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# A MAN CALLED DESTINY

**LAN WRIGHT**

Complete Novel





## BURIED TREASURE IN HUMAN FORM

Jones Planet wasn't the best place to be stranded with a broken drive unit.

But Richard Argyle didn't know how bad it really was until a stranger contacted him with a curious proposition. For it was a proposition that put a price on his head and made him the center of the death struggle between Earth and the great interstellar Traders.

Argyle didn't know what made him so important to the most powerful men in the Galaxy. He didn't know why he was dangerous enough to be mercilessly hunted. But he realized he had to find out fast—find out what secret he unknowingly held, or die.

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## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

### **Richard Argyle**

This third-rate engineer made a first-rate target.

### **Pietro Dellora**

He held the Galaxy in the palm of his hand.

### **Alfredo Dellora**

Even his own father would not trust him.

### **Armadeus Judd**

This politician always had a trump up his sleeve—he could read minds.

### **Sigmund Grant**

This innocent feared robbery, but he was the center of a more vicious scheme.

### **Arnold Matheson**

Murder proved more efficient in gaining his audience than letters of introduction.

# *A Man Called Destiny*

by

LAN WRIGHT

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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**STEPSONS OF TERRA**

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## CHAPTER ONE

JONES PLANET wasn't the best place in the Galaxy on which to be stranded with a broken drive unit. Argyle found that out for himself before the ship had been there two days. It was an off-beat world, as undistinguished as the man after whom it was named; a small, out of the way planet which circled its lonely path around a minor sun, a few light years to the Galactic north of Rigel.

Four weeks! Argyle swore to himself as he left the space-field for his evening jaunt in the small town of Jonesville. Well, at least he had the consolation of knowing that two of those weeks had gone already. The ship that had landed a few hours earlier from Rigel Five had brought the replacement unit. Tomorrow it would be off loaded, and the engine room staff—including Argyle—would set about the job of installing it. Chief Engineer Gracchi thought that it would take about ten days Terran time, but the captain had threatened him with every fate listed in the space manual if they didn't get away from Jones in half that time.

Argyle agreed with the captain, even if it did mean that he would have to work the clock round to get it done. The fact that this might be his last evening ashore didn't worry him in the least.

His tall, heavy form headed out of the open, unguarded entrance to the field and turned right towards the dim lights of Jonesville, about a mile distant. The road from the field to the town was the only good road on the planet, but even so there was no traffic at that time of night. The day's work had ended for the few thousand Terrans who formed the planet's only intelligent population. All of them would now be performing the nightly ritual of gathering in the bars and saloons to drink and argue and fight. Later on, early in the morning, they would weave their separate ways to their beds and dream that their five year contract was

up, and that they were ship bound for Earth.

It was a hell of a life. Five years with a small fortune in cash at the end of it; but before then there was a vista of long days in mines; no women, no entertainment outside of canned music and films; and rotgut local brewed liquor because it was too expensive to bring beer or whisky all the way from Earth. There wasn't even a teepee to call for help if anything serious went wrong. The only contact was a monthly supply ship. Teepees were far too important to waste their talents on a planet like Jones.

It was this lack of a resident telepath that had caused the delay when Argyle's ship had made a hasty and unscheduled landing. They had to wait for the supply ship to call before news of their plight could be sent to Rigel Five; thus the two weeks delay in starting repairs.

Argyle realised gloomily that he must be in a bad way if he was looking forward to getting drunk on the mixtures that were to be had in Jonesville. The cumulative effect of two weeks stagnation and the prospect of almost a week of unremitting hard work combined to lower his spirits. An evening in Jonesville became almost a pleasure.

The one story buildings loomed out of the darkness towards him, and the lights grew brighter, illuminating the streets and the houses, the offices and the shops. Here and there a garish sign above an open door proclaimed a bar or gambling room. From inside the door raucous music blared two-year-old Terran hit tunes above the jumbled drone of human voices.

Argyle went into the first saloon he came to, simply because he wouldn't have so far to crawl back to the ship when he was thrown out. Already the atmosphere was heavy and stale with synthetic tobacco, and half a dozen card games were in progress at various tables. He crossed to the bar and ordered a large bottle labeled Jones Whisky. Heaven and the barman only knew what it really contained. He found a table tucked away in a corner, and settled down to spend an evening in lonely, moody isolation. Most of the faces around him were familiar; some of them nodded or shouted



greetings at him as he was recognised.

