

THE KEY

THERE'S A KEY.

Man has been hunting for it ever since Man was Man. That curiosity, I suppose, is a trait inherited from our simian ancestors. Had our forebears been of canine or of feline stock it is probable that we should not be spending so much of our time asking, Why? Dogs and cats are not of an enquiring nature, unless food is involved. Monkeys are. But if our ancestors had been dogs or cats we should not be Men, not in the true sense of the word, and our intellectual energies would be directed only towards the more efficient production of food and shelter, and it is highly probable that we should never have left the surface of our own planet.

But we *are* Men, close cousins to the monkeys, and we did leave the surface of Earth, and that is how I came to be drinking in *Susie's Bar and Grill* in Port Forlorn, on Lorn, most dismal of the Rim Worlds, that night, and that is how Halvorsen came to find me there.

I'll say this for Halvorsen; he didn't look like a monkey's cousin. He looked like a monkey. He didn't need to put his hands over his eyes or his ears or his mouth to look like one of the three wise monkeys, however. He looked like a smallish, gray ape that has lived long enough to achieve and, even, to surpass human intelligence. He was skinny, but carried a pronounced pot belly. His dark, wizened face was framed by bushy gray side whiskers, and from it stared two large, mournful, brown eyes.

I felt those eyes staring at me. I felt them for seconds before I lifted my head from my arms and looked into them, across the table with its filled-to-overflowing ashtrays, its dirty glasses, its little, stagnant pools of spilled drinks.

I was in no mood for company. That was why my friends—Second and Third Mates of the *Rimhound*, their girls and my girl—had left me. I was feeling disgusted with everything and everybody, including myself, and the more that I drank the more disgusted I was feeling.

"Go away," I said to Halvorsen. "Go away. I don't know what you're selling, but I don't want any today, thank you. Not today. Not ever."

"How do you know?" he countered.

"Because I know everything," I replied. "Liquor makes me that way. I know that the Universe is just a cesspit and the stars and planets no more than ordure . . ."

He said, "I want to know everything."

"I've told you everything there is to know," I said.

He smiled sadly, pulled out a chair and sat down. He lifted a hand in oddly imperious gesture. Susie herself waddled over to our table, took his order. She returned with a bottle of imported whiskey—not the real Scotch, but that distilled on Nova Caledon is close enough—and a couple of clean glasses, set them down before us and smiled fatly. She treated the little monkey, as I was regarding him, with a deference that I found annoying. Halvorsen poured each of us a drink. He raised his glass and said, "To the key . . ." He drank, and I drank.

"What key?" I asked.

"The key that I am looking for," he replied.

"I haven't got it," I said.

"You can help me to find it," he told me.

"What the hell is all this about?" I demanded.

He said, making a statement rather than asking a question, "You're Charles Merrill, aren't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"You hold a Master Astronaut's Certificate of Competency. You were, until recently, Second Officer of the *Rimbird*. Prior to that you were with the Trans Galactic Clippers . . ."

"So," I cracked brilliantly, "what?"

"So I need a Master Astronaut. I'm willing to pay handsomely for your services."

"Listen," I said, "I've had Space. I've had Space in a big way. I'm sick of tank-grown food and

recirculated air and water. When I paid off from the *Rimbird* I swore that I'd never set foot in a spaceship again, and I meant it."

"Times have changed since then," he remarked. "You paid off from the *Rimbird* to get married, to find yourself a shore job. But the girl didn't marry you, and so you never got that sinecure in her father's business. You're polishing an office stool with the seat of your pants and hating it. You come in here every Friday night to get a load on and to swap stories with your old shipmates."

It was true, but nobody likes being told the truth. I was tempted to let him have what remained in my glass full in the face, but thought better of it. Fat Susie was watching us, and Susie, for some reason, had always been willing to give me credit. Susie, I had observed over the past few months, deplored rowdiness in her establishment and did her utmost to discourage it. I decided that I did not want to get in Susie's bad books.

"And who the hell are *you*, anyhow?" I asked him.

"My name is Halvorsen," he said quietly.

"Never heard of you," I grunted. "Not that I particularly want to."

He smiled, and looked more like a sad little monkey than ever. "Such is fame," he sighed. "You must have seen my name every day of your life, Mr. Merrill—aboard your ships, on every civilized planet."

Sorry," I said insincerely, "it rings no bell." I got to my feet. "Excuse me. I want to shake hands with an old friend." Halvorsen looked at me inquiringly when I came back.

"So," I sneered as I sat down, "you're *that* Halvorsen. Halvorsen, the Outhouse King, sitting on his throne of vitrified porcelain . . ."

He flushed. He said, "I'm a rich man, Mr. Merrill, but how I made my money is of no importance, except that it was made honestly. I'm a rich man, and I pay well. At the moment, I need a yacht-master. Levin, who was my captain, got himself knocked down by a ground car on the day after we arrived here and will be in hospital for months yet."

"I've had Space," I told him again, "in a big way. In any case, I've no desire to become a hired hand, a . . . a *flunkey*."

"If you take the job," he assured me, "you'll be no more a flunkey than my secretary, or my physician."

"You can call me Admiral," I said, "with pay and uniform to match, and I'll still not be interested. Take my tip and go to see old Grimes, the Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners. He may be able to loan you an officer."

"I've already seen Commodore Grimes," said Halvorsen. "He told me that he's very short of officers at the moment, and that all his officers are under contract and can't be released. He told me about you, and the places where I'd be likely to find you on a Friday night."

"So he told you about me," I growled. "What did he tell you? 'One of our most promising young officers, who threw away his career for a floosie?' Or did he say that I was a no-hoper and no loss to Rim Runners?"

"He said," replied Halvorsen, "that you were a good man gone wrong, and that you were in crying need of rehabilitation."

"You can take your rehabilitation," I started to say, "and . . ."

It was the look of contempt in the girl's eyes that stopped me. She had come in without my noticing her and was now standing behind Halvorsen. If he was a monkey, she was a cat. She had the slim sleekness of the well-bred Siamese and something of the same coloring, and her blue eyes held only feline disdain. *Who is this drunken bum?* she seemed to ask, although her wide, scarlet mouth did not move.

Halvorsen saw me staring at her, half-turned in his chair.

