ace double F-209 40¢

PIRACY IN DEEP SPACE

THE WIZARD OF STARSHIP POSEIDON

KENNETH BULMER

First Book Publication

CONSPIRACY OF GENIUS

His height barely reached five feet, his spindly legs supported a bulging chest, and his eyes protruded grotesquely from a gnome-like head—but within that absurd-looking man lay the mind of a genius.

It was a genius that had carried mankind deep into the secrets of creation and was now on the verge of producing living organisms from test tubes filled with inert chemicals. The world, however, ridiculed the theories of Professor Cheslin Randolph and the government refused to advance the millions needed for the final series of experiments.

But Professor Randolph was determined to get the money—even if it meant turning his powerful brain to robbing a spaceship in mid-flight, using trained viruses as his accomplices.

Turn this book over for second complete novel

KENNETH BULMER has been rated by *New Worlds* magazine as "Great Britain's hardest working science-fiction writer." A native of London, he has produced many novels and short stories, as well as non-fiction articles on scientific subjects.

Bulmer states that he has been reading and writing science-fiction for longer than he cares to remember, starting both while still at school in the early 1920's. During the war he served with the Royal Corps of Signals and published and edited a Service magazine in Africa, Sicily and Italy. It was while basking in the Italian sunshine that he first heard of an atomic bomb having been detonated over Japan—and thought it was just another hoax of his comrades.

He is an active member of London "fan" circles, but also includes among his hobbies model ship construction, motor racing and the study of the Napoleonic legend.

THE WIZARD OF STARSHIP POSEIDON

by

KENNETH BULMER

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York 36, N.Y.

THE WIZARD OF STARSHIP POSEIDON

Ace Books by Kenneth Bulmer include:

THE SECRET OF ZI (D-331)
THE CHANGELING WORLDS (D-369)
THE EARTH GODS ARE COMING (D-453)
BEYOND THE SILVER SKY (D-507)
NO MAN'S WORLD (F-104)

LET THE SPACEMEN BEWARE!

Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

AFTER REMORSELESS pressure and attack succeeding attack with merciless and sacrificial ruthlessness, Black Queen scissored across the board in the final onslaught like a teeth-heavy monster of the deeps. White's black bishop crumpled, was removed. White's king's rook, engulfed, was laid back in the box. The white king, at bay, surrounded and under heavy fire, covered by a lone and pitiable pawn, surrendered unconditionally.

"Mate," said Professor Cheslin Randolph, and turned away from the chess table, picked up the latest copy of *Nature* and and leafed through the slick pages. "Have you seen Kishimura's letter? He claims to have synthesised poly-amino acids using Matsuoka's nought-nine-seven technique. Oh, I know he's using a whole primitive planet as a laboratory under stringently sterile conditions, just as I shall on Pochalin Nine; but—"

Professor Randolph stopped speaking, lifting his gnome's head to return his guest's deep and half-amused stare.

"You're an amazing man, Cheslin," said Dudley Harcourt, Vice-Chancellor. "Your mind has just grappled with the utmost concentration on a complex chess situation, yet you turn away the second the game is over and just as intensely concentrate on a fresh subject."

"Chess is just a game. Speed, decision, attack—to win is not very clever. And it grows less amusing week by week. I'm chafing to space out to Pochalin Nine."

The two men sat comfortably ensconced under discreet lighting in Randolph's chambers. About them the unseen but omnipresent breath of the University pulsed beyond the glass and porcelain walls. The decanter and tobacco jars caught vagrant gleams of light as the men moved. The chambers were furnished with meticulous taste, heavy, authoritative, somehow mechanical, completely lacking any feminine grace.

"Are you over-working, Cheslin?" The Vice Chancellor spoke with the brutal frankness he reserved for friends. "Your own work devours you. Why not give it a rest—for a little time. Take a long holiday."

Professor Randolph dropped the copy of *Nature*. He selected a cigar and, uncharacteristically, sniffed it, looking up with his frog's-eyes over the rolled leaves at the Vice Chancellor. Randolph stood five feet in his socks, and his chest measurement was proportionate; only his head appeared in normal proportion to a grown man's—and that appearance was deceptive.

"Vice Chancellor," he now said with precise meaning. "You invite yourself for our friendly contest over the chess board. I accept because for an hour I can spare the time from my laboratory. But then you suggest: one, that I rest for a little time, and, two, that I take a long vacation." Randolph's smile transferred the image of his Black Queen to his own creased face. "What is it you have to say to me?"

As he had on the chess board, the Vice Chancellor crumpled under the directness of the attack.

Dudley Harcourt, as Vice Chancellor, had grown wearily resigned to swinging to the winds of desires in the University. Like some moss-encrusted weathercock, he merely pointed up the trend of events. When he exercised his own discretion, he did so deviously, through third parties. He had been unable to find anyone willing to risk the barrage of fire from tiny Professor Cheslin Randolph. So, here he was himself, uncomfortably mustering his own arsenal of weapons to combat this frightening gnome.

Harcourt had not been born on Earth. His outward face to the Galaxy was the usual tough, cynical, relaxed counten-

ance of the star colonial, very much a stock figure, and an expected one. Over that he had carefully laid the shining veneer of academic distinction so that, at this point in his career, he was Vice Chancellor of Lewistead and not too unhappy with progress so far. Unfortunately, Professor Cheslin Randolph, occupying the chair of extraterrestrial micro-biology, posed the type of problem best represented by a nine-inch crowbar between the spokes of a turning wheel.

Unused to prolonged delay in response to a question—even from backward students—Professor Randolph took the cigar from his mouth and said, "Well, Dudley?"

Harcourt lifted both hands and let them fall, softly, onto his knees. He did not look at Randolph.

"It's the Maxwell Fund."

"You mean there's a hold up? I thought everything had been settled—more negotiations? What now?"

"As I said to the Trustees. Unfortunately, this year there very well may be—further negotiations."

Randolph sat forward, hunched in his own special chair. His tiny feet stamped impatiently on his footstool. His creased, wide face with its angry frog's-eyes might, in a lesser man, have been merely ludicrous. When Professor Randolph puffed up his face, turned down the corners of his mouth, suddenly and with devastating effect slitted those protruding eyes, he became even to the Vice Chancellor of Lewistead a formidable and daunting figure.

When he spoke the habitual rasp had left his voice; he purred like a cat with a mouse.

"Is there to be more delay with the Maxwell Fund? This is my year for it. I've waited ten years for this. All my work is arranged, the Extraterrestrial Bureau has granted me Pochalin Nine, I've taken on Doctor Howland as chief assistant—everything for the last decade has been built up ready for this coming year. You know that. The whole establishment knows it. With the equipment I'm buying with the Maxwell Fund I shall initiate a series of experiments on Pochalin Nine culminating in—life!"

He leaned back, and his thoughts now were gripped by the obsession of his life's work.

"I am absolutely convinced, despite certain scoffers, that I can create artificial life—of a rudimentary type, naturally. And to do that I need equipment and funds far beyond the normal college allowance. Old Maxwell with his Nuclear Weapons and his conscience created the Maxwell Fund—I've waited ten years. Ten years!" His cramped face radiated the tenseness which even a minor obstacle could create these days. "I'm opening up the future, Dudley! Don't hold me back now!"

The glass and porcelain walls filtered the ribald sounds of students; in the all electric rooms not even the ticking of a clock could serve to abate the ominous silence.

At last: "Well, Dudley? This is my year for the Fund. What is your problem?"

"Cast your mind back a moment, Cheslin. Last year the Fund went to Gackenbach of Managerial Ratio-analysis. Year before to Mesarovic for Wave Mechanics. Year before that to Lewis for Endocrinology. Before that—ah—"

"Physics or Nucleonics, I expect. But what of it? That's what the Fund is designed for. And my whole department is geared for the new equipment—we're hungry for it."

Randolph had refused to read into the Vice Chancellor's attitude any menace of serious threat—the Fund was his all right—but something was bothering Harcourt. "If there is a delay my whole department would suffer. Doctor Howland is a great asset; but he's only here on the strength of the new work. All my work would be wasted if— My results cannot be published until they have been shown to be so. I'm convinced I can do what I claim, even if people like Kawaguchi scoff. But we cannot wait too long for the Fund!"

"As you know, Cheslin, the Fund has been scheduled for a considerable number of years into the future. We have to look very carefully at the relative degrees of importance—"

"I must have the Fund—this year. It's mine!"

"Nothing has ever been officially agreed—"

"Officially!" Something very like panic touched Randolph now; an emotion he could not at first recognize. His calm scientific manner began to fray under the ruthless ambition that was his chief characteristic, and the dominance of his personality sought blindly for a concrete target to smash and destroy. Nothing was going to stand in the way of his life's work—*nothing!*

"I'm very sorry, Cheslin." Vice Chancellor Harcourt spoke stiffly, finding the words red-hot in his mouth. "You must by now have realized that there has been a change in plan for the Maxwell Fund."

"No! I don't believe it! They—the Trustees—you, you wouldn't take the fund away now. . . ."

"It's not a question of taking away the Fund, Cheslin. No firm decision had been reached on its disbursement this year."

"But it was to come to me. That had been agreed as long ago as ten years. . . ."

"No, Cheslin." Slowly Harcourt shook his head. "Not so. Nothing was said, nothing was written—"

"But it was implied! The Chancellor himself told me the fund would be mine this year."

"If that is so, Cheslin, the Chancellor has no memory of it."

"No memory!"

Randolph's tiny hand groped for the arm of his chair, gripped and clutched as though seeking the feel of a solid object in an ocean of madness. "No memory . . ."

"I can only say I am sorry. We've been good friends, Cheslin. I rather hope that will not be altered by all this, this unfortunate development." Harcourt stared at the little man hunched in the deep armchair. Hesitatingly, he went on, "Quite off the record, I will say that my loyalty to the Chancellor and the Trustees has been seriously strained over this decision. There was talk of a resignation—mine. But you can't fight all the deadweight of authority, Cheslin. The men with the power see they keep the power—and to hell with anyone else."

"Power," said Randolph, softly.

Harcourt felt profound unease. He had never before seen the little Professor so crushed, so woeful, so shattered. And that reaction surprised him. He had expected anger, indignation, righteous wrath. Those Randolph had displayed; but he had gone through them at dizzy speed to end up like this—beaten.

"Tell me, Dudley. What is to happen to the Fund this year?"

"Those people who have received the Fund over the past ten or eleven years. They have one thing in common."

"They've all been lucky."

Harcourt shook his head. "No. They're all of the Sciences. The Maxwell Fund was designed for the use of the faculty as a whole."

"Am I, then, no longer a member of the faculty?"

Harcourt ignored that, went doggedly on. "This year the Maxwell Fund is going to Professor Helen Chase—"

"The glamorous female with the titian hair?"

"Yes."

"I've never really understood what it is she does."

"She holds the chair of Shavian Literature—"

"The what?"

"Chair of Shavian Literature."

Professor Randolph had to make a conscious effort to remember just what that was. He had to bring his mind away from the universe of science, back to a world and a galaxy around him that he took for granted and never thought about from one decade to the next.

"Does that mean she's a member of the weirdies? Those odd people who creep about muttering outlandish tongues, dead these thousand years, who don't know a parsec from an electron volt?"

"The Humanities, my dear Cheslin. The Arts."

"And they're the infestation stealing the Fund from me. . . . This is a mockery! What do they need the Fund for?"

"The University badly needs a new tri-di live theatre—we have rather a good name in the Galaxy for our work there, you know."

"Why can't they watch television like everyone else?"

Harcourt smiled sadly. "That's commercial. Here we are dealing with Art—with an oversize capital 'A'."

Randolph began to comprehend the magnitude of the calamity that had wrecked him. He pointed with a narrow finger. "A theatre of however exotic a design can't cost all that much. My equipment, travel and transportation costs to Pochalin Nine—that's a perfect planet for the work! Primitive, absolutely sterile, not a single living cell on planet—living expenses there, everything will absorb every last penny of the Fund. But I would stand to deduct the cost of a measly theatre. . . ."

"No good—"

"Oh, I can see the reasoning. Spend the Fund here, right in the University, have something here and now to show for it."

"It's not only the theatre. Helen Chase has the opportunity of buying for the University a most wonderful collection of Shavian manuscripts, marginalia, trivia, and, also, a number of documents in dispute."

"Dispute. I like the sound of that." Randolph's words carried a bitterness that cut Harcourt.

"Professor Chase is working to prove her theory that George Bernard Shaw and Herbert George Wells were one and the same man. One was the pseudonym for the other. If she can prove that Wells was a pseudonym used by Shaw then she, as a Shavian, will throw the Wellsians into utter confusion. It will be a greater triumph than merely proving, as many have tried, that either Wells wrote Shaw's work, or Shaw wrote Wells'."

Exasperated beyond reasonable control, Randolph pushed his little legs down into the soft carpeting, stood up, and began pacing agitatedly and threateningly about the room.

"But who cares?" he demanded with a vicious swish of a tiny hand. "These men—or man—have been dead for thousands of years. They belong, as I remember, to the Dark Ages. They probably didn't even have typewriters or ball

points to work with. What, did they chip these masterworks out of stone?"

"I'm sorry, Cheslin." Harcourt, too, stood up. With his usual tact he did not stand too close to the little man. Although, come to think of it, the aggressive power of Randolph usually obliterated his small stature from the memories of acquaintances. "Damned sorry." He'd had about as much as he could take. Killing a man's life work was not sport for which he cared. "I'd better be getting along. You'll—"

"I'll fight, of course! Shavian tomfoolery when there is an empty world waiting for me to bring the breath of life to it! When I'm about to prove that Man—mere mortal man—can himself create the miracle of life!"

Watching him, Dudley Harcourt knew there lay a battle of outsize proportions ahead.

"I've spent all my life with this great dream as the goal of all my ambitions. These last ten years here have been only the final preparation. If they take away the Maxwell Fund they're not just ruining a decade's work—they're wrecking my whole life!"

The door chimed and the ident plate lit up. Harcourt did not recognize the young man pictured there and Randolph was too engrossed with his own dark thoughts to care.

"Yes?" said Harcourt politely. "These are Professor Randolph's chambers. Can I help you?"

The young man smiled. The smile did not impress Harcourt. It smacked of artificiality, of calculation, and it also showed sharp white teeth.

"I don't think so. I can see Professor Randolph now. Hey, uncle! It's me—Terry Mallow."

The familiar tones brought Randolph's massive head around, twisting his scrawny body. Sunk in his own violent thoughts he stared at the ident plate; then he reacted to what he saw and pressed the nearest stud to release the lock.

"Terence Mallow," he said, wonderingly, brought abruptly out of his own vicious dilemma. "I was told you were dead."

CHAPTER TWO

THE BLACK spider-hands of the clock pointed to fifteen minutes to midnight.

Vice Chancellor Dudley Harcourt had long since left Professor Cheslin Randolph's chambers and now the professor sat thrust back in his winged chair, brooding, a glass of whisky at hand on the wing table. Across from him his nephew, Terence Mallow, sat negligently, smoking a cigarette, studying his famous uncle, and wondering how he could be persuaded to cough up the necessary—again.

They had not spoken for some time and although Mallow could plainly see something was niggling the old boy, he began to feel the silence oppressive, a blight on his nature, and an affront to his own presence here.

"I say, uncle," he ventured, and at once was annoyed with himself for the very childishness of his utterance. He was, after all, a grown man now, a lieutenant-commander in the Terran Space Navy—correction: *ex*-lieutenant-commander.

That brought back unpleasant memories, thoughts he could do well without. He swallowed and said, "Sorry if I gave you a shock dropping in like this unannounced. But I only arrived in from Rigel V yesterday and the jet was late at the airport. . . ."

Randolph was not listening.

Mallow stubbed out his cigarette and with a soft rustle from his well-cut synthi-velour suit reached across to the cigars. Uncle Cheslin liked the best and didn't stint himself. If a penurious and cashiered ex-Naval officer was going

to put through his scheme, then a trifle of hesitation over asserting his independence must be quashed ruthlessly, and at once.

Lighting the cigar Mallow again studied his uncle. Something had upset the old boy. The creased gnome face had shrunk in on itself. The pouches beneath the frog's-eyes looked like blue plums in the subdued lighting. Funny little fellow. No body, all brain. Absolutely top quality in his own field, something to do with protein molecules, the stuff of life, DNA. No doubt a very necessary brain to possess in the modern galaxy; but a brain rather rarified to a man who up to quite recently had been obsessed only by a smart ship, astrogational efficiency, perfection of gun drill, and a penetrating eye for a pretty woman.

Mallow's own problems were too pressing for him to worry overlong about his uncle's preoccupations. It had come to him as an amazing revelation that as a supply officer aboard a star cruiser he could not pilfer and get away with it. A few perks, the court had implied, were quite within reason and would be blinked at. But Lieutenant-Commander Terence Mallow had gone into the wholesale trade, and the Lords of the Admiralty objected. Result—one ex-lieutenant-commander without money or prospects back home on Earth seeking to cadge a fresh lease on life from his famous uncle.

And he'd damn well nearly got killed, too. The reports of the action had not been specific; but of a crew of two thousand men only a hundred and ninety had been saved. Then, the court martial had followed fast on the heels of the fight against those fanatical rebels out in Roger's system, and he had thought it best to allow reports of his death in action to go through uncorrected.

So here he was, eager for money—and Uncle Cheslin sat and brooded over his own petty problems.

Mallow coughed, blew smoke, coughed again, and finally, leaned over, and tapped his uncle on the knee.

"Professor Helen Chase," said Randolph slowly. "Proving that Shaw and Wells were one and the same or not one

and the same." Randolph looked up at his nephew with such a quick, belligerent stare from those hypnotic frog's-eyes that Mallow started back. "Well, she's not going to get away with it!" Randolph spoke with a quiet viciousness out of place in the quiet University chambers. "Goddamnit-tohell, no! Over my dead body!"

"I'm sorry, uncle. I'm not quite sure . . ." Mallow spluttered weakly. The look in the old boy's eyes . . .

"No. No, of course, you don't know the outsize in frameups that is going on here. You don't know that a piece of the most important work science has attempted in the last hundred years is going for nothing, is not even going to be allowed to start, because some red-headed painted female wants to dig up a couple of long-hairs dead these thousands of years and play pretty-pretty theories with them."

For Terence Mallow the outburst exploded along his nerves with much the same feeling a wizard might experience, conjuring up a grade-one devil. He stammered out a few trite phrases and all the time Randolph sat and champed with the anger he could only just control.

"And why should I control my anger? Why shouldn't I kick up the biggest stink this place has smelt in years?"

"Why not, indeed, uncle. I'm all for a spot of shillelagh swinging myself."

Randolph favoured his nephew with an ambiguous look. He remembered that at the time his sister—poor dead Julie with the slender hands—had married Frederick Mallow he'd been in the planning stages of the work that was now so near completion, twenty-five, thirty years ago? Then his first impression of Frederick Mallow, father of the young man sitting across from him now, had been one of grease. He had felt it his duty to warn Julie knowing she'd ignore what he had to say. Her death had been a happy release. But some of her vivacity, her love of life and warm and genuine response to friendship must have rubbed off on her son—it must have. If Terence Mallow had been all Mallow then Randolph would have been barely polite to him and bid him goodnight and turned him out of his chambers.

A scientific knowledge of genes and chromosomes and heredity patterns, a keen eye that probed into the microscopic universe of the living life force, he reflected with wry truth, still gave him no control over his feelings about normal family relationships.

"Suppose you tell me what the trouble is, uncle."

Mallow spoke with boyish frankness, acting right up to his naive, husky spaceman image. Money matters would have to be left until after his uncle was in a more receptive frame of mind. And willing and concerned interest in the old boy's affairs would pay dividends. "Can I help at all?"

"Unless you have a few multi-billions of ready cash I fail to see what you—or anyone—can do."

"So it's money."

"Partially." Just talking about the iniquity of the thing relieved Randolph a little. "And that's the queer part. It can't take all that much money to build a live theatre and buy a collection of manuscripts."

"Depends who owns 'em. If I did and knew a university with money behind it wanted the papers, well . . ."

"Yes, I suppose so. Values are so inflated and distorted these days."

"Who's Helen Chase?"

Randolph glanced up, alert, bright, suddenly like a pointer on game. "Ah!" he said, and fell silent.

Presently he began to talk, quietly, in a controlled tone of voice, giving a precise appreciation of the situation in the clear cut methods of thought habitual to a scientist. The spider hands of the clock moved uninterruptedly past midnight, past the half hour. Then Randolph moved away from the definite values of science into the nebulous fields of personal relations.

"I realize well enough, Terence, that you have come to see me to ask for money. Your explanation about your reported death in action against those foolish and pathetic rebels sounds quite romantic, and you have been courageous and honest about your court-martial. You're young and the lure of easy cash has wrecked many a stronger man—"

Mallow had the sense not to try to defend himself at that delicate juncture.

"Your poor mother told me, time and again, that your father was a charming man, filled with great potential. I do not believe in altering facts about a person because they are dead and so cannot defend themselves. I never saw eye to eye with your father. But that he had this charm, this easy air of familiarity, this ingratiating aura of bonhomie cannot be denied. And you, too, Terence, have it. With, thank God, a lot of your mother's decency and moral fibre and outlook to fight it. You did a damn silly thing, pilfering Naval funds and stores; but it isn't the end of the Galaxy."

"Thank you, uncle." Mallow, his head bowed in a suitably humble and repentant angle, listened to the sermon with resignation.

"I want you," said Professor Cheslin Randolph, "to exert some of your charm on this red-headed female, Helen Chase. I want you to find out all there is to know about her theories, her plans, what she really wants the Maxwell Fund for. Be careful. I feel she is a charlatan. And I am absolutely convinced that I can prove to the Trustees that what she wants to fritter this money away on is outside the scope of the objects of the Fund. I know the Fund should go to Science!"

Mallow lifted his head and looked steadily at his uncle. "You're determined about this, aren't you? You'd stop at nothing to prevent that money going elsewhere than your own department?"

"I am. And I'm prepared to do anything to make sure I get the Fund! As for your—ah—personal out-of-pocket expenses, well, I think we can afford to be a trifle generous there whilst you are, in fact, if not in name, as it were, working for me."

"That is good of you, uncle. You'll find I'll be quite a good undercover agent—and not too expensive."

Not, that was, Mallow cautiously decided, at first. If all that was worrying the old boy was the disbursement of this Maxwell Fund, and there was a woman in it, why, then

Terry Mallow, ex-Space Navy, was the very man for the job.

All the same, he hadn't much cared for that look in his uncle's eyes. He recalled with particular clarity the last time he'd seen that pale fanatic glare. The Rebbo had been young and lantern-jawed with an untidy shock of corn-yellow hair. His legs, Mallow remembered with minute exactness, were extraordinarily long and sinewy, the muscles bunching clearly beneath the fawn skin-tight trousers. He'd run at Mallow's landing cutter, yelling, demoniac. Just as Mallow had shot the young Rebbo he'd seen that lethal, wide-eyed, dedicated look of hollowness in the eyes.

Odd—odd and unsettling to find that passionate look in the eyes of his uncle, a sedate, stuffy, shut-out-of-the-galaxy scientist.

But Terry Mallow could shut his own eyes to a great deal for a fast credit.

And so they left it like that, Mallow retiring to Randolph's ample guest room and lying awake for some time, hands behind his head, smoking one of his uncle's cigars and wondering what Helen Chase would be like.

CHAPTER THREE

"FOR EVERY ten thousand science degrees last year, my dear Helen, one—just a single measly one—arts degree went through—"

"Can I help it, my dear Peter, if men and women are blind to their opportunities?"