Some were unfamiliar. They belonged to men who were more neatly dressed and better groomed than the majority. They kept to themselves in small groups of three or four; they drank slowly and chatted quietly without the uninhibited freedom of the locals. Rightly, Argyle took them to be crewmen from the ship that had brought the new drive unit—there were no other strangers on Jones.

The short, chubby man in a too well cut gray suit, didn't register on Argyle until he stood directly in his line of vision, bowed slightly, and inquired gravely, "Mister Argyle?"

Argyle swiveled his eyes to study the speaker. He was an out of place stranger for a planet like Jones. He was smooth, well dressed, well groomed and neat as no other person was on Jones.

"Richard Argyle?" insisted the man.

"Yes, that's right. What can I do for you?"

The man pulled up a chair and sat down. "My name is Spiros, though I doubt if that means anything to you."

Argyle said nothing. Beneath the urbane exterior and the smoothness of Spiros was something he didn't like. There was nothing he could lay a finger on, except the odd circumstance of a stranger greeting him by name on a back-water world like Jones.

Spiros smiled easily, not apparently put out by the lack of response. "I traveled here from Rigel Five, Mister Argyle, as soon as I heard that you were . . . ah . . . marooned here for a spell."

"You came on this afternoon's ship?"

"Yes." Spiros nodded. "I have been trying to make contact with you for some weeks, but you have always just left when I landed. The fact that your ship was damaged has given me the opportunity of catching up with you."

Argyle stirred restlessly. People didn't go chasing all over the Galaxy just to catch up with the Second Engineer of a scrubby cargo vessel. The story didn't ring true, but he could hardly call the man a liar on such short acquaintance.

He took a long drink from the glass before him and remained silent.

Spiros' face lost some of its composure. The smile was less unctuous and the eyes colder.

"I do not seem to be making myself clear, Mister Argyle."

"That's right," agreed Argyle. "Not at all clear."

"I believe," Spiros shifted his gaze downwards to the top of the table, "that you have not seen your wife since she left you eight years ago. Am I clearer now?"

A coldness filtered through Argyle's body, and he felt his muscles tense under the unexpectedness of the shock. Suddenly, after eight years, a door had opened that he had believed was locked forever.

"I am sorry if I was too blunt, but I needed to obtain your interest in me and my mission," said Spiros.

Argyle shivered slightly and lifted his eyes to look at the man in a different light. "All right. So you've got my interest. Now what?"

"I am employed by the Company Dellora. The same company that employed your wife during the last six years of her life."

"What?"

"I beg your pardon . . . I—" Spiros shrank in his chair in terror as Argyle stood up and reached across to grab the front of his jacket in a grip of iron.

"What did you say?" Argyle's voice was soft and terrible. The blazing fury in his eyes made Spiros shrink even more.

"I said I . . . I was employed—"

"Not that. My wife. You said the last six years . . . dammit, man, are you saying she's dead?"

"I thought you knew. Yes, that's why I have been trying to find you. I felt sure the news would have reached you . . . I . . . I'm sorry. . . ."

His voice trailed away as Argyle relaxed his grip and sank back into his seat. The door had closed again, and this time it was for good.

"How . . . how did she die?" he asked, his voice husky and shaken.

"I do not know. I know only that she was a personal assistant of Pietro Dellora himself. She was a very important person to him. So much so that he asked me to tell you, when we met, that he will be forever in her debt. Her death was a great loss to the Company Dellora."

Argyle nodded dully. "And Pietro Dellora sent you half across the Galaxy to tell me that?"

"No." Spiros shook his head. "He sent me to find you and to invite you to visit him. He hopes you may accept a position with the Company Dellora. In this way he hopes to repay a small part of the great debt he owes to your wife."

There was a long pause while Argyle digested the information. Dulled by shock though his senses were, there was still something that didn't ring true. His natural caution probed and pulled at the strangeness of the situation, but there was nothing concrete that he could pin down.

He asked, "Why should Dellora do this?"