"Leona," he said, his face lighting up. He sprang to his feet. Clumsily, unwillingly, I followed suit. "Mr. Merrill, I'd like you to meet my secretary, Miss Leona Wayne. Leona, this is Mr. Merrill, whom I hope to persuade to take Captain Levin's place."

She acknowledged the introduction and heard the news without enthusiasm.

"*Starmaid* runs herself, Mr. Halvorsen," she stated coldly. "Even I can handle her."

"Can you handle an emergency?" I asked her.

"Can *you*?" she countered.

"That's my job," I said.

Halvorsen hustled off and brought back a chair from another table. He fussed around Leona as she sat down. I resumed my own seat. All the time the girl's cold eyes were fixed on mine. Already I was beginning to hate her—the coolness of her, the sleekness, the plain, expensive clothing that achieved effect by cut rather than by ornamentation, the slender elegance of the body that was its foundation.

"I've heard about these ships that run themselves," I said. "Lloyd's of London won't touch them with a barge pole, and Federation astronomical law insists that at least one Master Astronaut be carried lest they become a menace to decent commercial shipping."

"One needn't insure with Lloyd's," she said. "We don't deal with them."

"You still have to observe Federation law," I told her. "Even here. Even on The Rim."

"A pity," she said.

"How soon can you join?" asked Halvorsen, breaking into the *tete-a-tete*.

"I haven't said that I am joining," I said.

"Don't press him," said the girl.

"I should give a month's notice to my present employers," I said.

"I," Halvorsen assured me, "am not without influence. Can you join tonight? We can get your name on the Register tomorrow."

"What's the job worth?" I asked, hoping to deepen the expression of disgust on the girl's face. My hope was realized.

Halvorsen told me. He named a figure that would have made the Master of an *Alpha Class* liner envious. He promised free transportation, First Class, to any part of the Galaxy on the termination of my employment and my reinstatement, if I so desired, in T. G. Clippers. More for the hell of it than anything else I pressed for a uniform allowance over and above my handsome salary. Halvorsen did not quibble. His secretary looked as though she would be paying for everything out of her own pocket.

We left *Susie's Bar and Grill* shortly thereafter. Big, fat Susie bowed us to the door, treating Halvorsen as though he were royalty—as, in a sense, he was. Did not every human and humanoid in the Galaxy pay him tribute at least once daily? There was a chauffeur-driven hired car waiting outside, its gyroscope humming softly. The driver opened the door of the passenger cabin with a flourish. Leona Wayne climbed first into the monowheel; I stood back to let Halvorsen follow her, but he urged me to take precedence. I sat down beside the girl. She edged away from me. At once I was acutely conscious of my shabby clothing, my long unpolished shoes, the fact that I had let three days go by without using depilatory cream.

Halvorsen seated himself on the other side of me.

"Where to, Mr. Halvorsen?" asked the driver.

"The spaceport," answered my new employer.

We skimmed through the narrow streets of the Pleasure Quarter, through the bright, meretricious glare of neon signs, through the waves of trite, tawdry music that billowed out through the open doors of bars and night clubs. Then we were among the warehouses, black cliffs that towered up, on either hand, to the black sky. The few sparse lights served only to accentuate their blackness, as did the faint, far nebulosities in the empty, Rim World firmament, glimpsed now and again from the bottom of our man-made canyon. Old newspapers, driving before the omnipresent bitter wind, gleamed in the beam of our headlamp like soiled, white birds. Ahead of us, growing brighter, was the harsh brilliance of working lights, the spaceport.

We swept through the gate after only cursory formalities. We passed the gleaming tower that was *Rimhound*, loading for Ultimo, Thule and Faraway. We rolled past the berth in which *Rimbird* was

discharging the merchandise she had loaded on the Eastern Circuit—Stree, Mellise, Tharn and Grollor. We left behind us the whining, snarling machinery, the busy conveyor belts, cranes and gantries. We ran out to an almost unused corner of the field, threading our way through and among towering piles of junk.

My first impression of *Starmaid* was of smallness. She was dwarfed by an upended tube liner—one of those from the Trans Galactic Clipper *Thermopylae*, left at Port Forlorn after she had put in for repairs—was hardly bigger than an almost porous propellant tank discarded from some other ship.

My second impression was of cleanliness and of neatness. *Starmaid* would have looked neat and clean in any surroundings, but she lost nothing by contrast with the interstellar junk with which she was surrounded. I realized that I had lived for too long without love, and that this little ship would do much to fill the emotional vacuum.

We got out of the car, stepped down to the dirty, scarred concrete. Halvorsen walked briskly to the airlock door, fussed with the combination lock. There was about him the air, outrageously incongruous, of the suburban householder returning home after a party. He got the door open, stood to one side. Leona Wayne went to enter, but he put out a restraining hand.

He said, "This is only a little ship, but I like to observe naval etiquette. The Master takes precedence over the Purser when boarding."

"And over the Owner?" I asked.

"Over the Bio-Chemist," he replied. "There are no idlers aboard *Starmaid*. After you, Captain Merrill."

"Thank you." I replied.

I walked first into the little-airlock, hardly larger than a telephone booth, ignoring the venomous glance that Leona Wayne shot in my direction. Once inside the ship I insisted that Halvorsen take the lead—after all, he knew his way around; I didn't. The drive had sobered me up and I was able to take an intelligent interest in all that I saw.

She was more than just a little ship. She was a big ship—and a big ship of the better class, at that—in miniature. She had everything, including gear that was still too expensive to be built into the T. G. Clippers or the Commission's liners. There was, for example, a set of remote controls so that the Mannschenn Drive unit could be operated from the Reaction engine room, and another allowing the rockets to be controlled from the Interstellar Drive compartment. (This, however, was necessary, since *Starmaid* carried only one Engineer, he being qualified to take charge of both propulsive systems.) The galley, Leona Wayne's domain (she was Catering Officer as well as Purser) was a gleaming miracle of automation. There was automatic monitoring for the yeast and tissue culture vats and the hydroponics tanks—but this, Halvorsen confessed, was usually disconnected as he enjoyed pottering.

We went up to the Control Room before we inspected the accommodation. This was in keeping with the rest of the ship. There were such luxuries as Mass Proximity Indicators, usually found only in the Survey Fleet. There was a Mark VII Geigenheim Electronic Navigator—and this, I knew, would be capable of taking *Starmaid* from one side of the Galaxy to the other. I resolved to do the same as Halvorsen had done with his electronic monitors. The Geigenheim made the ship intelligent—but she still had no imagination, and it is imagination alone that keeps Man superior to the thinking machines of his own making. It wasn't all mechanical.

