the movements of his six legs were ridiculously unco-ordinated. The dog nipped a piece out of one trailing wing. He turned to defend himself, and this time inflicted a wound so painful that the mongrel fled, yelping.

"He's hurt my dog!" screamed Derek Calver.

He picked up a stone and threw it. The others followed his example. But the police arrived before any serious damage was done.

"Cadet Calver," asked the Captain Commandant of the Academy gently, "do you swear on your honor, as a probationary officer and as a gentleman, that you played no part in last night's race brawl?"

"I so swear," said Calver solemnly, thinking, *After all, I was on the outskirts of the crowd and I never even got a chance to kick the black bastard. . . .*

"You'll come back, Derek," pleaded the girl.

"Of course, darling," lied Fourth Officer Derek Calver, secure in the knowledge that he was to be promoted and transferred at the end of the voyage and that with any luck at all he'd never be on the Polaris Sector run again.

"Mr. Calver," ranted the notoriously irascible Captain Jenkins, "never in all my days in space have I had to push such a sloppily loaded ship up through an atmosphere. You were in direct charge of the distribution of mass. What have you to say?"

"There must be something wrong with the Ralston, sir," said Second Officer Derek Calver.

And there soon will be, he thought, *if I can get my hands*

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

on it before the old bastard makes his personal check.

"So you're quite determined," whispered Dorothy Calver. "Does this home I've made for you mean nothing to you? Do I mean nothing to you? Don't you care what happens to the children?"

"No," replied Calver.

"I should have realized," said his second wife bitterly, "that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Calver tried to keep his temper under control. He said, "I was Chief Officer of one of the Commission's big ships. I was happily married with a family. I threw all that away so that I could marry you. But I'm not, repeat not, going to be made over to please you. I'm a spaceman, not one of those planet-bound puppies that you're always running around with."

"Happily married?" she laughed. "That wasn't what you told me. And you told me, too, that you were sick and tired of deep space and that you'd be happy to stay on the one planet the rest of your life, as long as you had me there with you. . . ."

"Your trouble, Derek, is that you're selfish. I've changed, in lots of ways, just to try to make you happy. You must grasp the fact that adjustments by both partners are essential to a happy marriage. But you won't adjust. You'll never adjust."

"I try to," he said.

"You say that you try to. You say this, and you say that, you promise this and you promise that, but that's as far as it ever goes. You're so conceited that you're quite convinced that Derek Calver is the end product of evolution, with no room for improvement. . . . And let me tell you, my dear, that my father is getting just a little restive and wondering why he should be paying an executive's salary to a glorified office boy."

"My nose bleeds for your father," said Calver nastily. Then, "Where are you going?"

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

"It's no business of yours. If you must know, I've been asked to the Sandersons'. And if you must know something more, Sylvia pleaded with me not to bring—I quote—'that drunken oaf of a spaceman'."

"What courteous friends you have," said Calver. "As courteous as you are, darling."

"Get out!" she flared. "Get out!"

Both Calver and his wife ignored the tawdry, frightened, little blonde who was struggling hastily into her clothing. Calver, getting slowly out of the rumpled bed, said, "This is my home."

"This," said his wife, "was your home. But it's my apartment. And unless you're out of here within half an hour, I'll call the police to have you evicted."

"If I had known," he said, "that you'd be home so early."

"Get out, you no-good swine!" she said with cold viciousness.

Captain Derek Calver, with Jane Arlen at his side, stood in the Master's cabin aboard the Trans-Galactic Clipper *Thermopylae*.

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

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

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

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

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

"So we shall," said Calver with a mild amazement. "So we shall."

And I shall be a rich man, he thought. I shall be rich, and

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

no longer dependent on the charity of Jane's father and perhaps, if she has not remarried, or even if she has.

He turned his head slightly to look at the other Jane, at Jane Arlen, his lover and loyal shipmate.

She'll manage, he thought. She'll have her share of the salvage money. But perhaps money's not everything. . . .

His hand found Jane Arlen's and closed upon it, and felt the answering warmth and pressure. "But I belong on the Rim," he said. "We belong on the Rim."

And he despised himself for the smug nobility with which he had made the gesture.

And as it went on he despised himself the more. On the stage of his memory there were scenes played with Jane, and scenes played with Sonya, and scenes played with both. And yet he was able to stand outside and watch, and to pity as well as to despise, and, towards the end, to understand. He was the creature of heredity and of environment. He was cruel at times, and clumsy most of the time, but he had tried to act with a certain bumbling honesty, had not been all bad all the time. . . .

To despise was wrong, and to pity was wrong. . . .

Somehow he knew that.

Understanding was the goal, the only goal. He would endeavour to understand his own behaviour, and Jane's behavior, and perhaps he would be able to bring her out here, and perhaps, when she had learned to face herself, a fresh start could be made.