"I have told you. It is my mission and I have fulfilled it. Your wife loved you very much, Mister Argyle, even to her death."

"That's why she left me," Argyle broke in angrily. "Talk sense, Spiros, or don't talk at all."

"I only know what Mister Dellora told me himself," persisted the man. "Her last wish was that you be told of her love, and that, in payment for her services the Company Dellora offer you a permanent position."

Since Angela had left him Argyle had carried the unanswered question within him. Why? He had never doubted her love for him all through their brief two years together. Then, while he was away on a trip to Arcturus, she had vanished as completely as if she had never existed. No one knew where she had gone, or why; nothing he had done had produced an answer; no inquiries had given the slightest clue to her whereabouts. The Universe was wide and space was deep. She might have been on any of a thousand planets in any of a hundred star systems. Now, she was dead. A fat, unpleasant stranger was telling him that she had spent the last six years of her life as an assistant

of Pietro Dellora, owner of the Company Dellora, the largest Trader company in the Galaxy.

Argyle stirred, aware that the silence between them had lasted too long.

"I don't know," he began uncertainly.

"Please." Spiros held up a pudgy hand. "I fear that too much has happened these past few minutes for you to think clearly about the matter. I shall be returning to Rigel Five tomorrow on the ship which brought your new drive unit, and I believe you will be going there in a week or two when your repairs are completed."

"So?"

"I shall be staying at the Hotel Galactica. On your arrival I should be glad if you would contact me and let me know what you decide so that I can communicate with Mister Dellora."

## CHAPTER TWO

RIGEL FIVE lay on one of the main Galactic trade routes between Earth and the populous Galactic center. Its position made it one of the richest and busiest worlds in the Terran Empire. It was a planet-city whose only function was to cope with the pleasures and needs of inter-stellar traders and travelers. Its production of raw materials was nil, and its natural resources unworthy of even the slightest attempt at exploitation.

As a communication center it was second to none; as a trade market only Earth herself was richer. The native population was devoted entirely to the comfort of the passengers and crews from the great Galactic liners which landed by the thousands every year on the twenty-seven huge spacefields. In the midst of their Terran dominated world the natives still retained their identity, even after five centuries of Terran rule. It was a rule which they accepted as logical because Terrans were so much better at everything than they were. Terrans brought work and trade and

pleasure, things with the Rigellians had never known before. The slim, slight race, with their wide mouths and pupilless eyes, lived for today. Ambition was a word they did not comprehend. They were happy with simple things, and they were loyal to those who could satisfy their needs.

Argyle looked on Rigel Five as a second home. The high buildings and the wide streets, the glittering lights and the well kept gardens were so much like those of Earth. Each visit brought a pang at first, for Earth was far away—almost two months by even the fastest ship—forty light years across the deeps of space. For all its Earthlike appearance, few Terrans were to be seen in the ordinary life of the planet. They held the power behind the gleaming glass and plastic facade of the planet-city. Their hands could be seen in everything and behind everything, but the work was done by the natives. Only one-in-fifty of the planet's permanent population was Terran.

Argyle was lucky since his ship, the *Lady Dawn*, landed at a spacefield only a few miles from the Hotel Galactica. For over three weeks he had brooded over the odd visit from Spiros. The sense of loss he felt at Angela's death dulled gradually into tame acceptance of an unpleasant fact. There was a gap in his life which could never be filled.

Because of his preoccupation the trip passed quickly for Argyle. It wasn't until the day before they were due to land that he decided definitely to look up Spiros. Even then it wasn't the dangled attraction of a job with the Company Dellora that decided him. There was the more important desire to find out about Angela and her life after she left him. There was in him an inarticulate thought that he might be able to fill the aching gap in his being if he knew more about her life—and her death.

It was midday local time when he found himself in the giant foyer of the fifty story Hotel Galactica. Everywhere were soft carpets, uniformed porters and messengers. The furnishings were the last word in sybaritic luxury, and the overall characteristic was sophisticated opulence.

Argyle went straight to one of the reception desks and

beckoned a native clerk. The native crossed to him and bowed slightly. His smile of service and welcome vanished suddenly as Argyle said: "I wish to see Mister Spiros. Which is his suite?"

"Mister Spiros?" The voice was high and softly sibilant.