We looked into the Radio Office. I was rather surprised to see that there was no dividing line drawn between electronic and psionic radio—the dog's brain amplifier was out of place among the severely utilitarian transceivers and radar gear. Halvorsen explained that there had been more doubling up, that his Communications Officer was one of those rare people who, in addition to their telepathic talents, have the ability to comprehend and to cope with electronic equipment. It was clear that nothing but the best was good enough for my new employer. I began to feel acutely conscious of my own shortcomings and began to wonder what was the urgency, why he could not wait for the recovery of Captain Levin who, to judge by the standards of his shipmates, must have been an outstanding astronaut.

I raised the point a little later when the three of us were sitting in the small, beautifully furnished

saloon, drinking the excellent coffee that Leona had made.

"I'm an old man, Captain Merrill," said Halvorsen. "I'm an old man, and beginning to get impatient. There's so much that I want to know before I go . . ."

"Is it that key you're looking for?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm looking for the key. I want to find out, if I can, if there's any meaning to the Universe, any meaning to life. I've already spent a fortune hiring other men's brains; they've come up with all sorts of fancy variations of the Unified Field Theory, but not one of them makes any real sense . . ."

"The Halvorsen Foundation . . ." I said. "I should have remembered."

"Yes. The Halvorsen Foundation, set up to discover what we are, *why* we are. I'm tired of waiting for the scientists to cook up any sort of intelligible answer and so I decided to find out for myself. I thought that I might find the key out here on the Rim, out here where our expanding, exploding Galaxy is pressing against the ultimate nothingness . . ."

"But what *are* you looking for?" I asked.

He hesitated before replying. He asked, "Are you a religious man?"

"No," I said truthfully.

"Then you have an open mind, presumably. I hope so—although I have found atheists to be as savagely intolerant as deists. But if you're an agnostic . . ."

"I am," I interrupted.

"Good. I've become rather hesitant about mentioning my current line of research before strangers. The deists accuse me of blasphemy, of impious prying into secrets that were never meant to be revealed; the atheists accuse me of trying to bolster up archaic superstitions. Be that as it may, what I'm investigating is the continuous creation of matter. It was Hoyle, a Twentieth Century astronomer, who first stumbled onto it, who put forward the theory that there was a continual influx of new hydrogen atoms into the Universe from ... from *somewhere*. Hydrogen atoms, the very building blocks of all matter. The theory was never disproved and in Hoyle's time, when the average scientist tended to be something of a mystic, was quite widely accepted. But mysticism is frowned upon now and Hoyle's theory of continuous creation has been explained away. The Galaxy is expanding, they tell us, and as all Space is filled with hydrogen atoms it is only natural that there should be an apparent influx.

"That explanation never satisfied me. I had *Starmaid* built to my own specifications, recruited her crew. I brought her out to the Rim. I ran out past the Rim, beyond the Rim—fifty light years, a hundred, two hundred, a thousand . . ."

"It seemed like a thousand years," said the girl. "Years, not light years . . . They complain of the cold and the dark on these Rim Worlds; they don't know what the words mean."

"There was emptiness," said Halvorsen, "an emptiness far beyond anything found in interstellar space. I doubt if there was one atom to a million cubic miles, and my Mass Proximity Indicator is fantastically sensitive. It was obvious that the hydrogen atoms aren't being swept in from Outside, equally obvious that this continuous creation is a phenomenon confined to the Galaxy—and, it could be, to the other Galaxies . . ."

"What do you hope to find?" I asked. "And where do you hope to find it."

"There is one answer to both questions," he said. "I don't know. But I have heard of the philosophical lizards of Stree, and it may be that they will be able to give me some clue. I want to leave for Stree tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"The ship is fully stored and bunkered, *Captain Merrill*," said the girl. "All that is required is the legal formality of placing your name on the Register. If you've forgotten all you ever knew of pilotage and navigation it doesn't matter; as I've already told you, the ship can handle herself if need be."

"I've not forgotten," I said sharply. I turned to Halvorsen. "There are things that have to be checked, sir. There are my own personal affairs to wind up . . ."

"You can be ready by tomorrow evening," he told me. "*This* evening," said Leona Wayne, looking at her watch. "This evening," amended Halvorsen.

I was.

I was ready, and *Starmaid* was ready, and we lifted from Port Forlorn at precisely 1900 hours, Local Time. It had been a rush getting all secured for Space. There were the legal formalities—and didn't somebody once remark that the tide runs sluggishly through official channels? There were my own private affairs to be clewed up, and there was the thorough inspection of the ship and all her gear that I insisted upon before I would take over.

The most important event of the day, I think, was the visit to Captain Levin in the Port Forlorn hospital. He was not the man that I had expected to find; I had visualized somebody much older, somebody with the manner and appearance of a senior master in the Trans Galactic Clippers or the Interstellar Transport Commission. He was a young man, hardly older than myself. He was frankly envious of me, and he was willing to talk.

"They're a good crowd," he told me. "Leona's only fault is her damned snootiness, her refusal to make allowances for human frailties. But she's a good cook and a good Purser, and she can navigate as well as you or I. The Old Boy's harmless enough—and I'd always be willing to sign him on as Bio-Chemist if he lost his fortune and had to work for a living again. Doc Rayner is pretty harmless—the only trouble with *him* is that he's too engrossed in keeping Halvorsen alive and kicking to worry much about us lesser mortals. He's a geriatrician, of course, one of *the* geriatricians, so anybody on the sunny side of seventy isn't of much interest to him. Then there's Cressy. If he isn't thinking about electronics he's thinking about psionics, and if he isn't thinking about either he's thinking about both. Leave him to his printed circuits and his dog's brain in aspic and he's quite happy. MacIlwraith can be hard to get on with. He's one of those engineers with the odd idea that the ship exists only to house her precious machinery. He'll always do what you want, though, even if he's apt to run screaming to Halvorsen about it afterwards . . ."