"Opportunities?" Doctor Peter Howland halted his finger over the recorder button where Bach waited to tinkle and titillate the senses. Helen Chase's chambers were crowded

with the usual folk, long hairs, weirdies, faddists, a few genuinely exciting new brains. Outside the lamps shone down on a snow-covered vista; but inside the rooms were warm and alive and scented with that pulse quickening aroma that good wine, good food, good cigars, and the presence of beautiful women can bring to any building no matter how old or ugly or decrepit.

"Yes, Peter. Opportunities. Now, how about Bach?"

Howland pressed the button and, with a casual flick, reduced the volume. He knew well enough he was tolerated by these arts people only because, as a scientist, he was looked upon as a technician who could handle the electronic recording apparatus they all took for granted and considered with a sickeningly affected coyness to be a clod-hopping item of machinery. It was amusing to Peter Howland. It broadened his own horizons. He had been at Lewistead now for how long—three months? Well, it seemed like three years. Professor Cheslin Randolph was not the easiest of masters.

He sat down on the floor beside Helen Chase's chair and picked up his drink. "You tell me about these opportunities."

"All right. Take yourself." Helen Chase smiled down on him, sitting there at her feet. She liked the look of him, tall and lithe—really rather too thin—but that was infinitely preferable to fatness. A scrubbed look clung to him, a boyishness, a shyness that matched her own. There sparked a fire in his eye, a humorous curl to his lips—and a predatory curl to his nostrils. But they had as much in common, as they'd wonderingly discovered over the past—how long? Three months? Seemed longer, somehow. They talked eagerly and long on every subject—except themselves. So now Howland looked up in guarded surprise.

"What about me? I'm normal."

"Of course. But you are a doctor of science and you specialize in some obscure and highly esoteric branch of your profession. You know how long you will have to wait before any establishment offers you a chair of your own."

"That's right enough. But I refuse to worry."

"Only because, thank the Lord, you're young. But take the picture outside academic life. Take any large industrial organization. There you have many hundreds of top-notch scientists all working in their laboratories. But who do you find in the executive positions? In the higher echelons of administration? I'll tell you, Peter. You have arts people running you scientific brains . . ."

"Not always true—"

"Of course, not always. Cybernetics takes care of a deal of the administration work. But in the end, where you have to have a man or woman to decide with human brains—nine times out of ten that is an arts brain—"

"Perhaps that's what's wrong with our society!"

"Pagan!"

"Well, tell me," said Howland, hunching up a knee under his chin. "You are God's gift to the Shavians and Wellsian people. You know it all. Now, I've read some of Shaw and Wells and they—"

"He."

Howland looked up at her affectionately. He lifted his glass to her in mock homage. "He, you say. Well, I've read some of the stuff you've lent me and I'd put my half crown down hard on the side that says there were two of 'em back then."

"You probably can't conceive of the idea that a man writes in a certain way, in a special style, to put over one message and then, quite deliberately, turns right around and puts out material of a completely opposite intent."

"But we've photographs—funny old flat black and white things—"

"You are naive, Peter! One man puts on a beard, the other doesn't. If I wanted to publish material under another name I'd soon find a girl's photo to use—"

"You'd have trouble finding one half so nice . . ." Howland stopped, flushed, buried his face in his drink.

Helen, too, looked uncomfortable. Personal relationships were a difficult problem. And she liked Peter Howland. But the work on her treatise came first. She rarely thought

of herself as a woman in the way that obsessed some females of the faculty; but she was too wise to affect the cropped-hair-and-slacks poise of others. She had grown to accept the idea that Peter Howland thought of her as a dry academician like himself.

Howland spoke quickly, jerkily, at random, covering up what he felt to have been an unwarranted intrusion upon personal privacy. "My work is going along pretty well. I've set up a whole sheaf of schedules. When we make planetfall on Pochalin Nine we'll be able to begin work right away. One of the biggest problems will be to stop ourselves from polluting the primitive place with good old Earthly viruses and bacteria. I've just about staked my whole immediate future on this work, you know. Yet I don't feel frightened of failure—that or a duff start would ruin me—because I'm confident of success. I'm sure our work is along the right lines, and Randolph is a little wizard. The Maxwell Fund is going to produce some of its greatest results this time, you'll see . . ."

Helen was looking at him most oddly. He smiled. Perhaps she had been offended too deeply by his thoughtless remark about her beauty—dammit all! She was a lovely girl and if he had a little more time to spare he'd think about doing something serious about it. As it was—she had no time for men and he had no time for girls—yet.

"Does this mean so much to you, then, Peter?"

"Mean much! Imagine you suddenly had the chance of speaking to George Bernard or Herbert George—take your pick—face to face. Does that give you any idea? This will make me—and then I'll take my pick of academic chairs!"

"But haven't you heard? Hasn't Professor Randolph told you—?"

"Told me what? What's the big secret?"

"Perhaps—I spoke unguardedly. Perhaps it is still a secret. Forgive me, Peter. This is outside my province. It is up to Professor Randolph, not me."

Howland looked puzzled, his young face a trifle comical. "All right, Helen. If you say so."

"Helen always does say so," said Terence Mallow, walking straight across from the door. "And she's usually right." His oiled slickness grated on Howland. But, as the prof's nephew, the man had to be tolerated.

"Hullo, Terry," said Helen. She looked up with an eagerness that displeased Howland. He suddenly realized the figure he cut, sitting on the floor like a schoolboy. He rose hastily, spilling some of his drink. Mallow had been hanging around Helen a lot lately and that displeased Howland. To himself, he was frank about that.

"Peter," said Mallow affably. "My uncle would like to see you right away. Thought I might find you here."

Reluctant to leave, Howland looked from one to the other. The ex-space navyman—retired, wounded in action—making of himself a glamorous figure, and the girl, formed a twosome that jarred on Howland.

"Right," he said with as much grace as he could muster. "I'll be on my way."

Watching him go, Terence Mallow guessed with shrewd insight why Randolph hadn't asked Peter Howland to spy on the Chase woman.

Terry Mallow and Helen Chase were fast becoming friends. The weather had broken early for autumn and snow fell out of season. The two spent a deal of time skating, enjoying electronic sleigh rides, going to dances and social functions, both intra- and extra-murally. Mallow had all the time in the galaxy, and could talk Helen into taking time off when Howland, for one, would never have dreamed of trying.

Mallow lost no time in bringing the girl to talk of her work; as a person she was reserved, shy, quite pretty in a way that did not, strangely enough, overly appeal to the more florid tastes of the ex-space navyman, so that, in talking of her theories and aspirations, he did not feel he was balking himself of better pursuits.

"She's damned well determined about it, uncle." Mallow reported punctually every morning the happenings of the day before. Usually this was a mere matter of routine, a

recital of social activities. On the day after a party he added: "She's quite genuine. I mean—all this stuff about the Shavians and the Wellsians is quite above board. Apparently academically it is ultra respectable."

"I know that—now," Randolph said waspishly.

"And do you know that if the University does acquire the Shavian manuscripts she wants to buy with the Maxwell Fund, that alone will put Lewistead streets ahead of any other establishment, on Earth or off it?"

"But how can this sort of dead stuff be so important? Lewistead owes its prestige and high repute to the work of its science faculty. These others, these weirdies, they make us a laughing stock—"

Slowly, Mallow shook his head. "Not so, uncle. There is more in the Galaxy than science."

This was heresy to Professor Cheslin Randolph. And from his own nephew—a man who had sailed the deeps of space and seen the wonders of scientific might at first hand! Randolph's thin body tensed up, his frog's-eyes bulged with anger. He expressed himself with such fluency and feeling that his nephew walked across to the cocktail cabinet and poured a drink for the old boy. Randolph took it and swallowed hard without seeming to pause in his speech. At last, Mallow managed to elbow his way into the monologue.

"Apparently if she gets the Fund she will have to go personally to the planet where the manuscripts now are. She won't tell me the name of the place—I gather there are plenty of other rich foundations anxious to buy the collection. She only got onto it in some mysterious way, again, she won't tell me how."

"I suppose the whole affair is above board?"

"Quite. Helen Chase is so upright she doesn't need corsets. Her integrity is rather—frightening."

"Humpf. Well, then, keep on trying to find out what you can. So far you've not been much help—"

"But, uncle—"

"I'm going to see the Chancellor. If Harcourt won't or can't help, then I'll go over his head."

"Isn't the Chancellor some big wig in the political racket?"

"Yes. He's Shelley Arthur Mahew, Secretary for Extra-Solar Affairs."

"Whew! A big boy indeed."

"At least he is a member of the party currently in power. As a member of the government he ought to see the value of my work over a miserable collection of antiquated doodlings."

Randolph arranged an appointment with Mahew and flew to Capital City in what had once been the Sahara Desert. Mahew was charming, courteous, urbane—and completely unhelpful. Flying back, Randolph repeated to himself, over and over, Mahew's last words.

"There is nothing I can do, professor. The Maxwell Fund lies within the jurisdiction of the Trustees. They feel it is time the Arts had a cut of the loot."

"Loot," Randolph said, disgustedly, reporting the gist of the talks to Mallow. "Loot."

"A very succinct word," said Mallow appreciatively.

"Mahew also applied it to the subject that is currently obsessing him to the exclusion of everything else. If you ask me," Randolph said darkly, "Mahew is suffering from overwork."

"Surprisingly enough, that's just what Helen said about you—"

"She's talking about me, is she? Behind my back! The frumpery insolence of the woman."

Mallow laughed. He felt he could afford a little more of himself to come through in his daily contacts with his uncle and, as he disapprovingly noticed, the strain of behaving himself was a deadly bore and tiring him more than being polite to the Chase woman. He glanced out of the window, across the snow covered expanse of grass, spotty where the heaters were working, toward the low grey crenellated flank of the Arts building. She would be over there right now, discoursing in her funny, serious way to a gaggle of open-

mouthed students on the inner meanings to be found in the characters set up and knocked down by Shaw. Funny little girl. And that red hair . . .

"Terence! Are you listening to what I'm saying?"

"No, uncle." Mallow spoke with disarming frankness. "I was thinking of a revised method of tackling Helen Chase . . ."

"Humpf. I was just pointing out that you can forget her—"

"Forget her?" Dismay at an easy job slipping from his grasp sharpened Mallow's tones. "But we're just getting somewhere."

"We're getting nowhere. I've made up my mind. I'm going to approach this whole problem from the opposite end. Now go and find Doctor Howland. You, he and I are going to do some very serious talking—and acting."

Despite his firm tones, Randolph viewed the coming interview with his new assistant with more uncertainty than he liked to bring to any undertaking. Old Gussman was all right. He'd do as he was told. And he would be told to keep strictly to himself and act in his usual capacity as midwife to experiments. But Peter Howland, now. H'mm. Howland was a new boy, full of brilliance, remarkably distinguished in one so young; but independent, distressingly so.

Peter Howland walked in on a gust of fresh air, brushing white powder from his shoulders. "Load of snow fell on me just as I reached the door," he said affably. "You wanted to see me, professor?"

"Yes, Peter, my boy. Sit down, sit down. You too, Terence. I'll put you in the picture first, Peter, then we can get on to the meat of the problem."

To Mallow, his uncle was a changed man. The little professor had put on a set, determined expression that ridged his jaw muscles and thinned his lips. There existed not the slightest hint of ludicrousness about him. He stood there for all the galaxy like a fighting cock with bulging chest, all five feet of him, blazing a rock-steady purpose. You could almost see the spurs adorning his tiny feet.

Yet, sitting down as he was bid, Peter Howland sensed with amused astonishment that Randolph was not at ease. That was not characteristic, the dominating personality could not hide it, and the amusement drained from Howland.

"You know the stage at which we stand about the Pochalin Nine work? Everything we can do on Earth has been done. Now we need an absolutely sterile planet, one completely untouched by life of any sort in which to prove whether or not our theories are valid. I wanted to have your thoughts at once on any aspects of our work you think can be carried on here."

Howland moved slightly in the comfortable chair. Then, slowly, he said, "I'm a new boy at the moment, professor. I have the deepest admiration for your work. The importance of it cannot be underestimated. But we can't move forward another step on Earth. We now need Pochalin Nine and the Maxwell Fund to buy us our equipment and take us there."

"Of course you're new, Peter! I was particularly pleased to have a fresh brain on the problem. Already your work has proved invaluable—in fact, you've helped directly in bringing us to the present stage. Simple cell creation we've been doing for years; but only that. We believe it to be Life—but to prove it beyond doubt the cells must be able to reproduce. *That's* life! They must be able to use energy obtained in whatever form is most suitable and convert it, reverse the flow of entropy, organize, put the order of life into primal unliving chaos."

This praise, the first he had received from Randolph in so outspoken a tone, obscurely alarmed Howland. It smacked of the notorious, "We like it, *but* . . ."

Slouched in his chair and listening quietly, Mallow caught some of the fervor of these scientists. To create life! A life that recreated itself, grew, expanded . . . he began to envision many-tentacled monsters with slimy bodies . . .

Randolph crossed his little legs on the footstool and gestured irritably with his tiny fingers. "You see how we are placed. You know the value of the work we are doing, I have

no need to belabor that point. All we now require is money to finance ourselves. Everything hangs on that."

"Quite so, sir," said Howland, a trifle bewildered by the nuances he couldn't quite interpret in Randolph's manner. "Nothing now stands in our way."

"Liking your sentiments doesn't make them so." Randolph prodded a stick-like finger at Howland. "Nothing can stand in our way—nothing must! I believe you to have the same dedication to your chosen profession as I have. What would you say, Peter, if I told you the Maxwell Fund was not coming to my department this year?"

Howland smiled. "My first thought, I think, would be one of annoyance that I'd come to Lewistead at all."

"Oh? How's that?"

"As you know I had a choice—restricted, but still a choice—of appointments. I chose you and Lewistead because I was doing similar work and because I knew you were getting the Maxwell Fund and could therefore finance the sort of work I—all of us—want to do on Pochalin Nine."

If Randolph felt surprise he did not show it. Instead, he said, "You would then be very annoyed and upset—angry, shall we say?"

Again Howland smiled that boyish smile. "I'd be so flaming mad I'd—I'd—"

"*You'd what?*"

"Why—why, I don't really know. I should feel—cheated. Criminally so. But as the question doesn't arise—"

"But you see, my dear Peter, the question does arise."

Peter Howland stood up slowly, section by section, until his tall lanky frame towered up above tiny Randolph as though Howland was scraping the ceiling.

"You mean—we don't get the Maxwell Fund?"

It was a whisper.

"That's right, Peter. We don't get the Maxwell Fund."

"You seem to be taking it very calmly. Your life's work—you've told me that often enough—shattered. We're not in line for the Fund next year, that I know. And it's all earmarked out—we should have it this year! My God! And

what about all the work—and me . . . I chose this appointment because of the Maxwell Fund—turned down other good positions—and now we're out in the cold. What a ghastly joke! Surely there must be some . . ."

"There are no possible grounds for hoping to reverse the decision." Randolph's words were icy. "As you say, the Fund is earmarked for the next twenty years or more. This was our year—and we are the unlucky ones. We are now told that nothing hitherto was official and we do not get the Fund."

"But what are we going to do?" Howland sat down jerkily, looking despairingly at Randolph. Mallow sat in his chair, quiet and watchful. "What can we do? Anyway, why don't we get the Fund? Whose decision is it? Where is it going?"

"As to your questions, my dear Peter, the first is the only one of importance. For the others, briefly, we do not receive the Fund because the Trustees decided that it should go to Professor Chase. Now—"

"To Helen!" Memory of what she'd been half-saying flooded back. "Why, the cheap—"

"Recriminations use up valuable energy uselessly. But I do gather that you feel strongly about this iniquitous affront to science?"

Howland took a deep breath. Randolph appeared not the slightest perturbed about this affair. Peter Howland trembled with the murderous rage that possessed him and he guessed that Randolph had been through that. There was a contained exultation about the professor; there radiated from him an aura of confidence, of defiance, even. Howland decided to try to contain his own anger, but, he couldn't help saying, "I'm so furious I could cheerfully wring the necks of the Trustees, one at a time. As for Helen—well—"

"And you also believe our work is of value to the galaxy? Yes. Well, then, I have no way of judging your integrity to our monstrous modern system of social justice. I think I understand Terence here. I mean to prove that I can synthesize a living cell and make it grow, multiplying by generations

in mere minutes. I intend to show the whole galaxy I can create life! For this work I need money. I was blind. I'd calmly sat down for a decade waiting until some moss-bound armchair bureaucrats in their generosity felt it expedient to hand me the Maxwell Fund."

Randolph was growing more excited as he spoke and the look now crossing his face was one of self-contempt, and a growing realization of new horizons, like a child who has been introduced for the very first time to sweets.

"To think I patiently sat like a spineless ninny waiting for those fools to give me money. Money is all about us, here in this rich galaxy. It exists in abundance, and it is not being used as it should be. I don't need to mention the criminal waste of money fostered by Professor Chase and the Trustees with the Maxwell Fund. There is the matter of the billions wasted every year on advertising rubbishy products that no one in his right senses would have in the house. Money is being squandered by the million every second—"

"I agree with that, uncle," said Mallow, uneasily.

Howland sat quietly now, listening intently.

"And what is the greatest waste of money today? I'll tell you." He fixed a penetrating eye on Mallow. "You!"

Both Mallow and Howland jumped.

"But, uncle!" Panicky thoughts fleeted through Mallow's scheming brain.

Randolph prodded a skinny finger at his nephew. He was riding a hobby horse, and it was a brand new one and gripped him in a mounting frenzy of enthusiasm. "I don't mean you personally, Terence. Merely what you represent. War! That's what. Oh, I don't mean your petty little rebels on wherever it is."

"They fight a tough battle," Mallow said, still able to feel aggrieved at the slight on his service. Then the idiocy of that tattered pride struck him—his service? His no longer.

Professor Randolph ploughed on, unheedingly. "In our galaxy live human beings, whether born on Earth or among her dependencies doesn't matter. There are protoplasmic forms of life with which we have little in common and even less

in contact. And there are—or may be—other forms of life of which at the moment we have not the faintest conception. So who are we going to fight? Against whom is the colossal armament we are building going to be used?"

"I was a space navyman and I don't owe them a damn thing. But the Navy feel they have a job to do, patrolling the starlanes, seeing that our trade moves freely between the stars . . ."

"Freely. Well, who, apart from your potty little rebels, is going to interrupt it?"

"I don't know. We don't think about that angle too much. But among all the stars in the galaxy we haven't even looked at yet, there may easily exist a race inimicable to us."

"Rubbish. The armed services exist to provide an outlet for taxation. And to provide a prop for industry and a training ground in discipline for young men like yourself. They are maintained only as a governmental weapon in the eternal game of balancing production and consumption."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"It's the only way!" As Randolph spoke both Howland and Mallow were impressed more and more forcibly by the change in the little man. He spoke like a fanatic. "Think of it, thousands of young men trained to kill and armed with the most lethal weapons flitting about from planet to planet—the whole concept is a ghastly farce."

"Well, we can't stop it."

"I'm not trying to do that. I don't care now what the cotton-wool brained politicians do. I am concerned now with what Mahew told me."

"The Chancellor!" Howland said, surprised within this vortex of surprises.

"Secretary for Extra-Solar Affairs," Mallow said, rubbing his pomaded chin. "H'm. I suppose the long-awaited and rather dreaded contact with inimicable humanoid aliens hasn't arrived at last? That's one good reason for keeping the space Navy. No one—*no one*—knows what lies out there beyond the furthest stars."

"Very poetic." Randolph brushed that whole line of thought

aside. "I am not, by nature, a modest man. But I hope I am successful in disguising that fact. I have cultivated a reputation for dogged perseverance just as much for an explosive temper—all, you will note, guided by a single controlling brain. My real self is beginning to exert pressure, bursting out to the surface of my wonderful machine-made personality."

"But what did Mahew say that started you off like this?"

"I repeat that I am not by nature a modest man. But in this scheme I am forcing myself to aim at a modest target. I am, if you wish, excusing myself beforehand for the essential meanness of my project."

Mallow began to give up hope that the little man would ever get there.

"Scattered around on various planets are space naval bases. Also, of course, Army guard units, the Civil Service, Ambassadorial staff and other organizations maintained by us across space. Those I am not concerned with—although they, too, waste far too much of the taxpayers' wealth. No—I restrict myself to this ridiculous space Navy."

"Right," said Mallow with resignation. He was perched on the arm of a chair now, wearily lighting a fresh cigarette. Howland still sat, quiet and contained.

"I am personally convinced that the space Navy serves no useful purpose, granting its actions against the rebels that could have been carried out with a tithe of the cost. Therefore the money lavished on the space Navy is wasted, tossed away, lost—a criminal waste. I intend to do something about that. I've been thinking over what Mahew said. Mahew told me that—"

"Yes, uncle?"

Randolph looked up, furrowing his broad forehead. "If you would kindly refrain from continual interruption, Terence, perhaps I might be allowed to speak."

"Sorry," said Mallow. But a little smile touched his rapacious mouth.

"Quite casually, Mahew mentioned that the money I required and was hoping to obtain from the Maxwell Fund

was a mere fleabite—his own disgusting expression—compared to the amounts he was daily handling. Why, he said with stupid pride, he'd only that day signed orders for the transmission of a year's pay for a space Navy base across the other side of Callahan 739."

Mallow nodded, remembering the place. And he began to vibrate to the same wavelength as the professor.

"They have to send cash so that the sailors will spend it among the planets. Payment notes and advices would serve no purpose. Bullion and cash still move in some complicated rhythm known only to the denizens of the galaxy's stock exchanges and indefatigable readers of the financial papers. All this money is being shipped out aboard various starliners and space Navy craft. All going to complete waste!"

Quite plainly before his inward eye Mallow could see where this conversation was heading. His first, delighted leap forward toward the obvious conclusion of what his uncle was saying now recoiled. Abruptly he began to see just what was going to be involved. If he was right, of course. And he knew he was. He started to get cold feet.

"I intend," Professor Randolph said with grave emphasis, "to put a stop to at least a part of this criminal squandering of money that should be used for greater purposes. I have details of sailings. For the good of science in general and my experiments in creation of life in particular, I am going to appropriate a consignment of this money."

"Yes, uncle," said Terence Mallow, weakly.

CHAPTER FOUR

EX-BOATSWAIN'S MATE DUFFY BRIGGS collected his scattered senses slowly. His squashed nose pressed hard against the sawdusted floor. In his ears, the jeers and yells of the barroom crowd, the chinking of bottles and glasses, the canned music from the out-of-phase recorder, the shrill hen-cackle of painted women blurred into a shingly beach roar of surf. The place stank of liquor and tobacco fumes, of unwashed bodies, and cheap perfume. The back of his head seethed with fire. He pressed himself up with both clawed hands, straining to drag himself back to full consciousness.

"Gawd!" screamed a woman. " 'E ain't knocked out."

" 'It 'im again, Fred!" yelled a drunken docker.

The bedlam surrounding Duffy Briggs sorted itself out to one single all consuming desire. He had to get back on his feet and strike the man who had smashed him. He had to prove he couldn't be bested by a runt of a longshoreman.

Stabs of pain flickered behind his eyeballs, his legs trembled and his joints seemed immersed in putty. He was growing old. But not too old to bash in the face of this runt who had slugged him.

Four fingers and a thumb closed around his upper arm. He was hauled up with lop-sided ferocity and slammed down on his heels.

He turned blindly, still seeing only streaks of crimson and vermilion, and raised his fist to smash away this new attacker.

"Take it easy, Duffy! There's a dozen of 'em. Let's get outta here with dignity, whole skins, and a sense of pride. In other words—run like hell!"

Amazement gripped Duffy Briggs as he followed that whispered advice. He had been alone in this dreary space-

port bar, down by the interstellar dock area, and had remained alone through the argument and the fight. Now, he had a friend—and an old friend. He ran like hell and felt better at each step.