To understand, to face and to understand . . .

To face, without fear, without contempt and without pity . . .

They were standing in the huge chamber, with its oddly flowing lines and fantastic perspective—Calver and Brentano and Tanya. Calver could see the faces of the others through the transparencies of their helmets, pale and with lines of strain that had not been there before, with the lines of strain still evident, and yet at peace. Their eyes were the

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

eyes of those who had looked at too much in too short a time. Yet they both essayed a tremulous smile, and Calver smiled in answer. He saw how they were holding each other tightly and he was briefly envious.

"I assume," he said, "that we all went through the same experience."

"I always had rather a high opinion of myself," whispered Brentano. "Until now."

"But what did it all mean?" murmured his wife.

"I think I know," said Calver. "I think I know—or I can guess. Or I can remember. I can remember a story I read once—it was when I was passing through a phase of reading every twentieth century author I could lay my hands on. This was by a man called Wells, and its title was *A Vision of Judgment*. Wells imagined a judgment day, with all living and all who had ever lived on Earth called by the last trump to face their maker, to be tried and punished for their sins or, perhaps, to be rewarded for their good deeds. Everyone had his session of hell as his naked soul stood in full view of the multitude and the Recording Angel recited the long, long catalogue of petty acts of meanness and spite. All the trivial (but not so trivial) shabby things, all the things in which even the most perverted nature could take no pride, no matter how much pride he took in some quite spectacular wrong-doing."

"So you think that we have been judged?" said Tanya slowly. "By whom, Derek? And why?"

"And how?" demanded Brentano.

"There are other doors opening," said Tanya. "There is machinery beyond them . . . Apparatus . . ."

"Dare we?" asked Brentano.

You dare, said the voice in their minds. You dare. The secrets are yours for the asking, to use as you will. Soon, now, you will cross the gulf, and you will be welcome.

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

XXII

THEY, THE members of the boarding party, were back aboard *The Outsider*, and were discussing their experiences with their shipmates.

"From Bernhardt's Nebula it must have come," said Calver. "How long ago? I don't know, but we shall be finding out. It's an intergalactic spaceship and, at the same time, an electronic brain that makes anything built by ourselves no more than a glorified abacus.

"And it's a quarantine station."

"A quarantine station?" echoed Vickery.

"Yes. And it's far more logical than any of ours. Ours are used after travelers arrive at their destination, this one is used before they set out. That's the idea I got, anyhow, and Tanya and Brentano gained the same impression. And truly alien entities need not fear biochemical infections; the destructive idea is the only one really communicable disease of intelligent life. So this quarantine station screens for that. Perhaps when Levine goes across with the next boarding party he may be able to establish better rapport with the mind of the thing than we did, and learn more than we have done. There's an utterly alien way of thought behind their machines, for example, and what we take to be the Intergalactic Drive Unit is altogether outside—*outside*, not beyond—our technology.

"But the quarantine station . . .

"The way I see it is this. There's intelligent life, highly intelligent life, on the worlds of Bernhardt's Nebula. It could well be that their manned ships have already visited this galaxy from time to time; after all, there is evidence. It could be, it seems to me, that the people of the Nebula want to make contact with us; for trade, perhaps, or cultural exchange, or just neighborliness.

"But . . .

"It could be that our neighbors in this next galaxy are, to

THE SHIP FROM OUTSIDE

all external appearances, horrible monsters, some utterly alien life form, something so different as to be frightening, or sickening, yet something that still has, under the repulsive surface, a very real and warm humanity. After all, we've come across nothing yet in our own galaxy on those lines. Every race with which we've come into contact has run very much to one or another of the standard patterns—mammalian, saurian, arthropodal."

"But the quarantine station?" demanded the Mate again.

"I was coming to that, Mr. Vickery. Please give me time. It was left here, out beyond the Rim—there may be others—in the hope that with the development of interstellar flight it would be discovered. It was left here to test the fitness of its discoverers to use the treasures of scientific knowledge and technical know-how that it contains, to build the ships capable of making the big crossing. We, the three of us, passed the test without cracking. Had we cracked, there is little doubt that we should have been bundled outside as unceremoniously as Maudsley must have been—bundled outside with the memories of the fear and the horror and some sort of post-hypnotic inhibition to stop us from ever talking about it. It's possible that some of Maudsley's crew did pass the test—but they died with *Polar Queen*.

"It is possible," he said, "that some of you will not pass." He added, with a new humility, "But if I did, there is little likelihood that any of you will fail.

"It's an ingenious test, and amazingly simple. It's . . . It's a mirror that's held up to you, in which you see . . . everything. Yes, *everything*. Things that you've forgotten and things that you've wished for years that you could forget. After all, a man can meet any alien monster without fear, without hate, after he has met and faced the most horrible monster of all. . . .

"Himself."

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