I met them all during the day. Rayner looked as though he himself were in crying need of the services of a geriatrician. He looked older than his patient, was no more than a perambulatory assemblage of brittle bones held together by dried skin and sinew. Cressy was only a youngster—the sort of youngster who wears pebble-lensed spectacles and has become a junior chess champion long before the onset of puberty. MacIlwraith was a hulking, carrot-topped brute who must have had Neanderthals in his ancestry. He made it clear to me from the start that I was only a Control Room ornament and inessential to the real work of the ship. He took orders, however, albeit grudgingly. He would have been iar happier if those orders had come directly from the Owner and not from a mere Master, such as I represented.

This, then, was my crew. This was the crew of the sweet, shining *Starmaid*. This was the little company that was dedicated to the search for . . . for *something* in the realms of the eternal *nothing*. I was dedicated to the same search, even though I knew that it was crazy. A man will do a lot for money. A man will do a lot—let us admit it—for the chance to get back into Space again.

At 1900 hours we lifted. At 1845 I was sitting in my acceleration chair in Control, looking out through the wide viewports. There was little to see—a chill drizzle had swept down from the hills to enshroud Port Forlorn. Dimly I could make out the glare of the working lights around *Rimbird* and *Rimhound*, the fainter glow of the city a little beyond them. Overhead the sky was overcast.

Halvorsen was in the special chair that he had caused to be installed in *Starmaid's* control room—it was well to one side and out of the way. Leona Wayne was sitting in the Navigator's chair. This was the first ship in which I had served in which the purser was interested in navigation; but there has to be, I told myself, a first time for anything.

She handled the pre-blast-off exchanges with the Control Tower competently enough, made the routine checks without hesitation. I could not fault her counting down.

"Zero!" she said at last.

Starmaid lifted, obedient to my fingers on the controls. She lifted, and the glare of her exhaust was reflected from the clouds through which we drove. She lifted, but slowly—I was remembering the old, brittle bones of Halvorsen, my employer, the old, brittle bones of Rayner, the Surgeon. Too, *Starmaid*

was not a commercial ship; there was no need for me to conserve reaction mass by getting upstairs in as big a hurry as the structural members would stand. She lifted, and with every mile of gained altitude I was getting the feel of her. By the time that we were clear of the overcast I was beginning to think that I was her Master in fact as well as in name.

Halvorsen smiled at me, saying, "She's a sweet little ship."

"I'm finding that out," I replied.

"She is also," remarked Leona Wayne coldly, "a tough ship. She doesn't need to be babied."

I swallowed the hot retort, returning my attention to the instruments. If there had to be ill feeling, I would not be its initiator. I made sure that the needle of the accelerometer stayed steadily on the Half G graduation, affected a great show of interest in the skin temperature gauges. I was conscious all the time of the girl's cold eyes on my every action. I wondered if my predecessor had had to put up with this tacit back-seat driving.

Lorn was no more than a great, misty ball below us. Ahead was the blackness, with the sparse pinpoints of light that were stars, of Outer Space; out to starboard was the glowing lens of the Galaxy. I cut the Drive, letting *Starmaid's* momentum carry her up and out. I actuated the gyroscopes, watched the cartwheel sight in the very nose of the ship swing slowly towards the glowing, orange speck that was the sun around which Stree revolved.

Dimly I was aware of a slender hand holding a sheet of paper before my nose. Irritated, I snapped, "What is it?"

"The coordinates of our trajectory," replied Leona Wayne. "I fed the data into the Geigenheim while you were so busy piloting."

"Thanks," I said, "but I'll not be needing the Geigenheim for this run. It's no more than the shortest distance between two points with nothing in the way . . ."

"How do you know there's not?" she demanded.

"Miss Wayne," I growled, "I've been on the Eastern Circuit for over eighteen months. There's not so much as a swarm of micro-meteorites between Lorn and Stree."

I juggled with the gyroscope controls, put the orange star in the exact center of the sights, held it there. I sounded the acceleration alarm, fired all tubes. I let the speed build up gradually, never exceeding one gravity acceleration. Lorn was well astern when I cut the rockets and ordered the Mannschenn Drive started.

The journey from Lorn to Stree is not a long one, in terms of subjective time—the direct journey, that is; it's long enough when you have stoppages for loading and discharge on Tham, Grollor and Mellise, with the consequent detours. It wasn't a long voyage for *Starmaid*. It was hardly long enough for me to get to know my new shipmates properly—and *Starmaid* was a ship in which all hands tended to do their own jobs quietly and efficiently with little inclination for social intercourse.

When he was not busy with his not very onerous duties as Bio-Chemist old Halvorsen shut himself in his cabin, studying the tapes that he had bought on Lorn concerning Stree. MacIlwraith, the Engineer, lived for and with his smoothly functioning machinery. Cressy spent all his time telepathically nattering with his colleagues in other ships and shore stations throughout the Galaxy. Old Doctor Rayner had little enough to do, but he sought nobody's company and seemed happy enough cataloging his stamp collection.

Then, of course, there was Leona. Her hobby—if hobby it could be called—was the pursuit and the destruction of dirt. Her galley was spotless, as were her storerooms. Her little office was almost impossibly tidy. The small public rooms gleamed from deck to deckhead. With this I had no fault to find—but when, one day, I came into the Control Room to make a routine check of her position and found her dusting and polishing I decided that it was time to draw a line.

"Please," I said, "leave the Control Room alone." I pulled myself across to the navigator's desk, which had been cleared of all books and papers. "Where is my work book? Where are the tables and the ephemerae?"

"In the drawers where they belong," she replied shortly.

"Miss Wayne," I told her, "I appreciate what you've done in here. Really I do," I went on, lying diplomatically. "But I'm an untidy man, and I know it, and I have my own filing system. When things are left my way I can find anything I want in a split micro-second. Now . . ."

"And now you can't, I suppose!" she flared. "Captain Merrill, I don't see how you can live and work in such filth!"

"Filth?" I asked mildly. "Isn't that rather a strong word? Absurdly strong? After all, there's clean dirt and dirty dirt, and a slight untidiness can hardly be classed as either . . ."

"A slight untidiness? And what about the cigarette ash over everything? What about that?"

"It does no harm. It has occurred to me, though, that our employer could devote his time and his genius to inventing a really efficient Free Fall ashtray ..."

"So now," she accused me, "you're sneering at Mr. Halvorsen, the man who picked you up off the beach and gave you a job . . ."