"That's right." Argyle was puzzled by the native's reaction.

"Sir, I regret, Mister Spiros is . . . is not available. If you will please to wait one moment." The Rigellian bowed and disappeared to the rear of the reception desk. He was gone several minutes and Argyle's puzzlement grew. When he returned the clerk appeared through a large door at the side of the reception desk.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, sir. If you will please step this way." He stood aside and bowed as Argyle crossed to him and moved uncertainly into the room that lay beyond.

It was a large private office. The walls were lined with filing cabinets and book shelves. A large, ornate desk was the main piece of furniture. From behind it a lean faced Terran rose to greet him as he crossed the thick pile carpet.

"I understand you were inquiring for Mister Spiros?"

"That's right."

"Are you a friend of his, Mister . . . ?"

"Argyle." He shook his head. "No, he's not a friend. I met him on Jones Planet a few weeks back and he asked me to call and see him here when I landed. Would I be rude in asking who you are?"

The man smiled and inclined his head. "Sorry," he replied apologetically. "My name is Montresi. I am the manager here."

"I'm a little puzzled, Mister Montresi," remarked Argyle. "All I want is to see Mister Spiros."

"That will be a little difficult."

"Indeed! Why?"

Montresi dropped his dark eyes to the desk top before him and fiddled uncertainly with a stylopen. "Mister Spiros was killed three days ago."

"What!" Argyle's jaw dropped in incredulous horror. "But . . ."

"Please." Montresi raised a hand. "It was something of a mystery, and the Law Squads are still investigating the matter. I have called the officer in charge of the case."

"What the devil for?"

"Because I was asked to notify him if anyone inquired after the dead man." Montresi smiled wryly. "Please forgive me, Mister Argyle, but I am not in a position to do other than ask you to wait for a short while. I may say that, when he made the request, the officer didn't think it very likely that anyone would be calling, because Spiros was an out-worlder."

"Yes, he was from Dellora Planet."

"So I believe."

Argyle sat up and fumed, regretting the impulse which had made him follow up Spiros' offer. The last thing he wanted was to get mixed up in a murder case. Murder? Montresi hadn't said anything about murder. He cocked a questioning eye at the manager.

"How did he die?" he asked abruptly.

"That is part of the mystery," Montresi replied. He hesitated, then, "I do not think I had better say more before—"

"Before the law arrives." Argyle nodded bitterly.

"I'm sorry."

"Forget it, it isn't your fault." Argyle relaxed into a moody silence that lasted uncomfortably until the desk clerk came in a few minutes later.

"Lawman Sworder, sir," he announced.

Sworder was a short, thickset man in his early forties; a tough, professional crime chaser who would have stood out in any company as a man with both brain and muscle power. His wide, blue eyes were penetrating and his jaw line firm and uncompromising. Clearly, he was a man to be respected. He was quietly and soberly dressed, and the only mark of distinction was a gold star at his breast with the red letters L and M on it.

"This is Mister Argyle, Lawman," said Montresi by way of introduction.

"Space Officer, eh?" Sworder's hand clasp was brief and hard.

Argyle nodded. "Second Engineer of the XQ342, Lady Dawn, in from Jones Planet today."

Sworder pulled a chair nearer to the desk and turned to the manager. "If you wouldn't mind, Montresi . . . ?"

"Of course, Lawman, of course." Montresi beat a hasty retreat, closing the door behind him as he went.

"You knew Spiros," stated Sworder flatly.

"I met him for the first time a few weeks back."

"Where?"

"On Jones."

"What was he doing there?"

"He came to see me."

"I thought you'd never met before?"

"Look," said Argyle, "Let me tell you the story from the beginning. That way you might make sense out of it."

Sworder nodded. "All right. Go ahead."

Argyle kept it short. He told of the broken drive unit that had stranded the Lady Dawn, and he told of the delay because of the lack of a teepee on Jones. He detailed the unexpected interview he'd had with Spiros in the seamy saloon in Jonesville. He told how Spiros had managed to catch up with him because of the delay, and he brought a frown of surprise to Sworder's brow as he told about the offer from Dellora.

"And that's all," he ended. "I was to think about it and let him have an answer when I got here from Jones. That's where you come in. You know as much as I do—probably more."