Chief Petty Officer Barny Cain—not yet ex, but arranging his affairs so that very rapidly he would be ex-CPO Cain—had knocked down a plug-ugly trying to bar the door, and had burst out into the chilly night air dragging Duffy Briggs.

The two men now gulped the frosty air, feeling the nip on their noses, and the rasp in their lungs.

"Barny Cain!" said Briggs, marvelling.

"I might have known I'd find you in a fight. Can you walk?" At Briggs' nod they swung together down the narrow alley, Briggs' physical resources surging back at full tide at every step. "You were down on the floor. Tut, tut," said Cain with malicious pleasure. "You musta been slow."

"Slow," said Briggs with mournful remembrance. "Slow and old, Barny. Old."

Cain glanced briefly at Briggs in the glare of the sodium arcs high above against the monorail. Briggs was as he remembered him from a lifetime in the service; a chunky barrel of a man with a square, ravaged face, and a squashed nose. Come to think of it, Cain reflected as they dodged through a darkened alley and emerged onto a garishly lighted strip, crowded with restaurants and hotels and used flier lots. The two men were much alike; came of serving and fighting for forty years in the space Navy, Cain supposed.

"How did you happen to be down there, anyway?" asked Briggs.

"Looking for you. And one or two others you can help me find. There's a job on. Good money. Slightly on the perigee side of the law; but I don't think that need worry us."

"It never has before." Briggs let the idea float around in his craggy head. "Money," he said as a knight might have spoken of the Holy Grail. "Money."

"I guess you're in with us, then? Good. You remember Lieutenant-Commander Mallow? He's running the show. . . ."

"I remember him," said Duffy Briggs. "I remember him."

Charles Sergeivitch Kwang raised his glass of whisky and smiled across the bar at Cyrus Q. Mauriac. Mauriac exuded wealth, bonhomie, business acumen, the scent of a fine cigar, and the aroma of old brandy. The last two delectable items had been paid for by Kwang, in the nature of a libation to a successful coup.

"Yes, sir," said Mauriac. "I know a smart businessman when I meet one. It's been a pleasure to do business with you, Mr. Kwang."

"And with you, Mr. Mauriac. I'm sure those holdings out on—ah—Calzonier Second will pay handsome dividends well within the three years we postulate. I think you'll be pleased you took the risk."

"Risk—no risk attached! I wouldn't have invested with your company if I didn't think that. I've put a lot of cash into this deal." Mauriac poured the last of the brandy down his throat, glanced at his watch, at the door, and at the briefcase standing beside Kwang's barstool. "We've all signed up—time to have another."

Kwang didn't want to fade too quickly. That was part of his cool professional competence. Just this last drink, pick up the briefcase, all smiles, a clammy handshake, and away—away out into the bursting-over-with-opportunities galaxy and the next sucker.

But Mauriac, too, was in no hurry. He held Kwang at the bar, talking expansively. Kwang kept the frown off his smooth, slender brown face. He was a lithe, slimly-muscled man with jet black hair and a button nose and eyes of a liquid brown sheen. He was also able to adopt an air of authority, of abasement, of injured innocence, all at the blast of a policeman's whistle.

"You told me you served with the space Navy," Mauriac rumbled on. "Most interesting. Tell me—"

He broke off sharply, looking at the door past Kwang's back. Kwang saw his plump body slump in disappointment and then Kwang felt a hand fumble at his own below

the level of the bar. A ball of paper pressed into his palm. With a casual yet polite charm of manner he excused himself, swiftly unrolled the paper covered by his knee, glanced down. "Cops," he read. "Get out—fast."

"Excuse me, Mr. Mauriac. I have to—you know."

"Sure, sure. But be right back. I'm enjoying our little chat."

Kwang slid off the stool, looked with his heart in his eyes at the briefcase, then strode off, head high, feeling slightly sick. Halfway there he altered course and made for the back folding doors where selected customers were introduced to the complexities of roulette and triplanetary. Through the door and the hanging curtains he glanced about. A sweat sheen glistened across his smooth forehead.

"You're losing your grip, Charley, my lad. Cops all over. That sucker you've got set up there is on to you."

Terence Mallow stood by the far door. His smile was curiously alive, calculating.

"Terry! Where the devil did you spring from?"

"Never mind that now. This way. You're stoney broke again now, I suppose? Well, I've a little job for you . . ."

Stella Ramsy flung back the bedclothes, grimacing at the feel of the dirty linen and the coarseness of the weave. She stepped gracefully out of bed, naked, and walked, quivering with anger, across to her husband's trousers where they draped in uncreased folds across a broken-bottomed chair. This dump of a boarding house was killing her. Perennially the smell of cooking, of unwashed kids, of cats and garbage; the rankness of decaying spirits daunted her own lonely ego. She lifted the trousers and for lack of a crease to find the pockets quickly, lifted them by the turnups, and shook, hard. A box of matches, a butt end, and three pennies. Disgustedly, she flung the trousers at Colin Ramsy's head.

"Wake up, you useless, bone-idle . . ."

Ramsy grunted and snorted, turned over, groping for the sheets Stella had distastefully flung back. "Leave alone, Stella."

"Get out of that bed! Between us we have exactly three pennies. We owe a month's rent, we've nothing left to pawn—and all you do is lie in bed. Come on. Out!"

The next quarter of an hour resulted in the usual screaming match. Stella didn't bother to dress. At least central heating came with the apartment. She possessed one decent suit and blouse and one pair of stockings with ladders that could be hidden. She wouldn't wear those around the apartment! Ramsy, groaning and working his dry throat muscles, dressed perfunctorily and at last Stella managed to push him out of the room. Leaning on the door, she screamed out her good-bye, "And you needn't bother to come back without a job!"

Slouching dispiritedly in the doorway, Ramsy looked back at her. She looked good standing there like that. He knew well enough why he'd married her. "Give us a kiss before I go," he said weakly. "For luck."

"The only luck you'll get is outside. I know what that kiss would lead to. And we need money first!"

Ramsy pawed at his face, feeling the quiver of his lips against his palms. This was a hell of a life. What chance of a job was there for a man with his record? But he couldn't lose Stella. That would break him up finally.

He dragged his hands away from his face to see Stella shouting at him: "Get out and get a job!" and to see her suddenly try to cover herself and slam the door.

Slowly, he turned around.

Walking towards him, smiling, came Terence Mallow . . .

Around him the sterile blinding whiteness of the laboratory struck agonizing spears through his eyes. Serried ranks of glass bottles winked sardonically upon him. A tap, dripping maddenly, hammered strokes of redness on his inflamed brain. He felt the slickness of the workbench beneath his fingers like a serrated saw edge, flaying through to his cringing brain.

His brain . . .

Willi Haffner knew too much about the human brain. Too

much and heart-breakingly not enough. The inhuman shininess of the laboratory whirled about him, and his clutching fingers grasped the workbench with despairing and weakening strength. Perhaps another little drink might help. . . .

Another little drink. Above the workbench in rows of mathematical precision stood glass jars. Haffner reached up with the most casual of glances. His square, blunt-fingered hands with the betrayingly bitten nails closed on the pure alcohol bottle—any one of the many derivatives would do—unhesitatingly. The smooth glass felt like sandpaper. He poured a stiff one. He gulped it straight. Some of the shakes went away.

On the bench two tanks connected by complicated tubing awaited his attention. The left hand tank contained the disembodied brain of a rat. Clever animals, rats. In the right hand tank the brain and a major portion of the ganglia system of a rabbit hung so enmeshed with electrodes, wiring, telemetry and test gear that the grey convolutions remained hard to identify. But Willi Haffner knew it was there. He'd taken the rabbit, a kicking, furry bundle with floppy ears, from the cage himself.

This experiment should prove Willi Haffner's genius to the world—or it would ruin and kill him. The company would sanction no further expense and already Borisov, the Scientific Executive, had warned Haffner on over spending. A Chemical Company, he had said, must produce profit as well as startling new experiments. You are, Haffner, he had said, only a spectacular form of advertising.

The bitter thought sent Haffner's questing hand after the alcohol bottle again. His brilliant academic career had been broken partly through inter-departmental rivalry. He'd been lucky—damned lucky—to be allowed to carry on by the Chemical Company—even if only as spectacular advertising. This time he must not fail.

But fail, he did. Just what went wrong, he could never be sure. An impression remained that he had heard Borisov's assured, hateful voice and dominating laughter from the

corridor *before* his fumbling fingers dislodged a vital connection. Rusty red liquid sprayed thickly from a snapped junction. The tide lapped across the bench, foaming a little like spilt beer. A sucking noise distracted him as the heart pump drew in ordinary contaminated air from the atmosphere in place of the hemoglobin mixture now frothing over the bench and dripping sluggishly to the floor.

". . . a remarkable man," Borisov was braying, pushing open the swing doors and plodding down the tessellated laboratory tiling. "A trifle unorthodox, perhaps; but, then, that *is* the mark of genius. His work on viruses, alone. . . ."

"He *is*, I'm sure," came another voice, reaching in to Willi Haffner as he stood there, helpless, before the wreck of his work. "I really do feel this to be an imposition; but there are one or two points I would like to have Doctor Haffner's views . . . He *is* an acknowledged leader in this field. I haven't seen him in—oh, two, three years now. He seems to have dropped out of contact with all his old friends."

The voice was familiar; but what did that matter alongside the wreck bubbling and coughing on the bench? The rat's brain lasted longer than the rabbit's. But in two minutes both were dead.

"Hullo! What's going on?"

Haffner couldn't reply. Borisov stamped up, his shoes arrogant on the tiling. Haffner waved a limp hand at the catastrophe and slumped against the bench. His hand reached for the alcohol bottle.

"I think, Willi," said Borisov, all the jealousy in him triumphant. "This means the end for you."

Haffner didn't answer. Through the red roaring in his brain—his brain!—all mixed up with the bloody shambles on the bench, he heard Borisov, as if from a long way away, saying, "You'll receive some separation allowance, of course. But we're finished with you. Oh—and Doctor Peter Howland is here to see you."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MEETING commenced at nineteen thirty hours under a low ceiling of tobacco smoke.

Terence Mallow had had no trouble in booking a small hotel's single meeting hall for this evening. The cover-up story—an ex-servicemen's friendship league—was barely heeded. Mallow and Kwang, ex-astrogator, and Sammy Larssen, ex-starcruiser electronics officer, had inspected the room meticulously and had baffled the two spy eyes and mikes they found. The job, for men of their aptitude, had been childish. The three also shared another fact of life in common, apart from expertize in the ways of the space Navy: they had all been court-martialed and booted out of the service.

Duffy Briggs and Barny Cain sat chunkily by the door. Across their knees each held a nasty-looking weapon. Mallow had briefed them very thoroughly.

Colin and Stella Ramsy sat next to each other in the second row of chairs. Stella wore her only good blouse and suit and Ramsy had taken a shave. The stimulus of having an object in life again had set a flush along his cheeks and an alertness in his bearing that made Stella reach across and clasp his hand.

Nursing a whisky bottle, Willi Haffner sat next to Peter Howland, who had told him firmly that the whisky was, from now on, going to be rationed with ruthless finality.

About a couple of dozen other men and women filled out the rest of the meeting. All were ex-service—all had been kicked out with contempt. All owned a special quality that could be put to use.

Looking around, Peter Howland saw a group of people

as dedicated as he was. He remembered his last words to Professor Randolph at the end of that amazing interview.

"Criminal it might be, to some," he'd said with conviction. "But you are right, professor. For the good of science in general and our work in particular—I am with you all the way."

Remembering those words brought a warm feeling of comfort. They weren't petty criminals. They were men and women determined to see that the wealth of the galaxy was shared out more equitably than it was now.

The door opened and Briggs was on his feet in a single fluid motion, his gun half-raised.

"Very meritorious, Mr. Briggs," said Professor Cheslin Randolph, walking in and looking up at Briggs. "I'm glad to see you so efficient."

Briggs looked pleased. "Ah—call me Duffy, Prof."

Randolph nodded with the air of a grand seigneur and turned to his companion.

"We're all here now, Colonel. Perhaps you'd care to find a seat and then we can begin. . . ."

Colonel Erwin Troisdorff nodded his close-cropped head and took the center seat in the front row. He eased his bulky body down carefully, favoring his injured leg, and favoring the company, too, with a single all encompassing glance. His civilian clothes were neat and well-pressed; but ancient and wearing thin. He placed his hat, gloves, and cane on the empty seat beside him. Watching the performance, Peter Howland guessed no one would have the temerity to ask the colonel to move them.

Speaking softly to Haffner, at his side, Howland said, "Where on Earth—or off it—did Randolph dig him up?"

"Surely," Haffner said, "that applies to us all."

Mallow, passing, smiled contemptuously and went on, to take his seat to one side of the dais and below it, facing the grouped chairs. Professor Randolph hopped up onto the dais and selected the largest chair, which he piled with cushions looted from others. He looked across the gathering and cleared his throat.

Silence at once ensued.

"Gentlemen. Please give me your closest attention."

He had not deliberately omitted mentioning the ladies present but even as he went on speaking he wondered why his nephew had been so insistent on including them. They would prove to be very useful if the full scheme had to be implemented, Mallow had pointed out, but Professor Randolph felt they would be a hindrance.

"I believe all of you present at this historic gathering have at one time or another been badly treated by our modern iniquitous system of social justice. I do not know you all personally yet, my nephew, Terence Mallow has brought most of you here. But I hope to rectify that omission very shortly." He paused and beamed down on the rows of faces. "We are gathered here to plan the preliminaries to an undertaking that will mark a new phase in the position of science and the creative thinkers of our civilization. No longer must we be dictated to by petty bureaucrats."

Everyone listened intently. That there was a job on they all knew. Beyond that—nothing. They could afford to humor this little old professor in his fancies, as Mallow had warned, if at the end lay the jackpot.

"I may add," Randolph rolled on, enjoying himself cast in the role of destiny-maker, "that Colonel Troisdorff agrees entirely with my reading of this affair. The Colonel was cruelly, infamously treated by the Space Marines. He dared to point out that they were wasting money. His reward was to be ignominiously ejected from the work of a lifetime, to be cast adrift, penniless and alone."

"He'll have me in tears next," Haffner said to Howland. Haffner fondled his bottle. "I could do with some of the money the government wastes on its pretty sailors."

"Normally," Randolph said, opening his frog's-eyes to their fullest, "I would be the first to say that the government should dictate where money gathered from the citizenry should be spent. But the time has come when I am prepared to stand up and declare that the government no longer has my support. The whole system of our social structure

is awry. Normal people have been subverted by a distorted and false set of values. They clamor after bread and circuses when the real beauties of life of lasting value are cast aside. And to those I add the power of scientific research."

To Mallow, sitting with a smirk across his weak, handsome face, the old boy was sounding fine. Any waverers among this hand-picked band would be converted for sure. Mallow, himself, was over that first panicky reaction. He glanced at Howland. A weak link there. He'd never liked Howland and had been surprised that the scientist had fallen in so eagerly with Randolph's proposals. As for old Gussman, expediency dictated he be left in ignorance.

As Randolph went through the preliminary outlines a stir ran through the conference hall. This sounded big. This sounded as though it could turn out to be the job of the century. Mallow, assisted by Briggs and Cain, tried to watch everyone. They weren't all one-hundred percent.

A wheyfaced fellow with a long upper lip, slatey eyes and not much hair, dressed in foppish bad taste, jumped up so that his chair squealed. Everyone looked at him.

"Excuse me—uh—prof—but if you plan the snatch as the vans are taking the stuff to the spaceport—uh uh. Freddy Finks tried that. He's two years into a twenty stretch on one of the penal asteroids." He rubbed his sharp nose reflectively. "Never did find out which one."

"Thank you—ah—Mister—?"

"Kirkup. Everyone calls me Fingers and I s'pose you will too. But I don't like it."

"Thank you, Mr. Kirkup, for your helpful advice. As it happens I do not plan the—ah—snatch as the bullion is being taken to the spaceport. That seems crude." Randolph smiled widely upon the assembled company. He was in excellent form. "You may have noticed that nearly all of you were at one time in the space Navy. The conclusion, I venture to suggest, is obvious."

Howland noticed with some amusement that some of them hadn't got it yet. Stella was speaking furiously to her husband, her eyes brilliant. On Kwang's olive face a half

smile lowered his eyelids. Duffy Briggs and Barny Cain, the strong-arm men, glanced at each other wonderingly.

"I intend," said the eminent and respectable professor, "with the help of you all, to take over the ship in space."

CHAPTER SIX

"I DON'T agree with you, Terence, and I must again ask you to remember that I am in charge!" Professor Cheslin Randolph puffed up his little turkey-chest and distended his frog's-eyes at his nephew.

He and Mallow and Howland had been joined by Colonel Erwin Troisdorff in the professor's chambers in Lewistead on the day after the successful first meeting in the hotel. Peter Howland walked about like a man under an anaesthetic; his mind was wrapped in comforting blankets of cotton-wool; and science, he felt, was owed a living by all the galaxy.

Under the professor's onslaught, Mallow ungraciously climbed down.

"All right, then, uncle. But I ought to put it on record—" He jerked his head at Howland, Haffner and Troisdorff "that I consider a direct attack with weapons we understand is the best method."

"I'm inclined to agree with that." Troisdorff did not wear a monocle and the effect he gave with his seamed owl's face was that he was naked without one. "Get aboard and hold 'em up with a few rifles."

"Why, my dear colonel, do you think we have Doctors Howland and Haffner? Not to mention myself? This is going to be a scientific expedition, not a murder jaunt."

"We may have to kill, uncle—"

"No!" Randolph's face furrowed with disgust and repugnance. "I cannot tolerate that kind of thinking for an instant. Here in my department we are working out a scheme and with Doctor Haffner's help we can implement it in time for the sailing."

"By the way," said Troisdorff, casually. "You haven't told us the name of the ship."

"That's right, colonel," Randolph said evenly. "I haven't."

Howland smothered a pleased smile. So the old fox wasn't losing his grip. From what he'd seen of the company dredged together by Mallow, Howland wouldn't have trusted one of them with a used monorail ticket.

"Well, all I hope," Mallow said a little sullenly, "Is that the police don't cotton on. If they do and we have to fight our way out—"

"This is negative thinking, Terence! I am certain that Howland and Haffner and I can bring off a bloodless coup. The ship will be ours, and we can dispose of the money at our leisure. That's where you come in."

At the look flitting across Mallow's face Howland felt obscure alarm. There was such a thing as a double-cross; but the fellow was the professor's nephew!

"I suppose you're absolutely satisfied with the loyalty of the men you've picked, Mallow?"

Mallow stared at him. "Quite sure, Howland. Each one is ready to co-operate fully."

"I'm glad to hear it. I was wondering what you proposed to do about any one who decided to quit."

"There'll be no quitters." Mallow's face thrust unpleasantly forward as he spoke, yellow lines crimping in the outline of his mouth. "If anyone tries to pull out now they'll buy themselves a lot of trouble. A lot of trouble."

Randolph turned on him. "I trust you do not intend any violence, Terence. I agree that we should not have anyone dropping out now. They might talk. But we have to observe the decencies . . ."

"If anyone tries to stop us, he'll wind up . . ." Mallow

did not finish the sentence. But the grim nod from Troisdorff merely underlined the unspoken words.

Tendrils of fear brushed Howland. If he wanted to get out now, he couldn't. It was too late. He comforted himself as so many men must have done before him with the thought that his leader abhorred violence.

He and Haffner went off to the laboratory. Randolph had had no trouble with the Vice Chancellor concerning Haffner. Willi Haffner was a famous scientist who was carrying out some original research on virus culture and Lewistead was fortunate, said Harcourt, in being able to offer him laboratory facilities. Especially, he added with emphasis, now that Haffner had overcome his—weakness.

That had been Howland's doing. Haffner was down to half a bottle a day and going strong. Having work to do that challenged him had provided the main spur. When this job had been done, Randolph had promised him, he could include all the experiments on brains, human and animal, he wished to undertake when the money had been split up. The notion of furthering another scientist's work had—surprising Howland—appealed to Randolph.

"This is a good thing," he said emphatically. "We men of science, to use a convenient yellow-tape phrase, must stake our claim to the riches of the galaxy. After all, if it was not for science there would be no richness in the galaxy. It would lie locked up in primal atoms, secreted away in the depths of the sky. Man would still be grubbing in the dirt for his daily bread."

So it was that Haffner worked more joyously than he had for years isolating, producing and orienting the required audio virus. He and Howland had to produce the finished product in sufficient quantity to satisfy Randolph. That took time. They went at the job, night and day, keeping all hours in the laboratory. Time, Randolph told them with a flick of the eyes to the wall calendar, was running out.

Other groups working under Mallow, reporting to heads of sub-committees set up at that first meeting, carried out their part in the complex preparations. Over all, the dom-

inating influence of Professor Randolph could be felt as a physical presence, urging, encouraging, domineering, castigating. The day approached.

Through this period Howland, from overwork and lack of sleep, grew pale and taut and nervy. He felt most of all the lack of any trusted confidante. Willi Haffner was a help; but Howland held back from full confidence in the reformed soak. The bitter realization that he was engaged in a technically criminal activity soured him, turned him short-tempered and unapproachable as much through the fear of failure as anything else. It was right—*right*—he told himself a dozen times a day that the frittered-away money of the galaxy should be directed to cleaner, saner ends.

Those long and dreary days before Christmas when he'd been a boy grimly saving his pocket money and working at odd jobs around the village after school returned to his memory now, here in this period of hard work and anxious waiting. His parents were both long dead and he'd left the village school to fight his way up the educational labyrinth to his present position. Every step of the way he'd had to fight. He wore now a meek and humble look before the galaxy; but he was made of stern stuff—his upbringing had seen to that. There were plenty of keen and bright up-and-coming young scientists in all the branches, ready to take what he could not hold.

Accepting the position with Randolph to work with that famous man in his inquiries into the origin of life and—the greatest temptation of all—the opportunity to create life, had been for Howland a tremendous chance. The positions he had turned down had been dismissed without regret—until the devastating news that the Maxwell Fund was not theirs.

Well, after they had—had stolen—this money, they would finish up their work on Pochalin Nine and then he could return to the normal galaxy with a reputation and pick and choose his own next steps in a career that meant everything to him.

The weather continued in a filthy mood all that week and

the next. Snow fell monotonously and people went about with long faces, anxious to remember to take their anti-cold pills regularly. Overhead the sky, when it was visible through snow flakes, looked like a ghoul's soup-pot cover, clapped grey and greasy down over the Earth.

One afternoon with the lights shining eerily in the long laboratory the telephone rang and Howland answered peevishly, a clipboard balanced on one knee.

"Is that Doc Howland?"

"Yes. Who is that?"

"Lissen, doc. Meet me tonight at eleven-thirty sharp. First door up the stairs on the left, 711 Sirius Street. Got it?" A pause. "And don't tell anyone!"

"Who is that? What do you mean—meet you?"

"No time for any more, doc. Just be there, see? Else you'll be in trouble, too."

And the line went dead.

Howland put the phone back feeling as though he'd spoken to a madman as Haffner bustled through, holding a test tube to the light.

"This batch is coming along beautifully, Peter. Why—what's the matter? Feel ill?"

That hoarse, husky voice rasped into his memory. *"And don't tell anyone!"*

"No, no, Willi. Just tired. This particular audio virus we're chasing is a cunning brute."

"But we're almost there." Haffner exuded confidence now in strange contrast to Howland's pale and washed out wanness. "We can begin production in as big a quantity as Randolph wants." He chuckled. "Provided this batch is the right one."

Howland excused himself and went away to think. After a half hour of fruitless brain-searching he still couldn't place that voice. Yet he had heard it before, and recently. The threat ringing in those rasping tones had been unmistakable. He'd do tonight. He knew that all right. But if Mallow was mixed up in this somewhere . . .