"I had a job at the time," I reminded her. "I have nothing against Mr. Halvorsen—but, after all, I was doing him the favor, not the other way round."

"That," she said, "doesn't give you the right to turn this ship into a pigsty."

"Get this straight," I told her, "the only person in a ship in Deep Space who has any rights is the Master—even the Master of a yacht, even when the Owner's aboard. The Master has the right to keep his Control Room in whatever condition of untidiness he pleases. I am exercising that right now. Will you please leave, Miss Wayne, and take your polishing rags with you?"

I didn't think that it was an excessively harsh reprimand—after all, I'd often heard far harsher ones delivered by irate Masters to female members of their crews. After all, when women come into Deep Space, with the rank and pay of spacemen, they must expect to take the rough with the smooth. I was rather congratulating myself for not having flown off the handle properly, was pulling books and papers from the drawers and sliding them under the elastic webbing of the table in my usual untidy manner, when I heard a sniffing sound.

I looked around. I was surprised and shocked to see that Leona Wayne, the icily calm, efficient Miss Wayne, was sobbing.

Damn it all, I thought, she's the Purser. She can't expect to be handled as though she's labeled *Fragile* top, sides and bottom. She's trodden on my corns, and she's had her corns trodden on in return, and so what?

"Miss Wayne," I heard myself saying, "if I said anything to upset you, I apologize . . ."

"It's not what you've said, you stupid brute!" she wailed. "It's what you've done. This was such a nice, clean, *tidy* ship before you came here. And now . . ."

Somehow, I was holding her, and she was sniffing damply between my neck and my shoulder. I remember what little I had seen of Levin, the slight aura of effeminacy that had hung around him—not that he was any worse a spaceman for that. I thought of the old-maidish MacIlwraith and the equally old-maidish Rayner—and, come to that, old Halvorsen had a certain prissiness about him . . . And there was Cressy, with his love of gossip—even if it was intraGalactic gossip . . . And when I joined the ship I had sensed, subconsciously, that all those in her were house-proud rather than ship-proud. (And yet Leona had taken care to impress upon me that *Starmaid* was a tough ship . . .)

So she didn't like dirt and untidiness, and she had shipped away in a yacht full of fussy, old-maidish bachelors, and then I'd come, with my slovenly habits, and had assumed the role of the proverbial bull in the china shop, the serpent in a hitherto gleaming and spotless Eden. It was just too bad, and I had no intention of promising to mend my ways. (I might try to mend them, but that would depend to a large extent upon the outcome of events. I raised her tear-stained face and I kissed her, and thought that I might, perhaps, try to keep my desk a little tidier and to dispose of my cigarette ash in the receptacles provided . . .)

She said, "But you must remember, Charles, you must try to remember how much I hate dirt and untidiness. It's almost a phobia with me. That's why I agreed to come away in this yacht when all the

other secretaries, senior to me, had turned the chance down. Space is so *clean* . . ."

I said that I'd try to remember—and it wasn't a case of anything for a quiet life either. I had realized suddenly that I'd wanted the girl ever since my first sight of her.

The others accepted the situation philosophically enough. I was half afraid that there would be jealousies and resentments, but I need not have worried on that score. I don't think that any of them was interested, even. Each had his own interests, and sex was not among them. His engines were MacIlwraith's shining mistresses, and so long as Cressy could indulge in his neighborly, back-fence gossip with other telepaths, *he* was happy. The Doctor had his stamp collection, and the only female in old Halvorsen's life was that naked Truth who, in the old legends, was alleged to live at the bottom of a well.

(And how close to the actuality those old legends were, we had no idea!)

As for me—I was lucky, and I knew it. I had a ship and I had a woman, and what more can a man ask? True, the woman was over-insistent upon cleanliness and tidiness, but that was a small fault. I could endure that for the sake of all the rest. And after all—until men are capable of building the perfect ship what right have they to expect the perfect woman?

And so, as the subjective days passed, we fell towards Stree. Both Leona and I were sorry when my observations showed me that it was time to return to the normal continuum, time to throw ourselves into an orbit around the planet and to maneuver the ship into her landing spiral.

But there was Stree below us—an ochreous ball, mainly barren rock and desert. There were the signals coming in, loud and clear, from the beacon at Port Grimes. There was the sibilant voice of Stressor, the Rim Runners' Agent, saying, "*Starmaid*, your request received. You may land."

We came in, dropping through the clear, arid atmosphere, dropping down to the expanse of arid sand that was the spaceport. We came in, with *Starmaid* obedient to my hand on the controls, with Leona sitting at my side and refraining, now, from back-seat driving, with old Halvorsen beaming at us like a benevolent, wise old monkey. We came in slowly, balancing atop the pillar of fire that was our interplanetary drive, falling gently to the circle of fused slag that showed where the backblasts of *Faraway Quest*, of *Lorn Lady*, of *Rimbird*, *Rimhound*, *Rim fire* and *Jolly Swagman* had splashed and spread over the surface.

We landed gently, softly. I cut the drive, pressed the switch that would make the *Finished with Engines* signal in the engine room.

"We're here," I said, unnecessarily.

I looked through the viewport. I saw Stressor hurrying out of the Port Master's office, looking, from this distance, like one of the dinosaurs that were once the dominant life form on at least a thousand worlds, that would still be the dominant life form if they had learned to adapt themselves, as had Stressor's ancestors.

"What—I mean *who*—is that?" asked Halvorsen.

"That's Stressor," I said. "You heard his voice on the R/T when he asked permission to land. He's Rim Runners' local agent."

"You're familiar with these people, Captain Merrill," said Halvorsen. "I'll leave it to you to do the honors."

"As you please, Mr. Halvorsen," replied. Then, to Leona, "You'd better put the kettle on. The Streen love a friendly chat over the teacups."

I went down to the airlock. Stressor was surprised to see me. He clasped my hand in both of his, the rough scales bruising my skin.

"Mr. Merrill—or should I say Captain Merrill? This is indeed a pleasure! I was told that you had left the service."

"I had," I said. "But I came back. Welcome aboard, Stressor. Will you join us for tea?"

"You are gracious."

He got through our little airlock with some difficulty, followed me up to the saloon. I introduced him

to Halvorsen, and then to Leona who came in from the pantry with the tea things. I told him that *Starmaid* was not a trading vessel, and he found the concept of a private yacht rather difficult to grasp.