Sworder nodded, but made no reply. He was obviously disappointed at the lack of help he'd got from Argyle.

"How did Spiros die?" asked Argyle. "Or is it a secret?"

"No, it's no secret." Sworder pursed his lips. "He was shot with his own needle gun in a locked room."

"Suicide?"

"No. The gun was lying fifteen feet away from the body



on the other side of the room and it didn't have any of Spiros' finger prints on it."

Argyle digested the information in silence. At last he said, "If I didn't know better, I'd say it was impossible."

Sworder's eyes flickered with mocking humor. "Don't I know it? To make matters worse Spiros had to be a teepee."

"What?" Argyle looked up quickly at the Lawman, surprise plain on his face.

"You didn't know?"

"A telepath? No, he didn't wear his badge when I saw him on Jones. He never let on."

"Odd, don't you think?"

More and more Argyle felt the tangled web of surprise and intrigue wind thicker round him. All telepaths were bound by law to wear a Teepee badge. They were too few and too valuable to be incognito in the community at large. A man wearing a Teepee badge was respected wherever he went. By the badge he wore he told of his gifts and his use to the human race. Teepees numbered only a few thousand throughout the Galaxy. It was to preserve their powers and to safeguard their future development that efforts to protect them took such stringent forms. A crime endangering the life of a teepee was a crime against the future of the whole human race, for on their shoulders rested the responsibility of interstellar communication. Only one teepee could talk with another across the vast oceans between the stars.

"But why didn't he let me know?" insisted Argyle.

Sworder shrugged. "He had his motives no doubt. The question now is to find the murderer."

"And how do you do that?"

Sworder sighed. "I wish I knew. I've had experts go over that room with a fine tooth comb, and they could draw only one conclusion. Whoever was in there with Spiros could not get out! It was an utter physical impossibility. There were people—four of them—in the corridor when Spiros screamed. They were outside his door within five seconds and they heard his body hit the floor. They heard the thud as the

murderer dropped the gun. They heard half a dozen footsteps, and then—nothing. When the door was forced open two minutes later the suite was empty.”

“Windows?”

“Unopened and unopenable. Air conditioned rooms. Besides,” Sworder grinned, “it’s on the thirty-ninth floor.”

“So?”

“There was no physical way out of that suite, of that I’m quite certain.”

“You said no physical way out?” He cocked a questioning eye at the Lawman, and Sworder pursed his lips in a wry smile.

“What are you going to do now that Spiros is dead, Mister Argyle?”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“You answer mine first.”

“I think,” he said carefully, “I might look up Pietro Dellora and see if his offer of a job still stands.”

“That the only reason?” asked Sworder softly.

Argyle looked at the Lawman with slight surprise. The insight of the man was clear and surprising.

“No,” he replied. “I think I’d like to know more about my wife and how she died.”

“You think it will help to know?”

Argyle shrugged. “I don’t know whether it will or not. But something doesn’t ring true.” He waved a hand vaguely. “Don’t ask me to name it. I just can’t see Angela as a leading light in the empire of a tycoon like Pietro Dellora. There’s another thing, too. People just don’t die these days at her age unless . . . unless—”

“Unless something is very wrong.”

Argyle nodded. “And now that Spiros is dead, too.” He realised with a shock that he was putting the two facts together, and the answer he got wasn’t pleasant to contemplate.

He looked up at Sworder. “Okay? That’s your question answered. Now, how about mine?”

Sworder looked at the floor between his feet. “There was

one way out of the room . . . just one."

"But you said—"

"I said no physical way." Sworder smiled grimly and nodded, then he remarked conversationally, "We've never had a teleport in the Galaxy before."

### CHAPTER THREE

WITH THE development of inter-Galactic trade a new class of tycoon was born. Terran laws became more fragile as distances from the home world increased. In the far spread outer reaches of the Galaxy—outside the grip of the law and the jurisdiction of the courts—there grew up empires of trade and commerce such as the race of man had never dreamed possible. Hard, strong men with quick brains and the ambition for power carved their own kingdoms on the tiny, unwanted planets that circled lonely stars. They made their own laws and lived by their own standards. They built up great fleets of cargo ships that plied the great trade routes between Earth and the stars. They controlled commodity markets, twisted prices to suit their own needs and created shortages and gluts alike.