Seven-eleven Sirius Street turned out to be one of those

sleazy apartment houses, fifty stories tall, clustering in grey spires around where once there had been river traffic and docks and the cheerful tooting of steam whistles. Now transport jetted out from the airfields and the tall spires crumbled along with the centuries they had known.

Going up the stairs, Howland found the first door up on the left. He knocked. His heavy leather gloves against the cold deadened the sound and he was about to drag one off, unable to find a bell, when the door sagged inwards, creaking evilly. A pulse began to hammer in Howland's temple. Keeping his gloves on he pushed the door.

The room beyond the open door was in darkness and Howland fumbled along the wall for a switch. He found it. Light slashed down dramatically from an unshielded bulb, reflected from the central shining object in the room.

Around that the room was dusty, meagre, thin with the poverty and neglect of years. A bed sagged in a corner, the bedclothes dragged on to the floor. A chair lay overturned. But in the center—a man lay on his face, his body in foppish clothes hunched, those clothes now dreadfully bedabbled with blood.

And from the middle of the man's back jutted the shining silver hilt of a knife—shining and reflecting the brilliance of the light Howland had just switched on.

For perhaps three seconds he stood there, his finger on the switch. Then he heard the door bang from below, hoarse voices, the tramp of feet.

The light went out under his pressing finger. He turned to face the corridor, feeling trapped. The possibility of explanations eluded him. He had to get away—get away, *now!*

Like a madman he rushed for the stairs, began to pad up four at a time, his lean and lanky body jackknifing with the effort, synthirubber boots soundless on the treads.

Below him, like an echo chamber insanely repeating the same maniacal words over and over again, the voices of men floated up. "Open up in there!" "Come on, in there—police!" And, finally, exasperated: "Break the door down."

So he must have pulled the door to after him and the snap catch had caught. That was giving him vital seconds.

But the police had known which room to go to. Had the same throaty voice warned them—as it had done him? Or was the owner of that voice now lying, horribly dead with a dagger in his back, down there in that evil little room?

Four landings above, Howland halted and punched the elevator buttons. He waited in agony as the lift slowly creaked down to his floor. On the landing below him a door opened and light shafted out strongly across the dim, dusty illuminations of the lobby. A peeved voice threw echoes downwards.

"What's going on down there? Can't you keep quiet and let decent folk sleep?"

Other doors opened and other voices raised as the sounds of a door being smashed in floated fruitily up. The lift reached his floor. The old alloy gates squealed back in neglected gooves. Up—or down?

Hesitating, Howland saw a door swing open opposite to him and frantically punched the up-button. As the gates jerked to, a woman in a dressing gown, with muzzy hair and sleepy eyes, peered around the opened door. The metal gates thunked together. Howland snapped the brim of his hat down over his eyes and cowered back into the shadows of the cage.

Creaking, the lift ascended. The woman glanced across and then yelled down the stairs: "Shut up down there! You stinking, lazy, good-for-nothings . . ." And then her voice was lost as the lift gathered speed.

Sweat lay thick and slimy on Howland's forehead. His hands trembled and the calves of his legs shuddered. If Terry Mallow was at the bottom of this, he'd—he'd—He remembered the last time he'd said that, and the consequences. He had had no time to ponder the strangeness of a respectable university doctor of science being dragged into a sordid murder in a grimy apartment house, with police dogging his tracks and everyone's hand turned against him.

He left the elevator at the thirty-seventh floor—indis-

tinguishable from the fourth except that it lay wrapped in silence—and again wondered what to do. The elevator indicator flashed and began to sink. Were the police calling it? Would they take it up after him? He suddenly cursed himself for riding up here. Hell and damnation! If he'd gone down he might have been out in the street by now—might have been. They'd leave a policeman guarding the door, that was for sure.

The thumping of his heart dizzied him. Been a long time since he'd run about like this; he was out of condition. But never before had he run from the police leaving the scene of a murder.

Standing for agonizing moments of indecision on that grimily lit landing, Howland was gripped by the conviction that he could not afford to be questioned by the police, that he was in danger, had been forcibly dragged into this frame up. His only safety lay in shaking all this mystery off and letting himself be seen in some familiar haunt—quickly.

Flier landing-stages had been built at ten story intervals on this old-fashioned building, and at floor thirty-seven he was three below a landing stage.

He ran up the carpeted stairs, the artificial fibre worn thin. Thirty eight—thirty nine—he wavered a little in his dead run, panting for breath, gloved hand grasping the banister. The elevator indicator stopped at the first floor, flickered, then began its laborious climb up.

Halted there, one foot on the lowest tread of the next flight, hand pressed hard against his side where a stitch had begun to drive skewers into his body, he saw a dark bat shape flit past the streaky window, blotting out the stars as it soared up towards the landing stage on the fortieth floor. Immediately he began to run in a frenzy of pumping legs up the stairs, ignoring the pain clawing at his side, his mouth open and rasping for breath.

He burst out onto the fortieth story landing with a first quick glance for the elevator indicator. Twenty-six. Then his eyes flicked back to the landing stage doors. They slid open and a man and a girl walked through—danced, rather, the

man's arm around the girl's waist, her hair disarranged and her eyes alight. Lipstick smudges tattooed the man's lips and cheeks.

Howland, one hand up to his face, brushed past them without a word and ran out onto the stage.

The autoflier's doors were just sliding shut.

He flung himself forward, hands out like talons to grasp and cling at the closing edges. His lanky body convulsed with the spring of his leg muscles, forcing himself through the narrowing gap to tumble onto the floor within.

At once he punched the go button and the acceleration tossed him back onto the cushions.

Clumsy in his big gloves he fumbled out coins and dropped them into the slot meter, set up a flight pattern for the Golden Cockerel, punched it into the board. Then he collapsed back onto the seat and stared out and down.

Below him the city spread out, rivers of golden light intersecting silver-sprinkled areas of building. Other fliers moved in their lanes as his flier rose smoothly and silently to join them. If there was a police flier down there he did not see it. Probably there was. But the dead man had lived on the first floor—the first door to the left up the stairs—and the police had gone in from the ground. He lay back, exhausted, trembling, shaking all over. He knew his face must look ghastly.

From the Golden Cockerel he went straight to the University. Snow crunched hard and squealing beneath his shoes. He looked into the commonroom, borrowed the latest copy of *Nature*, spoke with forced cheerfulness to old Gussman, and turned straight in, tired out in body and mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LATELY PETER HOWLAND had avoided the communal places of the University. He experienced a reluctance to meet Helen Chase and was acute enough to recognize that for cowardice; he couldn't face a scene with her, wrangling over the Maxwell Fund. So it was that he took lunch at the Golden Cockerel, one of the many small, cosy restaurants abounding outside the college walls. Haffner could be safely left—for short periods.

He gave his order over the table telephone and waited for the serving hatch to open with his meal. In that short pause a man, looking casually and a little short-sightedly about the restaurant, came over and sat down. He looked to be middle-aged, short, with a square, friendly face without any remarkable features. His smile was disarming.

"Mind if I sit here, friend?"

"Please do," said Howland. He had enough to occupy his own thoughts not to be disturbed by a stranger.

But the man wanted to talk. As they both ate he covered the weather, the latest solar-system rocket races, various political issues agitating the galaxy and the latest impudences of the rebels out beyond Roger's System. Howland had no interest in any of them.

"Say, friend, pardon me for mentioning it, but you seem mighty cut off from what's going on. University?"

"Yes."

"That explains it. You professors have to have your heads filled with scientific data. No time for the ordinary affairs of the galaxy."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Well, we've been sitting here and so far we haven't mentioned the topic agitating everyone in Lewistead—"

"What's that?"

"You see?" The man laughed good-naturedly. "I'm only kidding, of course. You must have seen the papers or the video-channels—"

"I'm afraid I haven't. Not this morning."

"Well now! You mean you haven't heard of the murder, right here in Lewistead?"

"Murder? At the University?"

"Not exactly at the good old U. But right here in town. Fellow stabbed in the back in a sleazy down-town dump. Still, as you say, you're not interested in murder." The man offered a cigar to Howland, who declined with a forced smile. Lighting up, the man said, "I respect that, as coming from a man of science."

"How do you know I'm a man of science, as you so mellifluously phrase it?" This common talk came with difficulty to Howland; he had hardly slept all night and memory of that naked bulb reflecting in winking brilliance from a silver dagger hilt haunted him.

"Just a hunch. D'you happen to know a Professor Cheslin Randolph?"

"Yes. I do, as it happens."

"So do a lot of us. But I'll be ready to bet you know him better than most. Isn't that right?"

Howland made his mouth laugh lightly. "No one knows Professor Randolph. He's too wrapped up in his own thoughts for any outside intrusion."

"Yeah? Well, that figures, too. Doesn't he have a nephew staying with him at this time?"

Howland tossed his napkin onto the table. He did not like the trend of these questions; they contained too direct a line of thought. "Look, just who are you? You're in Lewistead because of this murder, I suppose. Well, what's Randolph to do with that?"

The man chuckled. "I'm Tim Warner, journalist—on the Daily Galaxy. I was kinda hoping you'd give me a lead on this Mallow guy. You see, apparently he was the last person to see the murdered man alive. Oh, he's got a space-tight

alibi, there's no suggestion he did it. But I'm curious to know why he, with his connections, should have known the murdered man."

Howland was aware that Mallow's court martial was not common property and he knew about it himself only through an outburst of vehemence by Professor Randolph. There would be no real difficulty for any one to find out if the need pressed—say a newspaperman after a story. But Howland however much he disliked and distrusted Mallow could not gratuitously do him that disservice.

"Oh," he said now, casually, rising and straightening his jacket. "He's probably recently made his acquaintance in town. You know how it is."

"Yep, I do. Maybe this Mallow was in luck."

"How so?"

"Why, he might have been the next one to have been dipped. Fingers Kirkup was quite an artist."

Howland found Mallow in the college library, poring over old books piled on the mahogany desk and overflowing onto the carpeted floor, a frown of intense concentration giving his handsome face a look almost of nobility. Howland snook that fancy off very quickly. There was left in Mallow not an ounce of nobility. Every cell of the man worked for one thing and one thing only, the self-interest of Terence Mallow.

"So Fingers is dead. So what of it?"

"Did you do it, Mallow?"

Both men were whispering in fierce undertones, the words lost and drowned in the stuffy opacity of the library. No one else, fortunately, was within three bays of them.

"No, I damn well didn't! I've seen the cops and they're satisfied. If they are, then you ought to be. I'm sick and tired of your harping and criticizing all the time, Howland. We're in a man's game now. There's no place for old women now!"

"Not old, no. But you and Stella Ramsy seem to see eye to eye—"

"You leave her out of it! What's between Stella and me is our own business."

"And Colin Ramsy's, too? What'd he do, d'you think, if he found out?"

"Why, you little . . ." Mallow's face, mean and cruel now glared up from the scattered books, livid from the snow reflections outside and the gentle lights within. "Look here, Howland. You leave me alone and do your job as you're paid for and I'll do the thinking for the lot of us. We're going to pull this job off and you're damn well going to do as you're told."

Watching the man with a detached criticism that surprised himself, Howland reluctantly decided that Mallow could have no knowledge of that telephone call and of the visit to the murdered man's apartment. That hoarse, rasping voice must have belonged to Fingers Kirkup, then. Perhaps. Perhaps Mallow was far more devious than Howland allowed.

"Why was Kirkup killed?"

"I didn't do it. Get that through your thick head. And I know nothing about it, see? You seem to forget that I'm not answerable to you for my actions." Mallow posed a problem to Howland, right enough; always there clung to the ex-space navyman the suggestion that he was acting up to a part, was deliberately trying to create a brand image of the tough, devil-may-care spaceman.

"Maybe not, but Kirkup—"

Howland's quiet words were chopped off. "I can tell you this, Howland. He was going to chicken out. He was scared at what happened to his buddy, Freddy Finks. Well, we're going to be a darn sight more clever than a hundred Freddy Finks."

"So you did have him killed!" The thought appalled Howland, bringing him smack up against the fact that he had involved himself with a proposition that had grown abruptly nasty. But could he go straight to the police?

"No, Howland, I didn't. But this I'll also tell you. You're being watched. If you do anything—silly—you might receive the same treatment Kirkup got. Understand?"

Howland left the library, shaking.

He wasn't absolutely sure if that trembling spasm was anger or fear. He felt anger. And he was afraid—desperately afraid. In his life he had only once before faced the direct possibility of his own violent death—and then he'd found the courage and nerve to crawl from his friend's falling flier across to the other flier where a man and woman, semi-drunken, cowered in fear after the collision. He'd got away with it then. But now—now this was different and he felt bilious revulsion.

He had to live. He had work to do, important work that would open up new paths for research in the galaxy. And, again, the sweet scent of money tantalized him, he who had been a poor man all his life. If he went to the police they'd uncover the whole story. That would spell finis.

No. All he could do now was go along and shut his eyes to the facets of the job he disliked. The galaxy would manage to scrape along without Fingers Kirkup. This might be a weak and puerile line, true; but it was safe—wonderfully safe.

Walking out of the library doorway and down the steps where the snow had been sucked away, he passed Duffy Briggs. Briggs went on bull-headed without a sign of recognition. That was as it should be. The conspirators must not acknowledge one another—yet.

But Howland knew. He was being watched. From this morning on one of Mallow's men would have him under constant surveillance. If he stepped out of line they'd squash him flatter than a bug caught under a wheel.

Sunk in his own dejected thoughts he rounded the library corner fast, collided with a soft body, and looked up in time to see Helen Chase spreadeagle backwards into a bank of freshly swept snow.

She wore a brilliant blue sweater with roll top, black slacks, and high magneclamped boots. She bounced back on her feet long before Howland had time to reach down a helping hand. The hood, the same brilliant electric blue, lay on the snow. Her red hair shone wondrously, fluffed with soft

snow, and pats and dabs of the white clinging stuff powdered her shoulders and back.

"I'm sorry, Helen—didn't see you—"

"That's not strange, Peter. Why've you been avoiding me? Is it the Maxwell Fund?"

This direct attack disconcerted him. He took out his handkerchief and handed it across to her.

"Might be that. I've been busy, just lately . . . ."

"So I've heard."

He smiled at her, a trifle diffidently; but nonetheless, a smile. "Been checking up, is that it?"

"Maybe. Look, Peter. Come and have a coffee. There are a few things we have to talk over."

"I don't really think—"

"Oh, come on!" She took his arm in a grip he knew at once meant business. They walked off together, briskly cutting across lines of students, who turned to stare and smile after them. Seated at a small table in the area reserved for faculty in the college cafeteria, she said, "I suppose you're sore at me, Peter?"

"No, not really. Not any more. I was—fed up, if you like to put it that way, just after I discovered what you meant."

"What I meant?"

"When you were mysterious. You've got the Maxwell Fund. Bully for you. And just what are you going to do with it all? One live theatre is a flea bite in comparison with the amount in the kitty."

"Surely you know?" She put the coffee cup down and stared up at him. Her eyes smiled up frankly and honestly and sincerely. She disturbed him. He had to admit that he'd missed seeing her. "I'm going to bring off the biggest coup the old U's seen in decades!"

"Oh, you mean all those old papers—"

"All these old papers! In your best sneering tone—do you mind! These are holograph manuscripts by Shaw—using both his own name and the pseudonym of Wells. I've a few other ideas cooking, too, and by the time I've finished my paper will rock the academic galaxy. You'll see!"

Almost, almost but not quite, Howland started to say that he would not be on Earth then, that he'd be working on Pochalin Nine. But memory of Kirkup's murder and what Mallow had just told him reached through in time. He shivered.

"Peter! What's the matter?"

The same sort of tone old Willi Haffner had used, just after that telephone call . . . "Matter?" He tried to laugh off that spasm. "Nothing. Might be getting a chill—keep forgetting my pills."

"You look—scared."

"Yes, and well I might be. I'm supposed to be in the lab right now—working. Not sitting talking to—to female professors of literature."

"Well, you'd better make the best use you have of the chance. I'm sailing on the twenty-ninth."

"Oh? Twenty-ninth. Where, may I—"

"You may not!" She reached across the table and took his wrist, pressing with her finger tips. "I'll tell you all about it when I'm back with the manuscripts. Soon thereafter, Peter, my dear, I'll be famous. Then—"

He couldn't say anything. She would be famous—and good luck, too! But for all she knew he'd still be simple Doctor Peter Howland buried in Lewistead without the Maxwell Fund and all its dazzling prospects. He released her hand gently and stood up, smiling.

"I'll see you before I go, promise."

"Of course. Now get off to your stinks and smells in your horrible sterilized laboratory."

Back in his sterile, hygienic but very human laboratory, Howland found Haffner and Mallow watching Professor Randolph who was beside himself with glee. An unconscious or dead hamster lay on a tiny platform on the workbench beneath a shielding plastic dome.

"All very well, professor," Haffner grumbled as Howland walked up. "But, if you will pardon my saying it, the whole sequence is not—ah—very scientific."

"You and Peter have been producing this virus. Now

we see it has grown into what we need. Look! Look at the test animal—not a flicker of consciousness. Yet in twelve hours it will be skipping about its cage not the whit the worse for wear."

"It would be just as much out of the way with a bullet in it," growled Mallow, fretfully. He lit a cigarette without offering them around. "Can you absolutely guarantee the twenty-four hour period?"

Haffner nodded. "We can do that, at least."

"Ah, Peter!" said Randolph, turning and staring up. "You are just in time to see the finals—"

"The finals. How about the introduction?"

"That will be Terence's problem. He'll assign a man to assist you. I don't envisage any difficulty. After all, a spaceliner must be similar in many ways to a starcruiser—right, Terence?"

"I suppose so."

The tensions between these people, pulling them in different and mutually destructive ways, frightened Howland, filled him with misgivings for the future. The success of any expedition of this character must depend on teamwork and trust. At that moment, precisley, with Randolph and Mallow and Haffner exchanging glances, that fraction of time in which clarity hit him, Howland first decided on insurance.

"Right, Peter," Randolph said briskly. "We give the inoculations tonight. Arrange for all you need to be taken where Terence directs. Haffner and I will be working here, so don't forget to see we get our shots, too."

"Right, professor," Howland answered automatically, his mind feverishly rejecting plan after plan. There had to be a way. There *must* be a way to save his own neck.

That night, by devious routes, the members of the expedition reached the rendezvous, a greasy garage on the outskirts of town. Heliflyer parts filled much of the space and a jet engine hung on clamps from the ceiling. Howland didn't see the owner and he asked no questions.

Each member of the expedition stepped up to Howland, who was ministering in front of his opened suitcase like a

relief doctor in an old time cholera campaign. He gave each one the required shot of inoculation serum. They each made a joke of it, in character. Stella hoped it wouldn't leave too much of a scar. Howland reassured her, bending over, fiddling with his phials and bottles and ampoules. Mallow took his shot last.

"Just in case, Howland, old man," he said, with a smirk.

Packing up, feeling the tremble in his hands, Howland wondered if he had done the right thing. If he had read the signs correctly then what he had just done was very clever. If he'd been wrong—why then he'd go the way of Fingers Kirkup.

The preliminary target date—the twentieth—set by Professor Randolph arrived.

Terence Mallow and his crew left.

"Don't be late at the rendezvous, Terence," said Randolph as Mallow left his chambers. "We're all depending on you." If it was meant to be funny, then Howland considered the joke had fallen flat.

After Mallow had gone, Randolph turned to his assistant and said, "Everything's ready, Peter. I'm looking forward to buying the equipment we'll need on Pochalin Nine!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

DUDLEY HARCOURT, Vice Chancellor of Lewistead, accepted Professor Cheslin Randolph's explanation that he needed a rest. Randolph explained that he would be taking his new assistant, Peter Howland, with him. They would, Randolph said with a faint and disconcerting smile, not be away long; just a short restful cruise among the stars.

"I'm glad you've taken my advice, Cheslin. One of the virtues of a stellar civilization is the ability to visit a low-gravity world and live in absolute comfort, with all strain removed from the heart and muscles."

"If you don't prolong your stay. Atrophy sets in with alarming rapidity." Randolph chuckled; he was in excellent spirit. "Term finishes on the twenty-fifth; but we'll be back before the vacation is through. I intend to remain pretty active for a long time to come."

As they spoke Randolph realized, with a wry shock, that he would miss Harcourt and the games of chess that invariably resulted in a general massacre of the Vice Chancellor's forces. Harcourt was all right. Just that sometimes his position dictated actions alien to the man's character.

Like now. Randolph listened carefully as Harcourt spoke. Any feelings about his plans he might have possessed that would undermine his resolve vanished.

"I'm very glad, Cheslin, very glad indeed that you have taken the whole business of the Fund as calmly as you have. I feel the University as a whole owes you an explanation and an apology. But this is strictly between you and me; on a personal level."

"All right, Dudley," said Randolph, wondering what was to come.

"I know you saw Mahew, the Chancellor, and I know you were sent away empty. I suppose Mahew told you the story that he was in the hands of the Trustees and could do nothing? Yes? Well. I'm telling you this, I insist, on a personal level; there may be a chance of a subsidiary fund next year, or the year after. But—orders for the disbursement for this year's Maxwell Fund came straight from Mahew, straight from the government—"

"But they can't interfere in University matters!"

"When the Chancellor is Secretary for Extra-Solar Affairs, when the Trustees are almost all government men, the government can—and does—say what happens to money to be spent by the University."

"But this is monstrous!" Randolph kept himself from

fuming only by thought of the virus, and the whistle, and of his nephew and his crew aboard their spaceship. "What has Mahew against me? Why pick on me?"

"Not you, Cheslin. You were unfortunate that this happened to be your year for the Fund. You see—the space Navy have been developing a brand new weapons system and drive—revolutionize the whole tactic of space battle—and they just don't have facilities for handling the problems involved. We have here some very fine computers—among the best in the galaxy. With the Maxwell Fund the government is already hard at work developing the biggest and best, turning it over full-time to work on this new space Navy weapon—"

Randolph felt the red roaring rage in him and bit down hard to control himself. He had to retain his icy composure. But a little anger—a little—would be justified and expected. Keeping the lid on was tough.

"I'd like to flay alive every man jack in the government and their jackals of Trustees! Taking money that belongs to me—me!—and throwing it away, building machinery that can only kill and destroy! And I intend—intended—to create life! This is a monstrous affront to the liberty of science and a damned waste of good money—"

Harcourt smiled and held up a hand. "I guessed you'd feel almighty peeved, Cheslin. I took a risk in telling you. But I couldn't—I just couldn't let you go off without hearing the truth. It would have soured our own relations. I can do nothing, of course."

"And Professor Chase?"

"She just happened to be lucky. You were right in saying that the new theatre and these papers of hers won't take a tithe of the Maxwell Fund. But an appearance must be maintained that it is being spent on University projects. She doesn't know, either. And I'll ask you not to tell her."

Randolph returned that smile, amazing Harcourt. "I won't tell her. I'm off on a holiday in space. The government can carry on their filthy back stairs intrigues all they like. But if they think I'll vote for them in the next election—ha!"

The little professor stormed back to his department and hurried his staff through their packing. The rest of the expedition was packed off and waiting in a small hotel by the spaceport not too far from Lewistead. Randolph and Howland took their leave of the University. To Howland's sorrow he missed Helen. She had rung him; but he'd been out. Now she had left and he hadn't wished her a good journey. Well. Ancient manuscripts had no importance beside the hijacking of a bullion-carrying spaceship and the triumphant series of experiments leading to the proof that man could create life. *That* was important.

In his domineering way Randolph had brushed aside Howland's questions about the way they would explain their possession of the money. "I am Professor Randolph!" the little man had flashed. "If I return from a spatial voyage—even one on which money has been stolen—no one will dare suggest that I had anything to do with that merely because I can now go ahead with my work. Nonsense! And we'll cover the tracks . . ."