"But," he said, "you must have come here for *something*."

"We did," averred Halvorsen. "Knowledge."

"Knowledge?" This was something that a native of Stree could understand. "Then you have come to the right world, Mr. Halvorsen. Knowledge is the one commodity in which we are rich."

"Then you can help me?" asked Halvorsen.

"What knowledge do you want?" asked the native.

"There must be some . . . some key to the secret of the Universe," said Halvorsen. "Have you got it?"

Stressor delicately sipped his tea, the cup looking tiny and fragile in his talons, against his gaping, needle-toothed mouth. He said, "There is a key; we have known that for generations. We have discussed it for as many generations. Some of our philosophers say that they know what it is, say that what they have learned of human customs since our first contact with your race has given them the answer. There are those of us who cannot accept that answer, myself among them. We are not, as Captain Merrill will tell you, an overly proud people—but even humility has its limits . . ."

Halvorsen's eyes were shining.

"What is the key?" he demanded.

"Sir," Stressor replied stiffly, "I will not tell you. I, like you, am an intelligent being, and feel that this universe was created so that intelligent beings might appreciate it, come to a full understanding of it. All I can suggest is that you see Ossan. He is too old to have much pride left . . ."

"Can you bring him here?" asked Halvorsen.

"He is too old to travel," said Stressor.

As Stressor had told us, the Streen are not an overly proud people. They consider it no disgrace to act as beasts of burden. So it was that the following day, early, Halvorsen, Leona and myself, riding in saddles strapped to the backs of three of the Streen, set out for the rugged, hilly country in which Ossan lived. Stressor came with us, laden with gifts for the ancient philosopher as well as with our own food supplies, leading what could, incorrectly, be called the cavalcade. The mode of transport was not too uncomfortable—but it is rather disconcerting to be expected to carry on a conversation with the animal you are riding . . .

It was late afternoon when we reached the cave in which Ossan lived—a dark hole in a sheer cliff of red sandstone. He came shambling into the sunlight, blinking his filmed eyes. The scales of his body were flaking, crumbling almost, and the dry, musty stench of him was overpowering. He said something that was all clicks and hisses. Stressor replied in kind.

My mount turned his great, reptilian head on the long neck and said, "You can get down, Captain Merrill. Ossan has said that he will talk to you."

We got down, glad enough of the chance to stretch our legs. We took advantage of the slight breeze and stood to windward of the aged Streen, watched while Stressor displayed the gifts that we had brought—the tea, the sugar, the books. Halvorsen looked disappointed when the lizard philosopher displayed no great interest in the latter. The hissing, clicking conversation continued.

Stressor at last translated.

"Ossan says," he told us, "that first of all you must tell him all about yourselves—who you are, what you are, what you have seen. He says that you Earthmen brought the idea of trade to this world, and that he will trade knowledge for knowledge, ideas for ideas."

So we spread our sleeping bags—they had been carried in Stressor's pack—on the hard rock and sat down. Halvorsen talked first, with lengthy pauses for translation. He told of his humble youth as a plumber, of the invention of the first really satisfactory Free Fall toilet that had brought him fame—and to have one's name spread throughout the Galaxy in every ship is fame—and fortune. He talked of the intricacies of finance, of the problems of manufacture. He talked of the Foundation that bore his name and that had yet to make any real contribution to the knowledge of mankind.

It was my turn next. I talked of the worlds I had seen, of the people I had met, of life in the starships. Had Leona not been there I might have talked of the women I had known.

When Leona told her story it was dark, and the few, faint stars were shining in the black sky. It was dark, and it was cold, and Stressor broke out the efficient little heater from his pack and set it up so that we all derived some benefit from the warmth. He made tea, too, and we sipped the hot fluid gratefully. After he had finished his cup the old philosopher hissed a few words to the agent, turned and vanished into his cave.

"He," said Stressor, "will talk in the morning."

After a not very satisfying supper we crawled into our bags and tried to sleep, both Leona and myself resenting the presence of our employer and the great lizards.

Morning came, the sun striking our faces like a blow.

For a long, hazy moment I was completely bewildered, thought that I was recovering from a night's debauch, sleeping in some gutter in Port Forlorn. I opened my eyes and saw the red cliffs, the clear sky. I saw Leona emerging from the cocoon of her sleeping bag, still neat and unruffled in spite of the primitive conditions in which we had slept. I saw Halvorsen stretching his arms and yawning, looking not like a wise old ape but, at this moment, like an exceptionally stupid one. I saw Stressor and the three Streen who had carried us, rising from the hollow in the rocks where, curled lizardlike, they had slept.

Leona went to our supply pack, got out cleansing tissues, comb and mirror, wandered a little way down the ravine to where a bend hid her from sight. While she was gone I busied myself with our portable stove, with water and tea, with self-heating cans of rations. The Streen Watched with interest but no envy. Our food was unpalatable to them and, reptiles that they were, they could go for weeks without sustenance. Even so, they had become addicted to tea and when the boiling water was poured over the leaves their wide nostrils began to twitch.

Halvorsen got out of his bag and went along the ravine in the opposite direction to that taken by Leona. Stressor said, "That is one thing that we have in common with you Earthmen—a desire for privacy on certain occasions." I didn't feel in a very philosophical mood, grunted a curt acknowledgement. I knew Stressor of old, knew that with very little encouragement he could deliver a long and boring lecture on sanitation as practiced in various parts of the Galaxy, the bulk of the material garnered from the tapes and books that Rim Runners' ships had brought to his world.

There was a scrabbling noise inside the cave. Old Ossan emerged, looking more like a dinosaur that should have been extinct a million years ago than like one of the thinkers of his world.

He said simply, "I smell tea."

"But he can't speak English!" I exclaimed.

"He can," said Stressor, "when he wants to. This is one of the times."

"Give me some tea," demanded the ancient Streen.

I poured him a cup. He took it in his claws, drained it, almost boiling that it was. He held it to me to be refilled. He was gulping his third cup when Halvorsen and Leona returned.

"I am ready to talk," he said. "Listen carefully. You will not find what you search on the Rim. Your Key is not here. North you must run, and North again, North from the Center. There, I think, you will find the Key. This I ask—that you let me know what it is that you find. I would know, before I die, if my theory is correct."

"What is your theory?" asked Halvorsen.

Ossan was silent.