Before Earth realized the great strength of the trading barons; they had a stranglehold on Galactic trade which nothing, short of armed force, could break. In the beginning armed force had been tried—once. It was used against one, Vicente Dellora, and it wasn't successful because everyone of Dellora's fellow tycoons withdrew their ships, their money and their trade. In the end Earth had to give way and the Traders came back bigger and more powerful than ever.

Argyle signed off the *Lady Dawn* and took ship for the Planet Dellora where Vicente's descendants reigned. It was a long trip, five weeks in a pokey cargo vessel with a pirate crew and no facilities for passengers. It was as well for Argyle that he had come up the hard way, and was used to such conditions.

Argyle learned more of the Traders and their worlds during his five weeks voyage than he had learned in his previous five years of space wandering. The black bearded captain and his crew were in constant touch with one or other of the Trader Companies. Their ship was an independent which gained a lucrative but precarious living by taking small or awkward cargoes on out of the way routes. The large Trader ships would have been quite uneconomical for such tasks. But the small, scrubby ship with its rough, tough crew, could and did make a living at it.

"Be landing in two hours," the ship's captain told him from the autolog. "Guess you'll not be sorry, eh?"

Argyle stirred from his reverie and stretched his tall, heavy frame. "I've traveled worse," he answered.

The black bearded Terran laughed hoarsely. "It'll be a worse one when we leave here, if I know Dellora. He'll have a cargo for us as wide spread as the Milky Way."

"Then why take it?"

"If we don't we'll never lift ship from Dellora," was the grim reply. He cocked an eye at Argyle. "You'll learn Trader ways on Dellora, Argyle. Take my tip and watch out."

Argyle nodded and said nothing.

They came in to a landing on the giant spacefield outside Dellora City, the one large center of population on the planet. At once Argyle felt the power of Pietro Dellora. The field was wide and smooth, and around it he could make out the gleaming hulls of twenty or thirty great vessels as they lay in repair berths or stood by loading bays. Argyle knew that he had left Terran law a long, long way behind.

Hard faced men in steel gray uniforms with red facings, littered the spaceport. Each of them carried side arms that were not merely ornamental. Like all the Traders, Dellora had his own private army to see that things were done one way and one way only—Dellora's way.

Everyone on the ship from the captain down to the cook had to register at the Personnel Office, and everyone was issued an identity disc which was strapped tightly to the

left wrist. The discs were tuned electronically to a central plotter and computer. By a quick check through the machine, Dellora's Law Officers could tell exactly where anyone was at any given moment. It could not be abandoned because the pulse of the wearer kept it static. As the pulse beat ceased—either through removal or through death—the central computer registered the fact and gave the alarm.

As a visitor, Argyle had to suffer an interrogation by a Public Security Officer before he was allowed to leave the spaceport. He was shown into a large, bare office, furnished with two chairs and a table, and there he was left to stew for half an hour before his interrogator appeared.

The officer who came at last, was a plump, bored man with a bald head and wispy moustache. Argyle took an instant dislike to the cold, piggy eyes as he was waved carelessly to one of the chairs.

The officer produced a file and a stylpen. "Name?" he asked.

"Richard Argyle."

"Age?"

"Thirty-four."

"Occupation?"

"Second Engineer, Terran Space Commission."

The cold eyes flickered at him. "You're a hell of a way from home, mister."

Argyle shifted angrily in his chair. "So?" he queried harshly.

"So—why are you a long way from home?" the other rasped back.

"It's none of your business."

The officer eyed him bleakly, and then laid the pen precisely and slowly on the desk before him. He folded his hands and his gaze wandered ironically over Argyle's seated figure.

"You're not on Earth now, Argyle. You're on Dellora Planet. There is no Terran authority within twenty light-years. If you upset us too much we can make things very nasty for you. While you're here you'll do and act and live

just as we tell you. Otherwise . . ." he shrugged expressively and picked up the pen. "Now, we'll try it again. What are you doing here?"

Argyle fought down a desire to punch the man's chubby nose. He'd heard rumors of the demagogic way in which the Traders ran their own affairs, but he hadn't believed them until now.