It was so flagrant that Howland knew wryly that the prof would get away with it.

They left on the thirtieth and by the first of the month, with a surprising hint of sunshine clearing away the snow, trooped aboard starliner *Poseidon*, outward bound for Gagarin Three. The trip would be a comfortable three weeks. Many folk took the journey to get away from it all for a short time. A holiday mood pervaded the many levels and staterooms and restaurants of the mammoth ship. Despite his own preoccupations and worries, Howland experienced a strange and welcome lightening of spirits and an eagerness to participate to the full in the life of the ship. After Gagarin Three the ship made two further short trips, a week each, to Amir Bey Nine and Santa Cruz Two. What existed on those two worlds the stellar vacationers didn't know or care.

In the warm, brilliantly lit, brightly colored staterooms of the starliner, or in the mellow, subdued lighting of the bars and intercorridor cafes, everyone shook off the winter

shackles of Earth as they had left her; the snow gave place to soft carpeting, the bleak greasy grey sky to cosy illuminations and the frosty air to softly scented currents of pure ship's air.

Randolph beckoned Howland into his stateroom, a three-roomed apartment with every luxurious convenience the weary stellar traveler might wish. Haffner joined them as Randolph was saying, "On Santa Cruz Two is a culture originally set up by freethinkers from Earth, men and women who took to space so that they could live their own peculiar system to themselves. A quirk of social evolution; but harmless. Amir Bey Nine is our target—Terence told me about the place. The planet is bleak and is given over one hundred percent to the needs of the space Navy. It is an Outworld planet that strikes a chill into the heart of every man. Oh—and there are tinkly little debased amusements for the men to waste money on—*the* money!"

Haffner said, a slurriness to his voice that hadn't been drunk from a bottle, "So the money is actually aboard this ship at this moment! And, we too, are aboard with that money!"

"An odd feeling, certainly." Randolph spoke quietly. "To know that around you are three thousand human beings all looking forward to a holiday in space and with them, all unknown, there lies this great sum of money." He smiled up at Howland. "It makes you want to speak in whispers."

"Three thousand men and women," said Howland. "All settling down in a great steel box to hurtle through the emptiness between the stars, not really in our own space-time continuum at all, really; it puts a funny feeling down your spine."

Randolph seized the point he assumed Howland had been making. "You mention our space-time continuum. That reminds me of the trickiest part of the proceedings. But I think Terence will cope. The space Navy gave him an expensive education in these matters."

The warning buzzer sounded and, as everyone did when a starship broke gravity, the three scientists went up to

the observation lounges. They were just three members of the throng aboard, all craning to wave last farewells to their friends and relatives in the waving area, expecting a pleasant trip, thrilling just a little to the excitement of faring forth into space. The last solid connections with Earth fell away and for a heartbeat *Poseidon* poised. Then, smoothly and without a tremor she lifted.

At once they were in space.

The sun glinted greenish through filters over the masked direct-view ports. Outside those ports scourers were working overtime clearing away micrometeorites before they could damage the surface. The stars speckled the whole view, solid, encrusted, leaving not a single space to show black apart from those scattered and mysterious dust clouds and dark nebulae. Randolph stood with his head thrown back, just looking. Haffner, with a quick glance at Howland, took refuge in a short nip from his bottle.

The silence in the observation lounges was intense.

Then—flick—the sun and stars disappeared. In their place sprang into being the eerie whorls and chiaroscura vibrations in orange and pink, emerald and acquamarine blue, of velvet black and pristine whiteness, all confused, running, never-still, of the *other* space time continuum in which the ship would travel over a distance of twenty light years in three Earthly weeks.

"Whyewl" said Howland, lowering his head. "That always gets me."

"I agree," said a pleasant voice at his shoulder. "Some sight. Guess we're really not cut out for the space travel stuff."

Howland looked around in astonishment. Tim Warner, the journalist from the Daily Galaxy, whom he had last seen in the Golden Cockerel at Lewistead, stood smiling at him.

"Small galaxy, friend."

"Why—yes."

"You seem surprised to see me. I'm a journalist. Have to get around between the stars. But you—I should be surprised to see you here. Doctor Howland, isn't it?"

"That's right. I'm just—on holiday."

"Traveling with the boss, too. Very nice. Well, come and have a drink."

"That," said Willi Haffner, "is a sensible suggestion."

Howland made the introductions on the way to the bar. Randolph, with his ability to lose himself when he wanted to, vanished after shaking hands. He ran some risk, at times, of being trampled underfoot.

"D'you do a column for the Daily Galaxy, then, Mr. Warner?" asked Haffner. He got on with people far more easily than did Howland.

"Nope. I dig up the dirt and some underpaid subby does the literary masterminding. I don't have the time."

"What takes you out aboard *Poseidon*?" asked Howland.

"Well, now. There's a story there—but I'm not telling."

Something about Warner began to grate on Howland's nerves. The man seemed decent enough, a trifle brash; but it took all sorts to make a galaxy. The video call set lit up and from all the speakers scattered throughout the ship, an announcer said: "The captain extends his compliments to all passengers and wishes you a pleasant journey." Warner yawned, excused himself, explained he was tired and trundled off.

"Seems a decent bloke," commented Haffner and turned to the serious business of the trip. Howland kept him down to a reasonable level of intake; but now he, too, felt tired. Dinner would soon be served and he felt like a freshener beforehand. He went up to his cabin—not, he had noticed with a smile, a palatial suite like the one occupied by Randolph, and pushed open the door.

The cabin was quiet and in darkness and he reached for the light switch. An odd sensation of a breathing presence nearby touched him in the instant before his fingertips brushed the switch. Then a heavy object crashed down on his head. Sparks that hadn't come from the ship's lighting circuits blazed in his eyes. He let out a surprised yell. He hadn't been knocked out; the blow had glanced and that first involuntary movement had saved him from the full

shock. The second blow cracked agonizingly across his upraised arm.

The door slapped back and a black bulk rushed past.

He made a futile attempt to grasp the attacker; but the man had gone, feet ringing down the corridor. Howland looked out and could see nothing under the strip lights; and soon the footfalls were lost. The reaction hit him and he knew he wouldn't be running after the man. He staggered across to the washbasin, flicking on the pull light above it and doused his head. He felt sick. What in galaxy was going on?

He thought of Mallow and Duffy Briggs and Barny Cain. But they were away with the others and not aboard here. Someone had struck him. Probably a petty thief. But he still fled from the idea of reporting the incident. It could easily be something deeper and more menacing. . . . He'd see Randolph.

Willi Haffner could have a look at his head and deal with the bruise. And Willi Haffner would also take the opportunity to make some funny crack about Howland's brain.

Aboard *Poseidon* the tempo quickened as dinner was served, an observable heightening of excitement bringing with it the feeling of warmer air and brighter lights and gayer conversation. A ritual meal, this first dinner, with all the trimmings, to be followed by the first of the dances and shows and parties that would occupy the relaxing passengers until they made planetfall. There they would disembark whilst the ship made the lonely—and profitable—runs to Santa Cruz Two and Amir Bey Nine.

Peter Howland walked into that mood of gaiety and lightheartedness nursing a wounded head and a foul temper. Haffner had patched him up and made the expected quip about Howland's brain.

He couldn't trust Willi Haffner, could he? The old soak, willing to sell his immortal soul for the price of a drink—no, unthinkable. But Howland couldn't last much longer with this intolerable load of guilt festering in him. He'd pushed the moral implications of what he was intending to do out

of mind for day after day of that bleak winter. Thou shalt not steal. Black and white. Try as he would to tell himself that the money rightly belonged to the people of the galaxy, that it should be spent on better things than war and killing, with all this logic hammering at his tired brain he kept coming back, again and again, to the central fact. They were going to steal money. And there was a murder in it; that alone should spell out for him the mores of the project.

And now there was this, this attack on himself.

As before he pushed the problem aside. And he admitted that the fear Mallow had engendered in him would effectively shut his mouth. He'd rather steal and remain alive than be honest and dead. So much for his notions of honor.

After dinner—a meal he did not enjoy and food he could not describe—he went back to the bar. Warner was there, full of the joys of life. Howland evaded him, evaded the Ramsys, too, and sought another of the many bars aboard.

All about him beautiful women in priceless jewelry and furs and silken-sheen gowns perfumed the air. Elegant men in full evening dress circulated, smoking cigars the price of a working man's daily wage. Gaiety and laughter, a loosening of tight-reined inhibitions, an abandoning from the cares and planet-bound worries to the full free sense of liberty found only between the stars—all these circumscribed Howland's horizons as he prowled moodily.

Some zephyr of shock brushed him as he saw Stella and Colin Ramsy laughing and animated at a small table beneath the subdued glitter of artificial chandeliers. He'd avoided them just now, walked away; had these two, also, been given instructions to spy on him?

Colin Ramsy, glass in hand, spotted him and walked past to the bar. Howland turned his back on him.

"Has the prof given the word yet? I'd like to know as soon as possible?"

The words did not disturb the air. Half turning, Howland said, "Not yet. I expect it'll be at least a week out."

"Oh, well, I can last. This is life." Ramsy raised his

glass appreciatively. "The prof didn't stint on advance pay, I'll say that for him."

Stella called Ramsy then, and the man went across at once, beaming. Feeling deflated and ready to join the suicides' club, Howland packed it in for the night. He checked his cabin before going in. Nothing. Well, what did he expect—more mayhem?

His last thought before sliding into sleep was that if any more mayhem did happen to him, he'd meet violence with violence for a change, see how that system worked.

Two days later Randolph called a conference in his suite. The conspirators gathered, guardedly, cautiously, making their way along as though chance alone brought them here. "There can be no real risk at this late stage," Randolph said. "But I want no one aboard remembering coincidences, of certain people being seen too much together, for no good reason, after *Poseidon* makes planetfall and they unbatten the hatches onto an empty strong-room."

"There are so many people aboard," Stella said. "I'm sure no one will even see more than a tenth of the passengers. I'm continually meeting new people around."

"That may be true, my dear," Randolph beamed across at her. "But I think we're all agreed we take no needless risks. Right, then. This ship night we put phase-one into operation."

Ramsy perked up. "That's me, then, prof."

"Yes, Ramsy. We'll release the required quantities from our cabins; but you'll have to show Peter and Willi the ducting. I must impress on you the absolute necessity of covering every portion of the ship. We must not miss a single space."

"That's all right. The ducting reaches everywhere. Willi would understand that; it's like the oxygen-bearing blood stream of the human body—and brain."

"I think the parallel is reasonably exact," said Haffner in his heavy way. "The air must go everywhere, I agree. And our little viruses will go with it."

So that ship night—a period of eight or nine hours when

lighting was subdued—the three gathered in Haffner's cabin. They took the innocuous looking travel bags and then, with thumping hearts, followed Ramsy as he led them to the first objective.

Here extended a small corridor leading athwartships some way off the beaten track. Ramsy reached into his travel bag, brought out a nozzle, securely capped. He put the nozzle against a grilled opening low down in the corridor wall, removed the cap, and began to pump the bag like a bellows. The others stood casually about twenty feet apart from him, watching, ready to give the alarm.

Into that ducting, silent, unseen, deadly, billions of viruses wafted, to circulate along piping, through pumping machinery, slipping through filters with the ease of a microorganism. They were not just ordinary, normally deadly viruses; no—they had been specially educated for their task, trained like killer dogs.

In a few moments the job was done. Ramsy replaced the nozzle in the bag after capping it, walked nonchalantly along toward Howland. As he reached him a crewman in impeccable white uniform passed with a polite, "Good night, sir."

"Good night," said Ramsy. His smile was peculiar; the smile of a man conscious of wielding power.

"That takes care of number-one engine room," said Ramsy. "I don't believe this detail to be necessary; but we can't take the chance that they've installed separate air-circulation systems for each engine compartment."

The three men prowled the ship, covering every single separate air system, making sure that not a cubic inch of *Poseidon's* capacious interior should be free from the viruses. Ramsy's knowledge was vital; without him the two scientists, despite their own specialized knowledge, would have been helpless.

Presently it was done. Howland went off to his cabin tired and slept late the following ship morning.

Then, after a wash, shave, and shower he dealt firmly with a light breakfast and sauntered down to the swimming pool.

He felt in need of the sensation of clean sparkling water running freely over his body.

Dressed in a pair of green bathing trunks, he stood on the rim of the pool idly looking at the animated scene where bathers bobbed about, shouting and laughing, throwing balls and rings, hearing the splash of water, blue in the sparkling pool. Many girls in scraps of costume dived in, swam, or just posed gracefully on the lido for effect. He drew in a deep breath, lifted his arms and leaned forward.

A voice, shocked, incredulous, joyous . . .

"Peter! Good Lord—what are you doing here?"

He managed, going forward off-balance, to look sideways. Dressed in a miniscule diamond-blue costume that emphasized to the full her magnificent figure, Professor Helen Chase stood staring at him, wide-eyed, flushed, incredibly lovely.

Then Howland fell in.

CHAPTER NINE

"No PERMANENT damage is done to the brain, Peter!" Professor Randolph was annoyed. He turkey-strutted up and down his suite, watched by a nervous Willi Haffner and an exasperated Colin Ramsy. Stella had, Ramsy mumbled, not been around. Sammy Larssen, the electronics wizard, smoked and said nothing. As for Peter Howland, he didn't know what to say or do about Helen Chase.

"I know that," he said at last. "I'd never have agreed to the scheme if I'd imagined permanent damage could ensue. But Helen knows we're aboard! When the money is missing, and you buy equipment—"

"Oh, come now, Peter! A respectable professor of science taking part in a high-space robbery! Really!"

"If Willi's viruses do what he claims for 'em," put in Ramsy, "She won't do a thing. There'll be no proof."

"Precisely." said Randolph. "No proof."

"I suppose she's going to this planet of hers to pick up those famous manuscripts." Howland tried to think straight. "I suppose we might have guessed, especially when she said she was leaving on the twenty-ninth. That would give her nice time to catch *Poseidon.* And she'll be making for Santa Cruz Two—that odd world with its own social system. They must have the manuscripts there—"

"I don't care a fig for musty manuscripts." Randolph was not put out over this sudden unforseen happening. "All I want to do is go to Pochalin Nine and prove to a doubting galaxy that I can create life. And that is what I am going to do—financed by the cash aboard this ship."

"I don't quarrel with that," said Howland slowly.

"You don't quarrel with it! By all the patron saints of science—isn't that what we're doing all this for?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. But I don't want Helen hurt."

"You and Willi developed the virus from my original work. It won't harm anyone. Now, let's talk about something more to the point—"

The door chimes rang and Stella identified herself. She was all smiles and charm and curves.

"The captain was a pushover," she reported gleefully.

"How much did you yield?" asked her husband nastily.

"Now, Colin! Really, a girl can't do a little work helping along the cause without her old man getting jealous."

"Well, Mrs. Ramsy?" asked Randolph coldly.

"The captain's become quite a buddy. Oh—a little mild flirtation, nothing serious." She shook one elegant shoulder and her ship-board fur slipped around her shoulders. It was the fashion. Randolph hadn't spared the expense in this particular fifth column. "The draw is to be made by little old me!" Stella radiated a genuine excitement about that, too, and that tiny piece of humanity in her redeemed much of

her womanhood in Howland's eyes. "It's going to be a big party and I'm to make the draw and announce the winners."

"Very good," Randolph said drily. "Of the three thousand people aboard those unable to be in the grand salon in person will be in smaller lounges all watching the closed circuit TV. This gambling fever grips every one—just another sign of our moral decay." His smile was thin and reflective. "Well, that ties up all the loose ends, then. We'll have to signal Terence immediately—"

"Don't worry, prof. He'll come with all jets blazing," Ramsy said with easy confidence. But his eyes hadn't left his wife.

"Then we take the cash—"

The call chimed. Everyone looked around and then Randolph said, "Yes? Who is it?"

"Just me, prof. Tim Warner. Is Willi there? Thought we could have a little noggin before lunch."

Randolph flashed a ferocious glance at Haffner.

"He's here. Half a minute . . ." Randolph turned on Ramsy and Stella. "Into the other room—fast."

When Randolph released the catch Howland was sitting leafing through a book and Haffner stood before the door, all smiles.

"Good idea, Tim!" enthused Haffner. "I'm right with you. You coming, professor, Peter?"

"Excuse me, please," said Randolph. "I've work to do."

"Count me out, please, Willi, Tim." Howland threw down the book. "Headache coming on."

"Can't blame that on the old ship's air," said Warner, smiling, casual. "Come on, Willi. I've a thirst."

Only when they had gone and Stella re-entered the suite did Howland see her lightweight ship-board fur, lying across the back of a chair.

After the recriminations, Randolph said, "Well, all this proves is that we're no born conspirators. No harm done. Warner is only a journalist."

"I wonder," said Howland, fresh fuel added to just one of his many problems. "I wonder."

"Now what the deuce do you mean by that cryptic utterance?" demanded Randolph. "I know you were hit over the head and we decided not to notify the captain. It was probably a petty thief working the starliners; we must avoid publicity now. I'm not concerned that Warner saw the three of us—and the fur could have belonged to any woman."

"That's true," said Ramsy. "You tend to lose sight of the fur when Stella wears it."

"Compliments, yet!" Stella flashed her eyes at her husband. "And I wonder what sort of morals that man Warner thinks the professor has? I don't like him."

Howland, through his own problems, felt a stab of pity for Colin Ramsy. The chap ought to give Stella a whale of a hiding once on a while; that sort derived benefit from the treatment, like the proverbial fig-tree. Not Helen, though. Helen's fiber was too fine for that psychical as well as physical onslaught.

"As soon as the draw party is at the nodal point," Randolph said in his damn-you voice, "Mrs. Ramsy, you will have to take charge down here, seeing to things like stopping people from falling off chairs too hard or burning their gowns with cigarettes. You'll only be able to handle the obvious cases; the others can't be too bad. It's a tough assignment. Can you do it?"

"On my head, prof. On my little old head."

The impromptu conference broke up for lunch, with Howland still worried and unconvinced about Helen. He had swum straight to the other side of the pool, ducked out and around and avoided her after that catastrophic meeting. He guessed what she'd do now. In that pretty printed booklet the starline company handed to each passenger every passenger's name was listed along with cabin numbers. Who read through better than three thousand names, apart from husband-hunting matrons? But Helen would go through it carefully now finding Randolph there, and Haffner, and wondering. Then she'd be along to Howland's cabin.

Women always were nosey.

He ate lunch moodily, aware of uneasiness and tension closing in on him, as though black disaster was about to break. Avoiding his cabin he lost himself in a gay throng watching a tri-di film; what the film was about he didn't bother to seek, he didn't bother to look past the image filling his mind's eye with the face and figure of Helen Chase. That bathing costume had been really something. Staid professors of literature, it seemed, really let their back hair down on holiday.

At dinner he sought the most secluded table he could find and toyed with a fine meal, to his annoyance seeing Tim Warner sitting at a table across the aisle. The journalist was in profile and Howland hunched his chair around, presenting his back. He was in no mood for brash conversation.

A party of middle-aged women sat at an adjoining table. Each one towed in convoy a young, vapid, nubile girl dressed uncomfortably in the ludicrous height of current fashion. A fleeting second of thankfulness possessed Howland that he was not a marriage target.

"And it's so exciting!" One of the bosomy females brayed to her companions. "I'm sure I shan't win a thing, I'm so unlucky at gambling."

"I can't see why," said her friend, "gambling like this doesn't need intelligence."

"Everyone's gone in," butted in the third, patting her daughter's hand. "But I'm surprised the captain chose this—this Mrs. Ramsy to make the actual draw. I mean—who is she?"

On firm ground the three matrons discussed the shortcomings of Stella—who flamed like a billion-volt searchlight compared to the one candle-power of the three daughters. Howland looked away and noticed that Warner had left his table and was walking quickly with a ship's officer towards the exit. A vague, indefinable alarm stirred Howland. He tossed his napkin down and rose.

Passing the table full of matrons and young hopefuls,

he heard one say, "We'd best go along and find a good seat. Only another half hour."

"Yes—isn't it thrilling! Who's going to win all that lovely money?"

Howland didn't care.

He was walking quickly and carefully through the after dinner crowds following Warner's chunky figure at a safe distance when Helen Chase found him. Helplessly, he watched Warner and the officer, somehow remote from everyone else about them, walk away out of sight.

"Peter! You miserable scoundrel! I believe you've been deliberately avoiding me."

"Of course not, Helen. Just that—" But he couldn't explain. Now, for the first time he had a tangible excuse to offer, and he couldn't use it. "I didn't realize you were sailing aboard *Poseidon*."

"Obviously. I don't flatter myself you've been following me. So—what are you doing here? And Professor Randolph and that Haffner man?"

"So you have looked down the passenger list."

"Women are nosey, Peter." She took his arm. "Come and have a drink. We've just time before the draw. I want to know all about it."

"All about what?"

"Really, Peter! What the extraterrestrial micro-biology department of Lewistead is doing out here in space."

"A suitable place, don't you think?"

She looked fabulous. She wore a sheath dress of deep flamed-copper green, backless, almost frontless, with a long softly swishing skirt. Her hair glittered with artfully concealed brilliants. He looked at her and knew he wanted her. But not now. Not when they were going to strike tonight. Later, perhaps, when he was as famous as she was going to be.

"Suitable, yes. But unexpected."

"I suppose you're going to Santa Cruz Two." They had reached a bar; but Howland hesitated at the glass door. "I don't need a drink right now and I don't think you do.

Look, Helen—I'd love to tell you why I'm here is something deeply romantic and secret and adventurous. But I'm just taking a holiday. We all are between terms. We're not searching for ancient manuscripts in line of academic duty—"

"If you don't want a drink, what do you want?"

He looked at her. He looked into her eyes. She returned his stare and then, with a sudden gesture of her right hand on his arm, looked away. Her face colored.

"I—I don't know, Helen. I'm not sure. . . ."

More than anything else he wanted to tell her what was going on, empty himself of his worries and fears, bring in the strong sure comfort of her spirit to help him. Instead, he said, "Perhaps you'd care to join Professor Randolph? We're going into the grand salon."

Brightly—too brightly—she said, "I'd love that."

They began to walk towards Randolph's suite.

Howland knew that once in the grand salon when the draw was taking place he could keep Helen under observation, make sure she was not hurt. Their feet were soundless on the carpet. They reached Randolph's door. As he raised his hand to activate the chimes, the door swung open.

Professor Cheslin Randolph had ordered dinner to be served in his private suite. He tapped his lips with a serviette. The wine was good. Life was good. In just five more minutes he would walk down to the Grand Salon and watch the draw. Then—why then Plan Randolph would swing into Phase Two. Now that success was so closely within his grasp he felt keyed up, slightly anxious and annoyed that he should experience so foolish a sensation.

The bell chimed and he let Willi Haffner in. Haffner said, "That fellow Warner and a ship's officer are on the way here. I don't know what they want—"

A frown of annoyance crossed Randolph's face. "This Warner is becoming a nuisance." He released the catch. Warner and the officer entered. "What can I do for you, Mr. Warner?"

"Well, now, professor. Perhaps you can help me quite a

bit. I've been making a few enquiries into the death of a man called Fingers Kirkup, back at Lewistead—"

"Really? How can I possibly be of the slightest use in that type of inquiry? Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid is more in my line of country."

"I wouldn't know about that, prof. You have a nephew called Terence Mallow?"

"Yes."

"I expected he would be aboard *Poseidon*—"

"But he is not. Really, Warner, perhaps you would be good enough to give me some reason why you are asking what, after all, are personal and, I may add, impertinent questions."

Warner smiled. The ship's officer, a young, fresh-faced, rugby-shouldered, six-foot of toughness in his white uniform remained impassively by the door. Randolph, with an odd twinge noted that he was wearing a sidearm in its holster clipped to his belt.