"We are a humble people," said Stressor, "but we have our pride. We hope that Ossan's theory is wrong. We hope that you will be able to prove that it is wrong."

And that was all that we could get out of any of them. There was some sort of tabu involved—but what it was we could not determine. Bribery was useless and we were in no position to make threats even if we had been so foolhardy as to ignore Federation law. So we said good-bye—without reluctance on the part of either Leona or myself—and let our carriers take us back to the ship.

Bitterly I resented Halvorsen's demon, the demon that was driving him so far and so fast in the pursuit of knowledge, the demon that was driving all of us so far and fast. Sun after sun we passed, world after world, planets that we had never seen before and might never have the chance to see again. The ship reeked of hot oil and metal and our combined body odors, efficient though her air-conditioning system was. At no spaceport did we halt for more than the bare minimum of time necessary for us to replenish exhausted supplies. Had Halvorsen not been a heavy smoker I doubt that we should have halted at all—for all essentials *Starmaid* was a self-contained, self-perpetuating unit.

It should have been a honeymoon voyage for Leona and myself, but it was not. We, like the ship, like all in her, were too hard driven. Our tempers became frayed and we began to snap at each other. I forgot to maintain the standards of neatness upon which Leona had always insisted, and that made matters worse, so much so that my lapses became deliberate instead of accidental.

And so we drove on, across the Galaxy, across the northern "surface" of the great Lens. We landed at last on Polaria, a world as bleak and desolate as any of the Rim Worlds, a world whose sparsely settled Northern Hemisphere looked always to the Ultimate Night. But it was not the emptiness of the sky that made that hemisphere unpopular—because the night sky was far from empty. It was alive with flowing, coalescing shapes, with great curtains and streamers of cold flame. It was beautiful—and frightening. It was something to marvel at, to admire—but not to live with. It was something to be explained scientifically that, in spite of the scientific explanations, still evoked a feeling of superstitious terror.

We made our landing in the North, although there was no spaceport there. We set *Starmaid* down on a great, level field of ice, staying her off against the perpetual bitter winds. We helped Halvorsen and Cressy to set up their instruments outside the ship, instruments that were, to me, a complete enigma. We watched MacIlwraith doing inexplicable things to his Mannschenn Drive unit. We left the specialists to their mysteries, went to talk with the old Doctor.

He said, "I'm an old man, Merrill, and I thought that I had lost the capacity to be afraid of anything—but I'm scared. I'm a scientist of sorts, Merrill, and until now I've always thought that there should be no limit to Man's knowledge—but now I'm no longer sure of that ..."

"But what are they doing, Dr. Rayner?" asked the girl. "What are they doing?"

"Mr. Halvorsen thinks," replied the Doctor, "that this is one of the sources from which the continuously created hydrogen atoms flow into the Universe. He has set up meters to measure that flow."

"I guessed that," I said. "But what is MacIlwraith doing to the Drive? I know that I'm only the Captain, but I think that I'm entitled to some word of explanation from the Chief, Engineer."

"I can only guess," said the old man. "I heard them talking about it some time ago, before you joined us. Halvorsen reasoned that the influx of primal matter must be from some other dimension, and MacIlwraith believes that it will be possible to adjust the Drive so that *Starmaid* can stem the stream, follow it to its real source."

"Interdimensional travel is impossible," I said. "Like Time Travel, it's just something that science fiction writers play with."

The Doctor bared his teeth in a ghastly grin. "That's just what the Twentieth Century rocketeers must have said about the Faster Than Light Drive. Me, I know MacIlwraith well enough to be scared."

"And I'm scared," said Leona, drawing closer to me.

"I'm not," I declared, not too untruthfully. "I'm annoyed. Legally speaking, I'm the Lord and Master of this wagon, notwithstanding the fact that Mr. Halvorsen is the Owner. I resent being kept in the dark."

"And what," asked a fresh voice, "do you intend doing about it, Captain Merrill?"

I turned abruptly, saw our employer's figure framed in the doorway. He was still wearing the synthefurs that had protected him from the cold while he worked outside, although he had removed the gloves and thrown back the hood. His face was glowing with color. He looked almost a young man, far younger than Dr. Rayner's ministrations could ever have made him.

"Mr. Halvorsen," I said, "I demand an explanation. I am Master of this ship, and I have discovered

that Mr. MacIlwraith is doing something to the most important of her propulsive units that could not, so far as I can gather, be classed as routine overhaul. In my opinion, he is jeopardizing the safety of the vessel."

"Are you an engineer, Captain Merrill?"

"No—but the fact that I hold a Master's certificate gives me a smattering of engineering knowledge."

"A smattering . . . Captain Merrill, you are under contract. Your contract binds you to take the ship from Point A to Point B, as required by the Owner. I am the Owner. Should you refuse to carry out my instructions I could, should I so desire, sue you for breach of contract."

"I can resign," I said.

"You can give a month's notice," he told me. "But until that month, as measured by the G. M. T. chronometer, has expired, you are bound to carry out my instructions. Should you stage a one-man strike—then Miss Wayne can handle the ship."

"I'm with Charles in this," said Leona.

Halvorsen smiled. He said, "I realize that the voyage here from Stree has been a great strain on all of us. I know that I, myself, feel that I have come so close to my objective that I will let nothing stand in my way." The smile vanished from his face. "*Nothing*. But I'm asking you, Captain Merrill, I'm asking you, not commanding you, to take *Starmaid* up as soon as MacIlwraith finishes his modifications."

"Where to?" I demanded. "Where to? And, come to that, what are the modifications? I'm no scientist, no engineer, but I do know that the Mannschenn Drive shouldn't be monkeyed with."

"Where to?" echoed Halvorsen. "If I knew, Merrill, I'd feed the data into the Geigenheim and let *Starmaid* take herself there. But I don't know—and that's why I have to have a human captain at the controls. Of course, if you're scared . . ."

"Damn you!" I swore. "I am scared, and I'd be a fool if I weren't. I've heard all the stories about what happens when the Drive gets out of kilter and I've even believed some of 'em. But I'll never let it be said that I was too scared to . . . to . . ."

"To follow where a mere, glorified plumber led?" asked Halvorsen.

"I was trying to put the idea into more diplomatic language," I admitted. "But what *is* MacIlwraith playing at? Tell me that."