"I'll tell you, prof. I anticipate that Howland will be along in a moment. Then we'll have the whole gang—or the brains of the organization. There's a woman in it and she'll be picked up in due time."

"What do you mean?" flared Randolph. "What sort of journalism is this? Please leave my suite at once. I shall have a word to say to the captain about this."

Warner glanced meaningly at the officer. "I am not a journalist. Here." He reached in an inside pocket and drew out a leather flapped wallet. He flipped it open. Quite plainly Randolph saw the bronze medallion with the globe of Earth, the palm leaves, the inscription: *"Terran Space Navy Intelligence."*

Randolph did not say anything.

"We're an old-fashioned kind of organization. But we get results. Fingers Kirkup was telling what might have been an interesting story; he wouldn't tell all. Before we heard the rest he was murdered. But we know enough for me to ask Lieutenant Atherstone here to place you all under arrest. I've been waiting to see what happens. I still don't know all the story; but I know enough to act now to stop whatever

mischief it is you have planned. My hunch—ah, ah!" he broke off abruptly as Haffner dived for the door.

Atherstone's gun leaped into his hand. Willi Haffner froze.

Randolph retained his composure well. He stared up at Warner, bulging his frog's-eyes. "I think you must have taken leave of your senses, Warner. I'm a professor of extra-terrestrial micro-biology at Lewistead—I know nothing of this man, Ketchup—"

"Kirkup," said Warner, gently.

"I shall have this matter looked into and I promise you Warner, you will emerge a very chastened man!"

"Just so long as I stop you—"

Randolph glanced at his watch. Stella would be going into the Grand Salon now. All over the ship speakers were hissing, ready to broadcast her voice as she made the big draw. "I intend to humor you, Warner. I have not the faintest idea what you think you are doing. I am on holiday here. I know nothing of the murder of this man. My nephew has gone on holiday, too. I believe you questioned him at the time of the murder."

"That's right. He was clean."

"Very well. You have a man with a gun and I do not argue with that ridiculous show of force. I cannot conceive what lies in that inflamed brain of yours and I doubt that even Doctor Haffner with his profound knowledge of the human brain could tell. But this I do know—you'll suffer for this indignity, this outrage!"

Randolph paused. Then he said evenly, "I'm an honest man. What exactly do you want with me?"

"You may be honest now, professor. But that's only because I'm stopping you putting through your schemes. From what Kirkup said you intend putting through some sort of hold-up on this ship. You know she's carrying money to pay the Navy—well, I'm here to see the Navy receive their pay. And from your actions I've judged you plan the break tonight." Atherstone opened the door. "And I," said Warner, "intend to stop that, but good."

The four men stepped into the corridor. Facing them,

Howland and Helen Chase stared at the gun in Atherstone's hand.

"Ah!" said Warner. "The love birds. Fall in, you two. We're all going to see the captain. And then I'll lock you up—tight!"

CHAPTER TEN

Poseidon WAS A large ship. The little procession wended along corridors and down escalataors, making for that mysterious region aboard ship where passengers were not allowed and where ship's officers strode about their work, humanly stripped of that dedicated look they assumed in passenger compartments, and which so powerfully affected the more susceptible of the female tourists.

Atherstone had the decency to holster his sidearm; but he remained at the tail and Howland for one knew the officer would draw and shoot if Warner gave the word.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Ten minutes to go and then everyone would have gathered in the Grand Salon and smaller lounges, ready for the big attraction of the cruise, the great gamble, the big draw. But—*Poseidon* was a large ship. The minutes ticked away as they walked towards the control flats.

Randolph strutted along, his little legs twinkling, his head high, his face a black and wrinkled mask of wrath. As for Peter Howland, he felt within himself a churning knot of fear, a chaos of indecision—he even felt they *should* be safely locked away in cells and thus settle once and for all the problems that wracked him.

After that first abortive break Haffner had remained

subdued, shrunken, drawn in on himself. He walked with head down, chin pressed against his chest.

The corridor widened into a small annex. Directly ahead a white-painted door, closed, was marked: PRIVATE. CREW ONLY. They walked quietly up to it. In the annex a number of passengers sat or lounged about, obviously waiting for the draw results to come in over the speakers rather than crush in among the throngs in the Grand Salon. No one looked at them. But Howland looked at the seated passengers, wondering, trying to make up his mind to make a break for it, here and now. He rejected the idea at once.

Warner opened the door and stood aside to allow them to precede him. Howland said, "Did you enter my cabin, Warner, and hit me on the head?"

Warner smiled, his lips barely moving. "Sure."

"Well, next time I'll be ready, and I may hit back."

"I wouldn't try that, if I were you. Now get on in."

The character of the corridor subtly changed beyond that door. The lighting was dimmer, the carpet less lush, the walls painted with only thought for protection and not decoration. Through an arched opening a wide main corridor stretched up to the control room. The party pushed along this, aware of Atherstone's gun, now held openly.

They had reached the angle beneath the arched opening when the door behind them opened again. Howland turned to look, aware of Atherstone swinging around. Through that door marked, PRIVATE—CREW ONLY the group of passengers he had seen seated in the annex marched in a body. But as the corridor had changed, so, too, the bearing and manner of these men had changed. Their faces were set and grim, their actions swift and sure, and they kept their hands in their pockets. There were about a dozen of them.

Atherstone, the gun still in his hand, stepped forward.

"What are you doing here? Passengers aren't allowed here—"

He didn't say any more. He couldn't. The leading passenger had taken a gun from his pocket and shot Atherstone

in the chest. The officer fell, blood pouring across the carpet. The gun made no sound.

Tim Warner let out a yell and, jerking Randolph with him, ducked back behind the angle of wall. Howland, bemused, wondering what was happening, scuttled back, bumping Haffner. He heard three strange cracks in the air above his head, like a giant ring-master's whip. He couldn't comprehend what they were.

"So your pals have come to rescue you, have they!" said Warner, hot-eyed, angry. "Well, they won't get far!"

He shouted up the corridor, waving his arms, then began to run towards the control room, leaving Randolph and Haffner and Howland, who put his hand on Helen's arm.

"What the blazes—" said Randolph.

Haffner laughed. His face had regained much of its color. "So someone else *is* after the bullion! Interesting."

"We'd better find somewhere to hide—" Howland spoke quickly, feeling his hands clammy with fear, his mouth dry. To one side a door stood open. The four bundled through.

The passengers—gangsters, robbers, hi-jackers—Howland couldn't know how they regarded themselves—went running up the corridor. Presently the sound of gun fire broke out, harsh and ugly, and the frenetic stammer of automatic weapons. The air began to stink with burned explosives. Howland put his head around the door.

A man was crawling back down the corridor, his face sheening with blood, his right leg dragging, twisted and distorted after him. Beyond him the corridor was filled with darting figures, men running and firing.

As Howland watched about twenty men and women, passengers, sprinted in through the open crew door, slammed it shut. They worked as though to a rehearsed drill. Four men remained by the door, cradling automatic weapons. The others ran past Howland's cracked-open door. A girl with dark hair and a round, compassionate face, dropped to her knees by the wounded man, unstrapped her handbag and began to administer first aid.

"Whoever they are," Howland said, half turning, "they're organized."

Randolph, peering out lower down, said, "And there are a lot of them. This may be the very chance we've been needing. A bloody battle aboard a starliner, with a gang trying to takeover and steal the bullion—but how clumsy!"

"This was Terence Mallow's way," Howland reminded him.

The sound of gunfire receded. Presently two girls and a man kicked the door open and jerked their guns at the three scientists. This time Helen took Howland's arm.

"Out! Come on—and step lively."

They were goaded up the corridor, thrust into the shining expanse of the control room, told to stand still.

Atherstone's body had been carried away. As they stood, bemused, frightened, lost, they saw men and women in civilian clothes tending other wounded, passenger and crew alike. Everything seemed to be under control. Crewmen stood at their positions, under guard, and the ship continued to function. In the air, quite clearly to Howland, sang a feeling of exultation, of triumph, of a heady sensation of victory.

"These people don't appear gangsters to me," he said.

Randolph nodded. "My feeling precisely."

"D'you notice the armbands?" asked Haffner.

"Yes." Randolph had snapped back into his usual efficient, arrogant, cocksure self. "A strange fad running throughout human history, the desire to adorn one's person with insignia, as though to apologize for irrational actions. What is it? It looks mostly like a string of sausages being chopped up by a butcher's cleaver."

Haffner sniggered.

One of the girl guards—she was young, shapeless in plastic-zippered jerkin and black pants, her face tight with emotion and excitement—spoke contemptuously to Haffner. "The women of the Freedom Front have learned to fight alongside their men. Our embroidery suffers."

Howland felt Helen's hand constrict on his bicep. He

glanced down at her. Her face reflected the terror that had possessed them all; but also there was confusion, a bewilderment that had held her speechless since Warner had picked them up outside Randolph's suite.

Now, slowly, she said, "Freedom Front. Terry told me about them. They're the rebels—and that armband picture is supposed to represent a chain being cut by an axe."

The taller of the two male guards turned a bristly chin towards Helen. His face, masculine, tough and with crinkled lines seaming the brown skin, showed no sign of interest in her sex. He said, "The chains of bondage being severed by the double-headed axe of freedom. And—we don't like being called rebels."

"But surely," pointed out Randolph as though involved in an academic discussion. "That is what you are?"

"The government of humans in the galaxy is the true seat of rebellion. They have usurped the power rightfully belonging to the people of the galaxy. They distort and twist, frame unjust laws, maintain a monstrous growth of armed force—they pervert the very ideas of justice and humanity!"

"You can say that again," said Randolph.

Howland knew he was thinking of the Maxwell Fund; but the allusion to the government escaped him.

"Johnny Rebs, eh?" said Haffner. "Well, friend, I've no love for the government, either. They did me out of my job, chucked me on the scrap heap—set me on the booze. You won't get any trouble from me."

The girl guard laughed, a little too shrilly.

Thinking of Helen, Howland said, "What is going to happen to us?"

"Happen to you? How d'you mean? The Freedom Front has a quarrel only with the government and its agents; we feel contempt for your sort, who continue, year after year, to elect the same unscrupulous rulers. But we're not going to kill you, if that's what you fear."

Against his arm Howland felt Helen breathing, quickly, unsteadily, a softness pressing there. He knew then that not only did he want her; if anyone else tried to harm her he'd

kill, mercilessly, for her. The thought brought nothing strange to him, no incongruousness in the mind of a doctor of science.

Three men walked quickly down the shining control room floor, their feet soundless, their shadows absorbed by the angled lighting. One held a weapon pointing at the back of another, and the third walked as though he had just conquered the galaxy. This one spoke.

"This man Warner," he gestured to Warner who stood quietly, face livid, obviously fully aware of the third man's gun pointing at his back, "tells me that he was about to put you four in cells. Why?"

Randolph answered. "We don't know. We assumed he had either made a mistake or was mad. It seems he made a mistake. You were the people he was looking for."

Looking at Warner, Howland felt a twinge of pity for the man. Despite his veneer of superficial friendliness and the underlying brutality, the man was human.

"That may be. He's a filthy naval spy. But we don't kill unnecessarily. As for you, you'll have to wait here until our ship arrives."

"But," said Haffner. "What about the passengers? Surely they'll wonder what's going on—"

The man laughed. He had good teeth and a mobile mouth set beneath a strong nose and narrow, burning eyes. He wore a grey lounging suit, and a sidearm was belted to his waist. "They know nothing. Why should they? The brainless sheep are clustered around speakers and in the Grand Salon, breathlessly awaiting the results of a petty gamble. Here—here is where the great gamble takes place."

Randolph smiled. "You can say that again."

Again the saliva dried in Howland's mouth. He said, "You don't mean to tell me, Mister—?"

"You may call me Marko. It is not my real name. But by it I am known."

"You can't tell me that none of your people have invested in the draw?"

"Of course not. We did so in order to maintain our appearance as harmless tourists."

Stella must be approaching the high point now. The speakers scattered throughout the ship were not scattered here. Here was the sanctum, the holy of holies, the bridge of the ship. Howland swallowed dryly. "Mr. Marko, we have no quarrel with you—would you let us hear the big draw?"

Marko showed his contempt for such puny ambitions.

"I want to know what the captain is doing and if the sheep baaing down there are keeping their place. Alaric—cut in the Grand Salon speaker."

The shorter of the two guards jumped to obey. The speaker set in the wall out of the main control fascia crackled into life.

"I'd like to be there," Haffner said. "See the winner's reactions."

From the speaker all the sounds Howland had been missing boomed out loudly. The band was playing: "Around any star in the galaxy she's the only one for me," and people could be heard singing.

"And now it is my pleasure to introduce the young lady who will pick the lucky winner—" That was the pursuer, riding fatly in as the band diminuendoed. The captain would be standing up there, beaming fatuously, snared by Stella, unaware that he no longer commanded his ship. "Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Stella Ramsy!"

A burst of applause, quickly smothered. Around them now in the control room heads were turned, and Howland saw more than one furtive glance at a yellow paper slip he quickly thrust back into his pocket.

"Seems you both had the same idea," Randolph said mischievously. "Warner tried to arrest us and you, Mr. Marko, struck—both just before the big draw. Interesting."

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen." Stella sounded perfectly cool and composed. "It is a great privilege for me to be here tonight. I'm sure we're all thrilled and excited—a wonderful voyage between the stars with a wonderful

captain—and now the chance to win a very great deal of money into the bargain. . . ."

Laughter. Clapping.

"Here is the box—now I'll spin it." The purser was grabbing his share of the limelight. The sound of clicking like an urchin running a stick along iron railings clattered over the speaker, loud in the silence of the control room. "Now, Mrs. Ramsy—it's all yours!"

Drums beat a long roll, silence washed down from the speaker. Howland could hear Haffner's breathing, rasping. And into that raspingly underlined silence drifted the sound of electric cutters, biting through solid steel. Randolph smiled. They were doing his work for him!

Gambling ate into the souls of men and women, it fastened on them with an unbreakable grip, nowhere more powerfully than on the long hauls between the stars. Everyone aboard *Poseidon* now would be sitting still, waiting for Stella to draw out the lucky number. Everyone would be static. Everyone would be, Howland thought comfortably, perfectly placed for what was to follow.

The tension built to a climax now. Marko, even, could not hold himself aloof from what so powerfully affected fellow human beings despite the contempt he felt for them. A sudden, chopped burst of clapping spurted from the speaker. Then Stella's clear voice, "To announce the lucky winner I will blow this little silver whistle . . ."

Into those two atmospheres—one of lighthearted gaiety, the other of grim battle against odds—a soft, plucking, sensuous sound whispered. It couldn't be heard. Howland felt a pain like a pin prick in his eardrums. Stella was blowing the whistle—that very special whistle manufactured by Haffner and himself.

Marko stood with that contemptuous scowl on his face, his broad right hand resting on his gun butt. Warner stood to one side, worried, anxious, in terror for his life. The man pointing the gun at him remained with the gun lifted, pointing, rock steady. Helen, her hand gently disengaged from Howland's arm and now held by him, stood, a little

uncertainly, staring at Howland. The two male guards and the girl all stood watching their leader.

Randolph turned briskly to face his companions.

"Well, well!" he said brightly. "Just in time. Now we'd better see these poor rebels aren't injuring themselves with their safe breaking equipment."

"Ramsy and Larssen should be here soon," said Howland.

"All right. Just a moment—" Randolph looked at his wristwatch. The others looked at theirs. "I make it exactly twenty one four and a half," he said. "Check."

"Check," said Haffner and Howland, together.

"Peter, you go down and meet the others, tell them the score. Willi, come with me. We'll have to switch off the safe breaking stuff."

As they walked off Howland paused, looked at Helen.

The uncertainty was still there. Her eyes were clouded, her brows drawn down; but her face now held no terror. He let his breath out, long and shakily. Then, brushing past the stonelike statues of the rebels, he walked towards the door marked: PRIVATE—CREW ONLY to let in Ramsy and Larssen.

They walked through very quietly, very subdued.

Larssen said, "Sort of spooky out there. Everyone standing around frozen solid."

"Yeah," said Ramsy. "Stella sure did her stuff."

"Good old audio virus," said Howland, suddenly released, freed, the shackles of fear struck from him. "A very sweet operation. Billions of little viruses, all waiting for that ultrasonic note from Stella's whistle. Then—"

"Then a shipful of stunned, silent and unmoving people," said Ramsy. "The biggest wolf-whistle of all time."

They passed evidences of the fight.

"What's been going on here?"

"Someone else had the same idea we did. Freedom Fronters they call 'emselves. Rebels. Tried to take over the ship as Mallow would have done."

"They didn't do too bad," said Ramsy, coming out into

the control room. They walked carefully, still not used to people just sitting or standing, motionless, unseeing.

"Where's the prof?"

"Switching off these people's safe breaking stuff. You'd better see about your ship work. Mallow will be here soon."

The enormity of it all was striking home to Howland.

"For twenty-four hours, exactly, those viruses will paralyze every man and woman aboard—except us, who have been inoculated. We'll have to watch points."

"Don't worry, Peter." Randolph came back, wiping his hands on a piece of rag, smiling. "Everything is going wonderfully."

Larssen slid into the communications seat. The ship's radio officer stood woodenly to one side, under a gun muzzle. A rebel was bent, as though about to sit down. Howland knew they'd stay as they'd frozen, and come out of it and continue the movement, totally unaware that they'd been in the deep freeze for a whole Terran day and night.

Ramsy went methodically around the control room, working his space Navy magic on instruments and controls, turning the ship into a fit temporary-tomb to carry three thousand unconscious men and women. He had, Howland knew, a tough job to do. Howland only hoped that his nerves wouldn't foul up at thoughts of Stella.

Larssen, at the radio console, looked up, his face breaking into a smile of triumph.

"There's a ship out there all right! Terry's good and sharp on time. Must have been trailing us just out of *Poseidon's* detection range. Trust Terry." He turned up the volume.

A voice rode on the carrier wave, booming loudly and authoritatively into the control room.

"Good work! We're coming alongside. Stand by the main air lock. We'll have our weapons ready, just in case, Marko. We don't want any slip-ups now."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MARKO!

The name rang like a gong in the tenseness of the control room. Howland looked at Randolph. The little professor slowly lifted one hand; the knuckles stood out whitely. Then he let the hand fall.

"The Rebbos," Larssen said, looking up at Randolph, hand hard on the cutoff switch. "What do I tell 'em, prof?"

Haffner laughed.

"Let 'em come aboard. As soon as they take a good snifter of our special air—we blow Stella's whistle!"

"That's no good, Willi—" Howland said, hating to have to say it.

Randolph nodded vigorously. "You didn't think that problem through, Willi. If they see people standing about frozen—well, what will they think? And they won't all come through the airlock to be caught there in one body. And they'll leave men aboard their ship."

Haffner's smile faded. "What do we do then? Let them come aboard? Take everything? Find out—"

Professor Randolph gestured towards Sammy Larssen. "Give me the mike. Connect me up with that Freedom Front ship out there."

Larssen did as he was bid. The silence pierced acutely through the control room.

Then that heavy, assured, hateful voice boomed from the speaker once again.

"Hurry it up, Marko. We're nearly alongside. Turn on your screen and let's have a look at the victory."

Randolph flung a quick hand of negation; but Larssen had no intention of switching on the screens. Randolph picked

up the hand mike and stood for a moment, for all the galaxy as if about to address an afternoon seminar.

"This is starship *Poseidon*. You Rebbos out there had better give up right away. It is senseless for you to try to struggle. A space Navy cruiser is on her way here. Oh—and your man Marko is fast asleep."

Howland couldn't help admiring the old prof. That little speech contained enough slang terms—the use of the word Rebbo had been masterly—to deafen the impact of Randolph's academic speech. Now to see if it would work.

The voice from the speaker crackled now with all assurance gone, flat and dull, deflated. Howland guessed that this unknown man had raced in from space answering the first victory call Marko had sent, had sped in exultantly—to be met with news of disaster. No answering exultance flared in Howland. If people win, then people lose.

He was aware of Randolph and the unknown Freedom Fronter exchanging words, bitter, hurtful, cutting words. But Randolph played his hand admirably. No hesitation, no weakness marred his performance. When the Rebel ship sheered off, making full revolutions away out into the emptiness of space, everyone sagged with relief—everyone except Randolph.

"See if you can contact Terence," he told Larssen briskly. "That poor devil of a rebel thinks he's just managing to escape from a space Navy ship. He probably is determined to fight and die rather than be captured. I don't want that pathetic bravado mixed up in our plans."

"Righto, prof," said Larssen.

Professor Randolph's small stature had never before seemed so supremely unimportant. He radiated confidence. He gave orders briskly and surely, not hesitating, instilling the same dynamic enthusiasm in his associates—accomplices, rather, as Howland could not help thinking.

But even Howland felt touched by that brilliance of optimism from Randolph.

"I have never had a penchant for mendacity," said

Randolph. "But I flatter myself that scientific method applies in this field, also. In other words—"

"In other words, professor," interrupted Willi Haffner, smiling. "When you lie, lie big!"

"Everything can now run smoothly, once again." Randolph looked around. "Someone had better see how Stella is getting along—"

"I'll go," said Howland instantly. He needed movement.

A ghostly, eerie journey took him through the silent undead to Stella. She sat on the platform, dressed in her best, holding the whistle in one hand and a scrap of yellow paper in the other.

She was crying.

"My great moment," she said between sobs. "Everyone hanging on what I did, what I said. I was the center of it all—and then I had to blow that beastly whistle and everyone just went—went cold on me!"

And Howland had to laugh.

He reached across and took away the whistle and the ticket, put both into his pocket.

"Just thank another of the miracles of micro-biology, Stella. Cheer up. These poor suckers breathed in a virus—we all did. When you blew that subsonic whistle the virus was activated and paralyzed them. They'll stay as they are and twenty-fours later they'll wake up and not notice that anything has happened. I inoculated you against that effect—and you didn't have a scar, remember?"

She sniffed. "I remember. And you needn't laugh at me. I've been running about like a crazy woman trying to do all the things the prof wanted—but you should try it, too." Together they went among the silent motionless throng, tidying up a host of minor accidents.

"Don't worry, Stella," called Howland, suddenly not disliking the girl any more. "You'll have your big moment when they all wake up."

When at last Mallow arrived in the tiny spaceship hired for a short period with the last of Professor Randolph's extended resources, the conscious human beings aboard *Poseidon*

were clustered about the entrance to the strong room amidst a clutter of ex-Rebel cutting equipment, sizing up the magnitude of the task confronting them.

Ramsy and Larssen left to adjust speeds and vectors; those left felt the metallic vibration through the fabric of the ship as airlocks met. Ramsy returned with Mallow, Briggs, Cain and Kwang in tow. Randolph had told them not to bother about their own safe-cracking gear; but Mallow had had it brought, anyway. Colonel Troisdorff stalked in with that invisible monocle blindingly bright.

When he heard about Tim Warner, Troisdorff laughed in his sardonic way. "I've heard of Warner. Used to be a smart operator. Well, let's get to it."

Everyone else, too, had that impatient, thrusting, bubbling desire to open up the strong room and remove its contents. Howland moved to one side, stood moodily watching as the ex-space Navy men set about their tasks.

Mallow was exuberant. "Don't bother to be too fussy," he told his men. "After all, the rebels did all this, didn't they? And—we're not aboard, are we? How could we be, right in the middle of the great drawl" He laughed, nastily. The sound jarred Howland's brain.

Looking at him, at his weak, handsome, confident face, Howland thought of Fingers Kirkup. Well.

The ex-space Navy men knew how to use the rebels' cutting equipment. And here Colonel Troisdorff came into his own. He knew all about the strong rooms aboard spaceships—after all, wasn't part of a Marine's job to guard the afterdeck from the dregs of the fo'c'sle? Under his supercilious direction the men set to work. Mallow chuckled with satisfaction.

Giving some garbled excuse, Howland left the busy technicians and walked quickly away from the strong room area, went through the control room with a single compassionate glance for Helen, climbed stairs and descended escalators until once again he reached the Grand Salon.

The deathly hush disturbed him. He walked along between the rows of tables and chairs, between the ranks of

upright stiff, silent people. This was a foretaste of what came to everyone in the end. These motionless people might awake after twenty-four hours, resume where they had left off, never know they had lost those hours from their lives, for the conspirators would alter all recording equipment before they left—but Howland knew. He saw this trance all around him as some small reminder that at the last only one single thing in all the galaxy was definite, positive and finally inescapable.

He lifted a woman's arm, lying twisted awkwardly down the back of her chair, brought it around to lie comfortably on the table. He pushed a portly gentleman more securely into his seat. He picked up a fallen handbag. Stella and her helpers from Mallow's small ship had already been around replacing lengths of grey ash with new selfigs that would burn into life at the first draw. Pipe smokers too had been taken care of. *Poseidon* carried three thousand passengers; but they had twenty-four hours to do their work in. And they'd do it; Randolph would see to that. No single trace of this lost day's doings must come to light.

He thought of Helen Chase. And he thought of Terence Mallow. He knew, now, what he would do.

Back at the strong room door the cutting crew was hard at it, like gnomes before some heathen idol fire. Mallow smoked and cursed. "Anyway," he said, belligerently as soon as Howland appeared. "That fool Fingers did squeal, after all. It was a great pity we didn't get to him before."

"What the deuce do you mean, Terence?" Randolph eyed his nephew with all the bounce in him still undismayed by this revelation. Howland felt tension snap back into the warmed air, an almost tangible miasma, glaring at him from the narrow smiling eyes of Mallow and the blunt savaged faces of Duffy Brigs and Barny Cain.

"I said, Terence, what the deuce do you mean?"

"Nothing that concerns you, uncle. Just leave my boys to open up this strong room. That's all."

"But I demand an answer!" Randolph took a step forward

and stared up, bulging his frog's-eyes. "Are you telling me you did have a hand in the death of Kirkup?"

Colonel Erwin Troisdorff turned around from where he was crouched down by the electronic lock combination, a bluely-gleaming steel gem in the grey steel expanse of armored door, and said, "D'you people mind giving me a chance? Your cutting crew is getting nowhere with that Rebbo's equipment. If you'll all go and fight somewhere else I might be able to open this thing up. Go on! Move!"

Mallow swung furiously on him, face congested at the marine's tone. Randolph, smarter than his nephew, said, "A good idea, colonel. I apologize for my nephew's behavior. Terence—come with me. Leave the colonel to open it up."

That tension in the air had not been eased. Everyone moved back, leaving Troisdorff a clear field. Randolph said, "Now, Terence, perhaps you will kindly explain."

"With pleasure, uncle." Mallow had reasserted control over himself. He was cocky, dead sure of himself. "As soon as the cash is out we'll ship it aboard our craft and leave. But, uncle, you didn't really think we were going to do all this and then, back on Earth, tamely hand over the money to you, did you?" He laughed, a laugh echoed by Briggs and Cain. "Why, uncle, I'm surprised. And you, with your scientific training, too."

Sudden clarity hit Randolph. Clarity and much else. He felt stripped, helpless, and very, very small. For the first time in years he bowed under the whole awful stigma of his size, despair fell on him with the crushing weight of defeat. He looked about, groping, one hand outstretched. Willi Haffner was backed up against the wall beside him, puzzled and truculent.

"What's going on here?" demanded Haffner. "You can't mean that, Mallow . . ." His head peered this way and that, like a bull under a goad.

"You just keep quiet and don't interfere," said Mallow. "You clever clever scientists make me sick!"

Randolph, out of his misery, tried to come back, tried to assert his old dominance. "I'd appreciate it, Terence,

if you would keep your supposedly funny remarks to yourself. They do not amuse me." He glared at his nephew, all the famous Randolph bite in his face and stance, and his spirit a husk within him. "You are ceasing to amuse me, too, Terence. My sister, I am sorry to say, appears to have made a mistake with her son as with her husband—"

Mallow's face went mean. He stepped forward, his gun flat in his palm, ready to come down in a raking, slashing blow. Without doubt he was going to strike his uncle.

"Hold it, Terry!"

Mallow turned, off balance, surprised. Charles Sergeivitch Kwang, his smooth bland face now alarmingly screwed up, stepped forward.

"What the hell do you want now, Charley?"

"I didn't know about this change in plan. I can't say I like it. Professor Randolph's played square by us—you can't go around hitting him—"

"Just keep out of my way, Charley. I'm the boss, remember that." Mallow spoke evenly and quietly; but the vicious spite in his words made Randolph realize again—and far too late—how wrongly he had summed up his nephew.

"But you can't—" Kwang started to say.

Barny Cain's gun poked into Kwang's back. "Just shut the mouth, feller. Commander Mallow's the boss. You heard what he said."

"I've never liked violence," Kwang said, his voice more rasping than anyone had heard it before. "Randolph picked us up from the gutter, gave us an aim—and now all you can do is turn on him. I'd have expected—"

"Gratitude?" Mallow was bitterly mocking. "What man extends gratitude to the hand that lifts him from the gutter?"

"That's a damn poor philosophy!" Kwang burst out.

Mallow snapped his fingers. "If you don't want a part of this, Charley, then you're poorer by a large slice of loot. And we're the richer."

"You'll be sorry you did this," Randolph shouted; his slow appreciation of his nephew now filling him with self-reproach and ashamed chagrin.

"You mean you'll tell the cops?" Mallow laughed. "Not you. Why—who organized it all? Who masterminded the plan right from the start? Who's under suspicion right now, under arrest by Warner? Why—Professor Cheslin Randolph, that's who. You say one word and you'll be in for life."

Mallow walked about, watching the bent back of Troisdorff at the bluely-gleaming lock. "A sweet set-up. No one about, a ship to get clear away in, no one to know the job's done until they hit planet. Sweet—oh sweet."

Standing in partial shadow, his thoughts back with Helen Chase standing like some beautiful and graven statue, Howland felt the tension in the air close around his head like a wetted thong. All his suspicion of Mallow crystallized; but he saw savagely that he was far too late, that the man had come out into the open before he, Howland, had had the guts to play his own hand.

Charley Kwang, standing alongside Willi Haffner now, wiped sweat away from his forehead. Howland felt he understood the slender astrogator: as a confidence trickster he broke the law; but everyone knew that the victim of a good confidence man himself was a bit of a crook; he'd never fall for the line otherwise. And Kwang didn't like this violent sort of crime. An ally there, then.

Howland walked back into the picture, one hand in his pocket.

Mallow turned at once, rocking on his heels, staring maliciously at Howland. "Ah! The soft-hearted doctor! I don't know how you wriggled out of the trap we set for you with Kirkup; but you're finished now, Howland."

Haffner started to speak; but Mallow cut him off brutally. "Keep quiet, you old soak! Else you'll have a bullet hole in you to let out the whisky."

Howland's reaction disconcerted Mallow. Howland did nothing. Randolph, in turn, began to speak; but now Mal-

low forced the pace. "Get over with the others, uncle, and keep quiet. We don't have all that time. I want to be well clear of detector range before these fools wake up."

"Just a minute, Mallow." Howland took a deep breath, his hand gripping in his pocket. "You intend to take the cash inside that strong room and keep it for yourself, after paying your men a cut. You intend to deprive the professor of his chance to work on Pochalin Nine and to create life." The fear coiling in Howland brought sweat to his forehead and dried his mouth. "We're taking this money from a corrupt government because they refuse to let it be used for ends that are good, good in the sense of good for science and the commonwealth of mankind."

Mallow laughed the pompous phrases to scorn. "Good—what d'you mean, good? Suppose this life you want to create turns into a ravening monster, destroying men and women? What then?"

"There is no danger of that," Randolph said sharply. "Only an ignorant layman could imagine that. And the government *is* corrupt. They took the Maxwell Fund to develop a super weapon for the space Navy, to waste it on warfare—when there is no visible enemy. They don't need all that amount of money—the rest goes in bribes and corruption, and—"

"So that's the truth about the Maxwell Fund this year," said Howland. "Right. Well—"

"Well shut up, Howland." said Mallow viciously.

"We wanted money we should have had for decent purposes, Mallow. You're just a common thief! If there was any cash left over, we'd return it—but you, oh, no! You just want wealth for it's own sake, and for your dirty sake, too . . ."

Mallow's gun came up steadily. His face was bleak and mean and plainly on it was written the mark of the killer.

The muzzle pointed at Howland, and Mallow's finger tightened on the trigger.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PETER HOWLAND put his hand over his mouth in terror.

Mallow gave the gun a last evil thrust forward, as though personally to help the bullet on.

Into everyone's ears penetrated a subtle, tenuous, plucking sound, a sub-audible sound that irritated without being heard, a sound that activated those billions of sub-audio viruses, a sound that took Mallow, Cain, Briggs, one or two more, took them and froze them and turned them into motionless, silent, graven statues.

Howland let his hand fall away from his lips. A silver whistle glinted between his fingers.

Willi Haffner looked at Howland. "You cunning devil!" he said. There was in his voice only admiration.

Howland tried to smile. The victory had not been won as cheaply as all that. Haffner had forgotten his fear because it had not been a part of his own actions; now he could go forward at once. Randolph, too, could exclaim, "Now how the blazes, Peter, did you—?"

But Howland could only walk a little way apart from them, and sit down, and rest his head on the cool table top, and let reaction shudder over him.

In that moment of unwound tension, of a thankful relaxation of fearful surmise and a hesitation over what could happen next, Colonel Troisdorff stood up. He brushed his hands together, precisely. He bent forward from the waist, stiffly, pressed an amber-lit button beside the blued-steel electronic lock. With the faintest of hisses the lock revolved, tumblers clanged as the lock stopped—and the strong-room door slowly opened.

It was quite clear that Troisdorff hadn't heard a word of what had been going on behind his back.

Randolph, Haffner, Ramsy, all of them, they all started forward under the fascination of that slowly opening door. Forgotten were the deadly moments only just slipping into the past, forgotten the men among them who stood, silent as stone, their guns a pitiful reminder of their twisted violence.

Randolph was the first through the strong-room door.

No one could grudge him that.

Howland roused himself. His legs had stopped their trembling and his headache had receded. He stood up and padded softly across to the others, went with them into the strong-room. No one felt the need to speak. The vaults seemed to suck up noise, to siphon off excess emotion so that all that was left was the satisfied, satiated silence of men who stare enthralled upon a king's ransom and know it to be theirs.

The strong-rooms sprawled. In blued steel trays and drawers the bullion lay stacked from floor to ceiling. Bulging bundles of notes, all neatly banded, stacked in two hundred bundles, wrapped in twenty thousand packs and then crated in reinforced boxes of five hundred thousand apiece, stood, crate on crate, in regimented alleyways.

"From Santa Cruz Two the ship goes to Amir Bey Nine—an unpleasant frontier world, that—and from there the space Navy transfer all this stuff aboard their own vessels. There must be over a year's Terran supply here . . ."

"Yoweeee!" suddenly screamed Ramsy. Larssen thumped him on the back. Haffner was pumping Randolph's hand up and down like a primitive bellows. Others were jumping and laughing in exuberance. The air flew with laughter and jokes and a chuckling release of tension. One man dived a hand into an opened crate, began to toss money up into the air. It fell, swooping and curling, like a returning flight of doves.

"Flying back to tell us we've struck dry land," said Howland, half to himself.

Randolph made no attempt to bring the roisterers to order. His tiny face glowed, his frog's-eyes bulging with happiness.

"We've done it," he said, over and over.

Later, Howland managed to inject a note of caution into the fireworks. "Mallow can't take the ship back. So who does?"

Kwang stepped forward, his brown face smiling and smooth.

"You've no way of knowing, now, how much you can trust me. But I'll take her back."

Randolph nodded decisively; but he did not speak.

Ramsy put one hand to his ear. "Y'know, prof, after your own nephew turned out like that, I doubt you'll want to trust anyone. But—"

"But I have to trust someone, don't I? To make sure this money goes where it will be used properly. Colonel?"

Troisdorff had taken his long, supercilious look at the motionless men with their guns. He harrumped a little, and then said quietly "Kwang and I can get the ship back safely, and if you send Ramsy along, too, that'll give you extra insurance. Never did cotton on to young Mallow. But they'll have to be looked after on the run back to Earth."

"The Professor and Peter can't go, and neither can I," said Haffner. "We're here, in the control room, under the eye of Warner. When he wakes up he'll want to know where we suddenly vanished to if we leave now. But," he turned to Randolph in his heavy, bovine way. "I feel you can trust Ramsy and the others now. If they do anything silly, I'm sure they'll live to regret it."

"There is enough money here to carry out the necessary experiments, to pay off the men who have helped us, and probably to return a balance." Randolph kicked a crate containing five hundred thousand. "You'd better go with them, Ramsy. You can help fly the ship. Stella will have to cover for you here."

"She'll do that, all right." Ramsy looked undecided. "The captain—"

"I think you'll get along with Stella better from now on." Howland spoke with all the authority he could bring into

his words. "She's all right, basically. Just that the two of you needed a fresh start."

"And now you've got it." Randolph turned on the crew. "Right. Get this stuff aboard our ship. Pronto!"

Moving the money took time. Everyone chipped in—even Stella. They found electric trolleys and called out cheerful quips to one another as the full trolleys labored past the empties hurtling back to the strong-room for more cash. All their own cutting gear was collected, unused, taken back. Mallow, Cain, Briggs and the few other roughnecks Howland had injected with harmless distilled water were carried back to the ship, as stiff as frozen sheets. Ramsy collected his gear and said goodbye to Stella. No one was around as they said their farewells, and Peter Howland, for one, was glad of that.

The last rites were performed by Colonel Troisdorff. All the conspirators had been wearing gloves; that was so obvious as not to warrant a second thought. Now the gallant colonel checked on everything, ran a coldly calculating eye over the stripped strong-rooms, checked the valves and swung the ponderous doors to. He gave the electronic lock a sardonic look, twirled it, and the amber light went out.

"Shut up, tight," he said with satisfaction. "Now your Rebbos can cut 'er open—and the best of luck to 'em!"

Howland chuckled. So the colonel was human, after all.

They saw their ship off with three hours to go. They'd taken turns snatching short periods of sleep, and now the men shaved and brought themselves back into the condition in which they'd been when Stella had blown her whistle. She now had a silver whistle that blew an innocuous sound.

"Listen, professor," Howland said, walking back into the silent control room from the cabins. "Now everything has been wrapped up—Larssen is finishing up on the rigging of records and logs—seems to me we ought to arrange an easy takeover of the vessel by the real crew."

"What do you suggest?"

"We damp down the charges in the rebbos' guns, jimmy

the firing pins, things like that. Then when we make a break, the Freedom Fighters won't have anything to fight with!"

Randolph nodded pugnaciously. "Good idea, Peter."

They went about the job methodically. When they had finished the Rebbos might fire once—but after that their weapons would be useless. Walking back from that door marked: PRIVATE—CREW ONLY, Howland looked into a side room and saw the body of Atherstone laid out on the floor. At his side his gun glinted darkly. On impulse, Howland picked it up, slid it into his trousers pocket where it hung heavily but did not bulk out betrayingly.

"Anything else, Peter?"

"Yes." Howland licked his lips. "Stella had just drawn the winning ticket. I think it might be a good idea if we made that winner one of our tickets . . ."

"A brilliant thought, Peter!" exclaimed Haffner.

But Professor Randolph was looking outraged. He swung furiously on his associates. "What are you both thinking about? People have paid money to enter this draw; everyone stands an equal chance. If you did what you suggest it would be dishonest! I'm surprised . . ."

And, thinking about it, Howland felt shame that he'd ever mentioned the idea.

"You said," he asked slowly, "that the government were building a big super-weapons computer thing with the Maxwell Fund, that only a tithe of it was going to Helen? Right. Well, that fixes the big power-and-authority boys for me. They're corrupt, all of 'em. And I'm sorry I suggested rigging the draw—that would be corrupt, too."

Haffner had found a bottle. Cradling it, he said reflectively, "People always used to talk to me about a nebulous thing called 'conscience.' As a scientist I regarded this as primitive talk—you can't find a conscience when you cut open a human brain." He lifted the bottle. Over the rim of the neck his face suddenly lifted, eyes bright and seeking on their faces. "Troubling you any?"

Randolph smiled. "It was, at one time, Willi. Troubling me a lot. You could call what we're doing—what we've

done, by George!—you could say it was criminal. But that money was going to utter waste. All my histrionics may have been corny; but they were true. We're going to use that money to fulfill a purpose I believe to be 'good.' Other people might quarrel with that, but sometimes you have to fix your target, and go for it, regardless. You have to stand up straight in the galaxy and think for yourself."

"Think for yourself," Howland repeated.

"I shall continue to live my life now as I would have done before," Randolph said earnestly. "There will be no luxury, no spendthrift sprees. I am a micro-biologist, and I have a job to do. This money is merely that which should have come to us. Instead it was used by a corrupt government to further their warlike plans. The money is therefore being used by us and we have had to adopt a somewhat unorthodox method to obtain what in effect is the Maxwell Fund."

"That damned Maxwell and his Fund," said Haffner benignly.

"All set, gents?" Larssen walked through, quick and keen and competent, despite lack of sleep. "I'm going back down, now. I'll arrange the warning to go through to the captain. Stella will just love that."

"Fine, thank you, Larssen." Randolph smiled across confidently.

"Oh, and," said Sammy Larssen, "don't worry your heads over all this. I've seen some of the waste that goes on in government service. Shocking. High time they were given a swift kick in the pants. Now maybe they'll think twice before throwing away the taxpayers' hard earned gravy."

"I'm sure," said Randolph politely.

Sammy Larssen went away. The three conscious men in the control room checked watches, looked at the big central timepiece in the athwartships bulkhead. Fifteen minutes to go.

"A very fine operation all round," said Randolph. "Apart from my nephew. I shall have something to say to that young man when next we meet."

Howland thought of Helen Chase. Haffner took a last swig from the bottle and threw it down a dispenser. It was still half full. Haffner, too, had grown up.

Five minutes.

"All right." Randolph moved across and stood carefully, feet planted exactly. "Take up your positions."

Carefully, tenderly, Howland put his arm around Helen's waist. Quietly, thinking their own thoughts, they waited.

The clock showed twenty-one four and a half . . .

Stella's voice rang lightly from the speakers, melliflously phrasing the words Randolph had taught her.

"All right! Here it is! And wake up at the back, there!"

Laughter. Dazed laughter, a little; a running sigh of humor breaking shakily from those people in the Grand Salon, all now looking at Stella and wondering why, perhaps, they felt a little stiff, why their drinks were a little flat, why their cigarettes were subtly different. But they'd been watching this unknown Mrs. Ramsy, hadn't they? Hadn't taken their eyes off her. And there she was with her silver whistle and the lucky yellow ticket—the lucky yellow ticket . . . That was the mesmerizing ace . . .

Warner's face, worried, anxious, conscious of that gun barrel so steadily bearing on his back, was alive once again. Marko was chuckling deeply with his moment of triumph. The guards shifted a little—perhaps to ease cramped muscles.

And Howland felt his hand tremble as Helen's body moved, as she turned slightly to look up at him . . .

"And the lucky winner is number 787!"

Catcalls, whistles, screams of dismay—and one long screeching whoop, banging out from the speakers and bouncing from metal walls.

"That's 787 letting us know who's won!" Willi Haffner tossed his crumpled ticket onto the floor. "And to think it could have been one of us." He looked hard at Professor Randolph.

Randolph laughed. "There are better things in life, my dear Willi, than merely winning a gambling prize . . ."

"There are." Marko turned lithely away from them. "And

they're all stacked up in that strong-room across there." He shouted at a guard standing by the door. "How's it coming, Alwyn?"

"Slowly, chief. But they're cutting through hard now. Stoppage a moment ago—the torches went out for some reason."

"Well, keep 'em at it! Our ship will be here soon."

Randolph, Howland and Haffner exchanged glances.

For them, the tension had drained. Howland felt a great longing for Helen sweep over him. She stood close to him, trembling slightly, worried, wondering what was going to happen. He wanted to reassure her; but all he could say was, "Hold steady, Helen. It will soon be all right. Nothing is going to happen to you. I promise."

Her only answer was to press her hand over his.

After that the sequence of events moved in a preordained pattern.

Howland knew he would never forget the look on Marko's face when the brief, bitter but bloodless battle was over.

Larssen had managed to give the alarm without revealing the source and had been in the forefront of the rescuing party. In the battle Howland, his fears for Helen torturing him, had been forced to fight and had wounded two rebels. He had not enjoyed doing this. When the captain and Warner, a very chastened man, had thanked him, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off Marko. The rebel leader stood against a bulkhead, his hands on his head and his whole damned soul in his eyes.

Howland couldn't face that look. He turned away. "We had to fight them," he said to the captain. "For the sake of the women passengers. But you have to feel sorry for them—at least, they believe in what they're doing."

As an epitaph, it was poor; but Howland had buried a great many ideas he had once cherished on this trip.

But, also, he had found Helen Chase.

That would make up for everything.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A MOST beautiful culture, my dear Peter." Randolph beamed at his chief assistant. Around them the newly-created laboratory gleamed with wealthy opulence, quite clearly the result of inspired detail design, prolonged hard work—and much money. Old Gussman looked up from his bench, his scare-crow face agleam with happiness.

"I second that, Peter. This batch should take us a long way along the trail. You're taking it out today?"

"Yes." Howland nodded. The excitement they all felt bubbled in him no less strongly; but they did not have a Helen Chase on their minds. "Area seven-three, I thought, would be suitable. There is a tidal mud flat and a river churning up minerals. We ought to have positive results inside ten days."

"Ten days." breathed Randolph. "Ten days for the creation of life—it took millions of years on Earth. But then, where was the midwife?"

"That ancient life was created and died, over and over again," Gussman pointed out, smiling at the reference to a midwife. "And so will ours. But each time we process a fresh batch, we gain a little more on death."

"Conditions here on Pochalin Nine are ideal." Randolph did not turn to look through the windows. That compulsion had died with the death of the first batch, twelve months ago, and now they all accepted without question the dark overcast, the flickering, eerie lightning, the battering gusts of wind crashing against their buildings. When the sun ripped apart those lowering clouds and revealed the landscape the first and dominating thought—always—was 'this place is dead.' No oxygen in the air, no humus in the

soil, no virus or bacteria in the atmosphere or ground—a dead world; but a world that had not yet lived and so contained a promise.

Colin Ramsy walked into the laboratory. "All ready, Peter, when you are." Ramsy was a changed man. He walked with a spring, his face was ruddy with health, he glowed with the fulfilment of this second chance in life. Truly, the plunder of *Poseidon* had created life for Colin Ramsy.

"Thanks, Colin. What's flying going to be like today?"

"Bad, as usual; but not too bad. The decontam squad is cleaning the flier up now. I shudder to think what the prof would say if we took just one little Earth virus out there with us!"

Randolph scowled ferociously at him. "I'd send you out to join it, Colin, my boy—without a suit!"

They were all here, here on Pochalin Nine. All of them, except Terence Mallow, Barny Cain, and Duffy Briggs, and their friends. They had been paid off—Randolph had seen the wisdom of that. Mallow had said what he'd had to say. "Can't understand what came over me, uncle," and "frightfully sorry, uncle. You *do* forgive me?" and "of course I had nothing to do with the death of Fingers Kirkup. He must have fallen foul of some of his shady friends."