"The only engineering that I know anything about is sanitary engineering," said Halvorsen. "But I think that I can give you a rough idea. *The* principle of the Mannschenn Drive is precession, gyroscopic precession. Its gyroscopes precess at right angles to the three dimensions of Space, in Time. But Time is only one of an infinitude of dimensions. What if we could achieve precession through Fifth, or Sixth, or Seventh Dimensions? What if we could precess into that dimension from which the flow of hydrogen atoms emanates?"

"And you think that MacIlwraith can do it?" I asked.

"I'm sure that McIlwraith can do it," he stated.

"But *should* MacIlwraith do it?" asked old Rayner.

"Getting religious in your old age, Doc?" sneered Halvorsen.

"No, but . . ."

"Even you can't keep me alive and kicking much longer," said Halvorsen. "And when I've found the Key I'll be willing to make my exit."

The Engineer, accompanied by Cressy, pushed his way into the little cabin. He looked more like a Neanderthaler who has just dispatched an enemy with stone club than a scientist who has just solved a knotty problem—but his air of triumph was unmistakable.

"Take her up as soon as you like!" he cried. "The job's finished! Take her up as soon as you like!"

I looked at Leona. Her face was pale, and I thought I saw her lips frame the word, "*Don't!*" But if she said anything it was lost in the triumphant uproar created by Halvorsen, MacIlwraith and Cressy.

I took her up, the glare of our exhaust reflected from the icefield and yet not as bright as the aurora in that northern sky. I took her up, through and past the curtains and the streamers of cold fire, of pallid fire

and rosy fire and fire that flaunted a purple such as no emperor ever wore. I took her up into the emptiness, the blackness—and the skin temperature gauges told me that Space, in this region, was far from being a vacuum.

Leona sat at my side, saying nothing. A little away from us was Halvorsen, chuckling happily over that fantastically sensitive Mass Proximity Indicator. I looked at him with distaste, reminded of some unpleasant, gray little monkey engrossed in some trifle that has captured its curiosity. And MacIlwraith, I thought, he's another of the same breed, an apeman, an apeman with brains, but still with that monkey taint to his character . . . I turned to look at Leona, and remembered the old proverb, *Curiosity killed the cat*. If Halvorsen's curiosity kills my cat, I thought, I'll wring his blasted neck.

"You're bucking the stream, Merrill," shortled Halvorsen. "You're doing fine!"

"And what do I do next?" I asked.

"Cut the reaction drive as soon as you're ready. Turn on the Mannschenn."

Nothing can happen, I thought. Nothing can possibly happen. I don't believe that anything can happen.

I cut the drive, felt the upsurge against my seat belt as the pseudo-gravity of acceleration abruptly died. "Mannshenn Drive ready?" I asked. "Mannschenn Drive ready!" came MacIlwraith's reply over the intercom. "Mannschenn Drive on!" I said, throwing the switch. I heard the familiar whine of the starting gyroscopes, felt the familiar giddiness and loss of orientation in Time as well as Space as the temporal field built up. I looked at the stern vision plate, expecting to see the great, starry field astern of us that was the Galaxy undergo its familiar transformation into a topologist's nightmare in glorious technicolor.

Instead, it ... vanished.

There was a gleaming whiteness ahead of us, around us . . .

Ahead of us ...

This I'll say for myself, I had the presence of mind to refrain from using the rockets. The Mannschenn Drive was still running, and any alteration to the ship's mass while that system of cock-eyed gyroscopes is in operation can have results that are catastrophic. I refrained from using the rockets, relied on the control surfaces. They surely shouldn't have worked—the ship was in airless Space (or was she?)—but they did. We turned away from the gleaming wall with which collision was imminent, pushed on and . . . and up? But every schoolboy knows that there is neither up nor down in Space.

"I'm turning her," I said. "I'm turning her. We're going back out the way we came in—but you'd better tell Mac Ilwraith to run the Drive in reverse."

"Why?" asked Halvorsen—but he had not disputed my decision to turn.

"Because I don't want to be thrown back into the Galaxy as free, individual hydrogen atoms, that's why."

"How do you know?"

"It's a guess, and I hope it's a good one ..."

I struggled to keep the ship in the center of the great, convoluted, white-gleaming tunnel, and, even so, managed briefly to wonder just what had happened. Had the dimensional shift resulted in a vast increase of size? It must have, but the mechanics of it I was content to leave to the physicists if they ever believed our story, if they ever heard it, even.

I heard Halvorsen babbling excitedly into the intercom, heard the Engineer's replies. I became aware that the droning song of the gyroscopes had faded, had restarted again on a slightly different note. Then there was light ahead of us—not a sterile whiteness any more but the great field of Galaxy, twisted and distorted beyond recognition, shining with a myriad of colors—but still the Galaxy.

For all its fairness I knew now what it was, and Leona, my once fanatically cleanly Leona knew what it was too. Her lips curled in the familiar expression of repugnance and then, quite suddenly, she started to sob. She said brokenly to Halvorsen, "You've ruined everything, for everybody. How can any decent person live in this Universe after what you've found? How can we endure the . . . filth?" Her sobbing became hysterical.

Shocked, I stared at her. Already there was a coarsening of her fine features, a subtle slumping of the

fine, taut lines of her body, a foreshadowing of the slattern within that she had, until now, so firmly repressed. *It doesn't matter*, I wanted to say. *It doesn't matter, Leona—you're still you and I'm still me, and we have each other.* But it would not have been true. I was still myself and would be able to fall back into my bad old ways without effort; Leona would never be her old self again, and both of us knew it.

"What does she mean, Merrill?" asked Halvorsen.

My hand hesitated over the switch that I hoped—or did I so hope?—that would bring us back to normal Space and Time, to the fair worlds that were the homes of men, to the worlds that once we had thought were fair, once upon a time, a long time ago. I thought, *but I'm not fussy*. I pulled the switch, mechanically set about shaping our trajectory for Polaria.

"What does she mean, Merrill?" asked Halvorsen again

"You know," I said curtly. "You know I've already told you once I told you when I first met you, back in Port Forlorn. Remember? When you said that you wanted to know *everything*, and I said that I'd already told you everything there was to know ...

"Halvorsen, the not-so-wise monkey," I sneered. "Halvorsen, the Outhouse King! You have found your Key, Halvorsen, haven't you?"

"The Outhouse Key!"