It sickened Howland but, rationally, he did nothing about it. The old professor had been punished enough by merely having such a relative, the galaxy would not mourn the death of Kirkup—and any further inquiries would lead men like Warner straight to Pochalin Nine and the answer to the riddle that had astonished everyone.

For the rebels claimed not to have taken the cash. Their cutting equipment had not bitten through the door to the strong-room before Larssen's warning had brought the captain and the crew down to wrest back control of their ship. But the money was gone. And—quite evidently—the three men and a girl arrested by Warner could have had nothing to do with its disappearance. *That,* at least, the police could count on as solid fact.

The tracks of heavily laden electric trolleys had been

found on the air lock floor. And the money had disappeared. But *how* it had vanished and *who* had taken it remained a mystery.

Howland had disembarked with the rest of the conspirators at Gagarin Three and had helped with the cover deception to conceal the absence of Colin Ramsy from *Poseidon*. With Stella's willing help that had not been difficult, and with Sammy Larssen doing the doubling act at customs, they had brought it off nicely. Stella, too, had changed. When they'd all re-united back on Earth and had begun the careful ordering of equipment already designed and waiting at various manufacturers—ordered by Randolph early on the strength of the Maxwell Fund—she had greeted her husband unmistakably as a loving wife.

Having a scientific team bolstered by all these ex-space Navy types made a wonderful difference; things got done. Howland had privately wondered if any of them would object to living on a world like Pochalin Nine; the opposite was true and pathetic. They'd all welcomed eagerly the chance of doing an interesting job again—an honest job.

Colonel Erwin Troisdorff was in his element as security chief, given the difficult task of maintaining the planet completely free of life—any form of life—apart from those carefully introduced cultures brewed by the scientists in their labs.

When Charles Sergeivitch Kwang wasn't skippering the supply spaceship, he helped Sammy Larssen with the myriad electronic devices that turned the human-inhabited part of Pochalin Nine into a second Eden. All in all, the space hijackers led a full and interesting life; and all felt themselves to be, at last, doing a job worth doing.

Old Gussman superintended the loading. Cheerful workmen slid the wide shallow trays into the racks riveted to the cabin walls of the flier. Ramsy, zippering up his flying suit, entered the hangar. Howland, despite his own calm scientific manner and dislike of excess emotion on a job, zippered up feeling tense and a little apprehensive. This batch was a good one. He felt that. Now it was up to him

to see that the artificially created living cells received a flying start, grew and multiplied—even though, as they all knew, the cells would—must—die in the end. But how long that end could be prolonged would add another significant entry in Randolph's Life Chart.

"All loaded, Peter." Gussman smiled his scare-crow smile. "Good luck."

"Thanks, Gus. Fit, Colin?"

Ramsy nodded. They entered the flier and the hood clanged down. The decontam squad, masked and armed with the implements of their cleansing profession, went over the flier again. This whole hangar area was asceptic; but a man breathing out might start a train of life on this world—it was a sobering and yet a vaulting thought.

Ramsy handled his controls with the delicacy of perfect understanding. The flier rose, headed up and through the triple airlocks, out and away.

"Overcast is down to three thousand, Peter. But it's clear ahead. See the sun pouring through."

Howland looked through the transparent hood. The scene was certainly impressive—wild and inspiring and full of a savage beauty. Ahead the overcast tattered away like smoke driven before a breeze and through the last coiling tendrils the sun avalanched down, a golden floor spreading over the land.

Away to port the horizon broke in jagged, blue-grey waves as the naked hills rose into pinnacling mountains. Untouched by the breath of life, those mountain ranges were new enough not to show appreciable signs of erosion. The wind clawed at them and the rain lashed down on them; but still they stood, tall and spiked, ridged and sharp edged, a primitive upheaval of a primitive world.

"There's the sea."

Howland followed Ramsy's pointing finger, saw the ashy waste, sullen and rolling, flecked by white-caps, surging in tirelessly as Pochalin's single moon directed, flowing to and fro over the tidal mud flats he had selected as his experimental area.

"Looks mighty unpleasant, Colin. Better call base and reassure 'em we're still airborne."

"Right." Ramsy called up the base, talked to Larssen who usually stood communications duty when a big operation started.

"No reply," Ramsy said. "That's odd. Hullo, Sammy. Can you hear me?"

No answer apart from static mush that bedeveiled human communications the galaxy over.

"Come in Sammy. Sammy, can you hear me?"

"I suppose the radio checked out okay before we took off?"

Ramsy nodded curtly. "Of course. Did it myself. Ah—here he is now. Sammy—you being incontinent again?"

Larssen's cheerful voice rode in. "Sorry for the delay, Colin; but I had to talk to Charley—"

"Charley! But he's not due in with supplies for a week yet."

"So we believed. But he's up there in orbit now, prelimming a landing pattern. And you know how tough the prof is on anyone coming into Pochalin Nine."

"Yeah," Ramsy laughed. "Do I not. Charley's welcome to that chore."

To Howland the thought that their supply ship was circling up there with Kwang riding her into the landing pattern brought a comforting sense of union with the galaxy, as though an umbilical cord had not yet been broken. He concentrated again on the sea ahead, like a great grey carpet spread out to the horizon and felt the flier turn gently onto a new course.

"We'll just be back in time to greet Sammy," Ramsy said. Then they both put all their minds to making a perfect landing. A crackup would not be funny. When the flier touched down on the black, greasy mud, and the engines stopped, both men let out sighs of satisfaction.

Their work went well. The trays were positioned in the airlock blower units, slid in and the doors closed on them. The pumps were started and the plastic trays and covers given a last sterilization. Then the outer valves opened, telescopic arms raked out bearing the tray at their ex-

tremities, rather like those clever semi-robot servers in classy restaurants. The tray was lowered onto the mud at the precise point selected by Howland, the lid blown free and the cells deposited neatly in their home.

The work was easy and could have been done inside an hour; but Howland went methodically and precisely at it, so that three hours elapsed before he packed up and turned to Ramsy.

"Right, Colin. She's all yours. Home, James."

As the flier lifted, Howland looked back. On that primeval mudflat microscopic cells lay, alive, but only just, waiting for nutrient salts, for sunlight, for the alchemy of nature to take over the task from mankind. The thought could never fail to thrill him.

Unexpectedly, as the flier bore on for base, Ramsy said, "Y'know, Peter, I'm very disappointed in you scientific blokes. I knew you wanted to create life. So I expected a tank with pipes and controls and masses of impressive equipment and then, out of it, for you to bring a—a—"

"A beautiful girl with long blonde hair, a perfect figure and vacant eyes, with the brain of a new born baby? Really, Colin—this is a scientific venture!"

"I know, old boy. And, I suppose in a queer way what you're doing is even more impressive than your blonde. After all—she's there and the next step is educating her. That's not a problem in creating life. But here—I know enough to understand that you're the guiding hand that begins it all, and from now on nature acts in her own strange ways. More profound . . ."

"We're doing in a month or so what nature took millions of years; but we're still doing it nature's way. This blonde would be anti-natural, and science may go against nature at times for the good of man's eternal soul; but basically we try to play along with the old lady."

"Yup," said Ramsy. "And the base is coming up—and Charley is already down."

"I didn't hear him land . . ."

"Smart boy, our Charley Kwang. Oh, well, there's the landing signal. I'm taking her in—now!"

And the flier orbited once, dived, and came to an impeccable landing in the hangar as the triple locks above slid shut.

The first person Howland saw when he stepped, a little stiffly from the flier, was Terence Mallow.

"Mallow said, "Just the man I've been waiting for. Step this way, Howland. And no nonsense."

Howland did not argue. Mallow held a gun in his hand. He wanted to use that gun, use it on Howland. But right now he was enjoying himself too much to cut off the pleasure by that single moment of pure joy.

So Howland followed the others, went with Ramsy and Larssen and Randolph into the central building. Mallow, Cain, Briggs, and their henchmen followed them, guns ready.

Kwang said, "I'm sorry, prof. Mallow jumped me when we were loading. Made us drive straight out here. I couldn't do a thing. His pals kept tabs on us all the way . . ."

"For one thing, Charley, my turn-coat friend, I'll not forget how you did me dirt back on *Poseidon*. I've come for the loot—there's a lot left, I know. You haven't paid any back as you said you would—as if you would! D'you think I'm stupid?"

"We shall, Terence," said Randolph. "There is an election going on in the human section of the galaxy now. You may perhaps have heard of it. We intend to pay the money back when the new government is in power. Not before."

"Yes, and not after, either! For I'm taking it—all."

A sense of complete despair settled on Howland. He now realized that he didn't care a single tuppence damn about the money or what happened to it. He wanted to live. He wanted to live and marry Helen and have children and become a staid paterfamilias and also a great scientist—although he'd forgo that for Helen. And he saw with a bilious fear that Mallow intended to kill him.

"This situation is quite like old times," Mallow said. "Just like it was aboard the liner. Only now there is no whistle to

blow, no sub-audio virus to go to work for you. This time, Howland, you won't escape!"

"No," said Howland dully.

The call went on at the radio board and Mallow's head jerked around. "Now who the devil—?"

"I'd better answer," Larssen said. His face was pinched. "They'll wonder what's gone wrong. . ."

"All right. But no tricks."

Larssen sat at the console. "Come in, please."

"Calling Pochalin Nine scientific base. Permission to land? We understand your decontamination procedure and will follow exactly."

"Who is that?"

"This is Dudley Harcourt speaking—"

"Dudley!" said Randolph. "What are you doing here, Vice-Chancellor?"

"Hullo, Cheslin! We've come to see how the University's wonder boy is coming along. Stand by. We're landing now."

"All right," said Mallow viciously, softly. "They can land. We haven't put the sight on so they don't know what they're walking into. They'll have to take their chances along with the rest of you."

To his credit Randolph tried. But his first shout of warning was cruelly cut off by the big raw-boned paw of Barny Cain. Mallow's gun swung to cover the others. One of his men cut the sound switch.

"Any more of you try anything silly, and . . ."

He did not need to finish.

"Why did you have to come back into our lives again like a bad smell," said Ramsy. His tan showed patchy over bloodless cheeks. "We were doing fine until you turned up. It's a good life here."

Mallow had thinned during the year Howland hadn't seen him. The man's face and eyes and posture, the flush along his cheeks, the febrile bitterness in his eyes, gave the impression of a man consumed by a wasting disease, by a fever or a cancer, eating away at him, giving him a spurious vitality that would burn fiercely until all his resources had been

spent. After that—there would be no more Terence Mallow. But long before that happened, Peter Howland would have been killed.

Around them all now the pulse of life of the scientific laboratories and installations quickened. Mallow and his men wanted one thing—the balance of the cash taken from *Poseidon*. There was no great trouble finding it. The wall safe in Randolph's study presented laughable problems to Briggs and Cain. And so men moved through the corridors and rooms, herding other men with guns, all being sorted out into sheep and goats.

"All right, Howland. You and Haffner come along with us. Uncle—you will kindly lead the way." Mallow hadn't bothered to draw his own gun. He was leaving the crudities to his men. "Into your own rooms, please, uncle. I'm sure the money is there."

They went.

They had no choice.

That sick feeling of despair gnawed at Howland. He heard the shrill descending whine of Dudley Harcourt's spaceship outside and felt the trembling vibration through the floor as she touched down. As soon as those academic men set foot in this place tough gangsters would overwhelm them—and there would be just a few more frightened and bewildered prisoners for Mallow's men to keep under observation.

Strangely, the familiar office with its filing cabinets and wall charts, its big desk and pillow-stuffed chair for Randolph, appeared to Howland alien, unknown, unfriendly. Men crowded it burstingly. Mallow saw the safe. A pleased smile creased his worn features.

"Very convenient, uncle. *Open it up—fast!*"

There was nothing else Randolph could do. He bent only slightly before the combination lock, began to turn the dials. He looked pathetic there, bent and old and fragile. Then he looked up, one hand resting on the final lever. "What kept you so long, Terence? Why didn't you return for the money sooner?"

"Had to make plans. And you'd spent all you were going to spend long before I could stop you. So it didn't make any difference to the amount after that."

The other men in the room crowded. Howland felt Brigg's gun pressing harder into his spine. He moved uneasily away, and Briggs took no notice; kept his eyes on the safe. Randolph tumbled the last lever and the safe swung open.

At that precise instant, with the door swinging wide and the ranked boxes within just coming into view, the first gunshots slapped flatly through the tense atmosphere.

"Who the hell's that!" Mallow still did not draw his own weapon; but he nodded savagely at Cain. "Barny! Go and find out. Move!"

Barny Cain rumbled through the open doorway like a tank rolling into action. More gunshots sounded. Then Cain was back with the men in the room still in their same frozen positions. "It's the cops—dozens of 'em—all over!"

Mallow swore luridly. He swung on Randolph and his language brought a flush along the cheekbones of that tough little professor. Randolph stood up to his full height. He cocked his head back. He bulged those frog's-eyes of his and glared at his nephew.

"The kindest thing I can say Terence is—go! Run—try to get away. And from now on I shall not own you a relative. But I won't try to stop you or hand you over to the police—"

Howland sensed rather than deduced what Mallow's next move would be. Briggs' gun pressed hard against his spine. Howland moved smoothly sidways, pivoting, brought the edge of his hand around straight and bonily across Briggs windpipe. Duffy tried to scream and couldn't force air past his paralyzed windpipe. Then Howland kicked him in the stomach and took his gun away. Ramsy and Larssen were tangling with their guards and other of Mallow's men were running in a scrambling welter of arms and legs out the door, dashing up the corridor. If they could reach their ship they could escape—Randolph's ship, rather. Howland, not yet panting, let them go, looking first at Randolph. The little

professor was on one knee, gripping his left wrist with his right hand.

Mallow was bringing his gun down onto that unprotected head.

Howland did what he had to do. But his aim was wild; the shot crashed past Mallow's head, pinged into the safe and fetched up safely in a thousand note. Mallow's face contorted. He didn't go through with his blow, spun on his heel, the sound surprisingly loud between gunshots, crashed out through the window, taking the glass and frame and all.

Out there the meticulously kept lawns and flowers of this Earthly Eden on Pochalin Nine offered some sanctuary to a desperate man until he could make his way through to the main airlocks and his own spaceship.

Before Howland could follow, men in the drab blue police uniform burst into the room. At their head Tim Warner saw Howland, smiled with a long reflective smile—and started to speak.

"All right, Howland. That's far enough—"

Perhaps, if Warner hadn't spoken, Howland would have obeyed the unspoken command. As it was all his hatred for what Warner represented burst in him with the violence of a grade-one Pochalin Nine thunderstorm.

He went through the window trailing the remnants of frame and glass that Mallow had left.

He'd been hungry when he'd landed with Ramsy after the planting flight. But all his nervous energy now was concentrated on finding Mallow; there was time or thought for nothing else. Professor Randolph's nephew raced across the crisp lawns beneath the low arching domen a hundred feet away.

Howland didn't try a shot. He sprinted hard. Behind him he heard a vague and distant bellow from the shattered window; something about getting out of the line of fire. He ignored that, running on hard.

Scientific living was supposed to atrophy the hunter's muscles, easy comforts destroy the savage instincts of primeval ancestors. Howland felt bestial anger suffuse him as he

pounded heavily after Mallow. The man had caused trouble and anguish ever since he had erupted into Howland's life; and there was Helen, too. Howland felt no mercy as he closed with the fleeing man.

But Mallow, too, had cunning to match that ferocity. His racing steps took him to a side door leading back into the hangars. And here Howland caught him.

Mallow was running so fast he skidded on the turn inside the door as his staring eyes saw the police converging. He fled along the corridor, followed by Howland, and both men catapulted into the hangar floor. In there a hollow silence echoed their footfalls and rasped breathing.

Mallow, balked by the metallic side of a flier, swung to face his pursuer, his gun coming up. Howland took off, hands outspread like eagle's talons, collided with Mallow and knocked the gun away, hearing Mallow's grunt, "I might have guessed it'd be you." Howland then rocked back as a fist exploded along his jaw.

Another tearing blow hit him in the midriff. He straightened up, dazed, with barely enough sense left to sway sideways and dodge the next blow.

Then he put a fist into Mallow's face. He felt his knuckles sting and wondered if the blood was his or Mallow's. Something kicked him hard on the shin and he lashed out again, catching Mallow high on the forehead. Both men were grunting like pigs now. He caught Mallow's arm in a grip learned years ago, twisted, felt a bone snap, ignored the next savage blow from Mallow, hung on and belted the man again and again with his free hand.

The screams from Mallow bounced from the metal walls, giving him a sense of being in a nightmare echo chamber. His fist was rapidly losing all feeling; but he kept on thrashing Mallow, who twisted and wriggled and hung from his broken arm. Then, gradually, Mallow's struggles lessened.

Only when Warner disengaged Howland's grip, ripping the rigid fingers away, and pulling the scientist off the ex-

space Navy man, was Howland aware that Mallow was unconscious.

"Take Mallow away and fix him up," Warner directed curtly. "How do you feel, Howland?"

"Grand—"

"Yeah, that's to be expected. And I thought you scientific birds were all head-muscle and dehydrated emotions. Come on. The doc can put a stitch or two in your hide and some acraflavin here and there. Then we'll pour a double Scotch down you."

"And after?"

"After that you'll know why we're here."

Back in Randolph's room, Howland listened. He felt stiff and sore and his body stung; but soon that would go, and the whisky tasted good. He remembered Mallow—and the Scotch tasted even better.

Charley Kwang said, "Here's a letter for you, Peter. Came with the rest of the mail; but all the fun and games prevented me from giving it to you before. Check?"

"Check, Charley. Thanks."

The letter was from Helen. Howland let it lie in his fingers, limp, feeling the paper, as he savored what it might say, and as he listened to Dudley Harcourt, Vice-Chancellor of Lewistead, speaking.

"And, Cheslin, I may say that I am *not* surprised at what you did! I do believe that had I been put in your invidious position I would have done something similar myself. Although to rob a spaceliner in deep space might have been a little above my sphere—"

"Rob, Dudley?" Randolph was himself. Dapper, smart, arrogant, he stared at the police in the room as though they belonged on a microscope slide. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's okay, professor." Warner carefully selected a cigar from Randolph's desk. "We know what you did—and we know how you did it."

"Really? Please enlighten me."

"Look, Cheslin. There is no need to fence any more. We

know. But I ought to say at the beginning that there have been changes back on Earth in the year you've been here on Pochalin Nine. There's been an election, for one."

"Results are out, are they? I suppose the government retained their comfortable majority." Randolph was speaking, Howland saw, in an effort to drag the conversation back to rationality after the absurdities of the spaceliner holdup. "They're all a corrupt bunch of politicans."

Harcourt was smiling. "Look at me, Cheslin. In me you see the archetype of corruption. As Vice-Chancellor at Lewistead I was in fairly close contact with Mahew, the Chancellor. And he was Secretary for Extra-Solar Affairs."

"Was?"

"Was, Cheslin. The old government is out. *Out!* And we're in! Oh, you never bothered your head over my political affiliations, that I know. But I now find myself in the extraordinary position of sorting through Mahew's mess—in other words, my dear Cheslin—I am now Secretary for Extra-Solar Affairs."

"A very big boy indeed," said Howland. Everyone in the room ignored him. Randolph held their attention; Randolph, still, against the power of the new Secretary.

"Dudley! You artful old skin-grafter, you! Of course I knew you were mixed up in politics, and spoke the same language as Mahew—but this is marvelous! Congratulations."

"Thank you, Cheslin. But what this means is that I, as a small part of the government, have to prosecute you for what the news people called 'this audacious crime' and the 'holdup of the century.' You do follow?"

Warner broke in giving Randolph no time to answer. "We know you did it, prof. And very clever, too. Mr. Harcourt really provided the answer when he mentioned Dr. Haffner's work on viruses. We put it all together in our funny old-fashioned forensic way."

"Don't be so modest, Warner," said Randolph, tartly.

You still couldn't really like the undercover agent, despite his obvious willingness to be pleasant. Why he was trying to

be decent, no one, least of all Howland, on the scientific staff could comprehend.

Harcourt supplied the answer.

"Had the elections gone through just that little earlier, then you would have received the Maxwell Fund without the slightest hitch. As it was—well, we won't go into all that painful business again. Suffice to say that my government feels that your work on creation of life is so important that we will not only see you receive the Maxwell Fund but also a tidy sum direct from the government itself. In fact, Cheslin, the amount we are prepared to advance, by some co-incidence, tallies exactly with the amount that was in the strong-room of *Poseidon*."

Howland stood, stunned. Randolph turned his great frog's-eyes up at his friend, Dudley Harcourt, Vice-Chancellor of Lewistead and now also Secretary for Extra-Solar Affairs—a very big boy indeed—and smiled his cheeky, perky, unrepentant urchin grin.

"I thank you, Dudley. And I understand—"

"Not quite finished, Cheslin. The robbery from *Poseidon* was important enough for us not to want a repetition. There will be a trial arising from charges already made. I can tell you that you will not be there in person at the trial neither will your name or the names of your associates be mentioned. But the sentence will be two years in prison—"

"Prison! Two years!"

"Yes, Cheslin, for the law cannot be flouted. However, the name of the prison happens to be Pochalin Nine. You will stay here for two years—"

But a shaky laugh of relief swept over Randolph and Howland and Haffner and the others, a relief that they could not openly express for fear of ridicule. But they all felt it. Two years in prison—but the prison was here, where they were working their hearts out unraveling the secrets of life—a measly two years here—they'd been prepared to spend ten if necessary.

"Thank you, Dudley," said Randolph. And this time he really meant it, meant it more than anything he'd said be-

fore. For money was after all only colored scraps of paper and entries in ledgers—but work on Pochalin Nine trying to outsmart nature was an essential part of him, his whole being, and without it he would shrivel into a useless dried husk.

The principals went quietly away to settle the details. The ex-space Navy men went to their quarters and soon the sounds emanating from there showed they were in full swing celebrating. Haffner and Howland, in the middle and marooned from either party, went their own separate ways—Howland to read Helen's letter.

In part, she reaffirmed that she loved him and wanted to marry him. That was satisfactory. Howland, sitting on his bed, read on avidly. She was back at Lewistead working on the manuscripts. They were more puzzling than she had at first realized. But she still believed in her ideas.

"If I'm right it will mean that I shall spend a long time at Lewistead writing my paper and trying to settle as much as possible of the differences between the schools of thought. I'm sorry about that, Peter—I want to get married as much as you do—but if your work takes you to Pochalin Nine then mine as insistently holds me here at Lewistead."

Howland looked up from the paper. Someone was singing down in the crews' quarters—Stella was having herself a ball, accompanied by some of the other men's wives. Helen might not fit in here—but Howland doubted that. She'd fit in. But she was staying at Lewistead to work on dead and buried authors—author, sorry.

"Of course," he read on. "If I'm wrong, if Shaw and Wells are not the same person, why, then I shall look pretty silly; but I shouldn't really mind. In that unlikely eventuality I'd hop the first ship to your nearest checkpoint and you could come and fetch me with Charley Kwang's ship. But I think, my darling, that you will have to wait some time."

Howland slowly lowered the paper. Randolph was finishing the details with Harcourt, and his project to create life would go on now, to success, Howland felt confidently. Haffner had found his self-permitted one bottle and was

happily and sedately drinking. The crew was having a whale of a time. Even Old Gussman was happy.

Peter Howland would only be happy if Helen Chase discovered that George Bernard Shaw and Herbert George Wells were two different people.

And, despite his big words to her back in Lewistead, he couldn't have any real hope that the experts were wrong.

He stood up. "They've *got* to be different people!" he shouted violently. "By heavens, they must be two writers! They must!"

He looked down at Helen's tri-di snap in its plastic cube on the bedside table. She smiled back at him.

"You've got to be wrong just this once, Helen. Then, perhaps you and I can do something about creating life on Pochalin Nine—in the old fashioned way."