"I want to see Pietro Dellora," he stated bluntly.

The man grunted in surprise. "Well, you don't do things by halves, do you, Argyle? Maybe you'd like a million credits as well?"

Argyle ignored the sarcasm.

"Why do you want to see Mister Dellora?"

"I don't want to see him," replied Argyle, changing his tack. "He wants to see me."

"Oh, sure. And of course, you've got a written invitation?"

Argyle's temper flared and he slammed his fist on to the top of the table before him.

"Look, I didn't ask to come to this pest hole of a planet. Dellora sent one of his men to find me . . . a man named Spiros . . . a teepee."

"Where is Spiros now? Why isn't he with you?"

Argyle grinned coldly and with unholy delight. "Because he's dead."

The silence which followed could have been cut with a knife. It lasted several long seconds while the officer digested the news. Then he closed his file carefully and grimly.

"You'll go into town, Mister Argyle, and register at the Hotel Dellora. You'll stay there until someone gets in touch with you. And remember, we'll know every move you make as soon as you leave this office. Don't try to go too far away. We hate having to bring people back."

"What if I don't like the hotel?"

"Then you'll register in our jail, and no one will get in touch with you for a long time. We've got long arms and short memories, mister, and our tempers are shorter than our memories." He turned abruptly and left the office.

Argyle sat for a long minute digesting the situation and

regretting the impulse which had made him come to Dellora Planet in the first place. The one small consolation lay in the fact that the name of Spiros had been the key to open a very difficult door. Once it closed after him he wondered what key he would have to use on the way back—if there was a way back.

The hotel, he had to admit, was more than comfortable. It was luxurious. It was the largest hotel in the city, and was used to accommodate visitors to the planet who were not important enough to be entertained by Pietro Dellora personally. Everyone who visited the planet without the official seal of Pietro Dellora had to make do with cheap rooms over the saloons and bars which littered the area around the spacefield.

True to the warning he'd been given, Argyle didn't stray far from the hotel. He visited a stereo show when things got boring; he watched the local tridivision until the banality of the shows drove him to his room; and he consumed large quantities of liquor in the hotel bar. He could do nothing but wait, and after three days the waiting became tedious.

Late on the evening of the third day, just as he was preparing for bed, they came for him. There were two of them in the now familiar gray uniforms; one of them was tall and lean and strong, the other was shorter, just as wiry, and just as strong. As Argyle opened the door in answer to their knock they walked past him into the room as if they owned it, and the tall one remarked casually, "Mister Dellora has sent for you."

Argyle eyed him incredulously. "Now?" he queried. "Dammit, it's after ten-thirty!"

The shorter man grinned humorlessly. "Time doesn't mean very much to Mister Dellora," he replied softly. "Come on."

Argyle shrugged and slid into his uniform jerkin. Clearly, it wasn't any good arguing with them—which only went to show, he thought wryly, how much his thinking had changed in just three short days.

"Shall I need anything?" he asked.

"I doubt it. If you do just ask for it when you get there."

They left the hotel in a low ground car which drove them the short distance to the spacefield, and as they drove under the high, arched entrance to the field Argyle felt his nerves tingle with apprehension and bewilderment.

A small, fast vessel of an interplanetary class not known to him, was their destination. As they strapped themselves into their seats it was all that Argyle could do to stop himself asking at least one question. Dellora was a lone planet! In theory, at any rate, an interplanet ship was useless—there was nowhere for it to go. He settled himself back in the seat and felt the gentle surge of takeoff push him back into the plastic foam padding. He glanced sideways and met the sardonic gaze of the guard who sat beside him.

He tried to sleep but it was no good; the minutes ticked by on leaden wings until the drive note changed down again and the thrust forward of deceleration pulled at his body. He opened his eyes. The small clock on the instrument panel beside the pilot showed that it was just half an hour since takeoff, and a glance through the viewport showed that they were in deep space. At least, he thought, the answers would not be long in coming.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A FAINT muffled clang echoed through the cabin, and the tiny ship shuddered slightly. Both the sound and the motion were things which Argyle had experienced before, but under entirely different circumstances. He had never known an oxygen cycle planet to have a space station before. There was no need of it. A space station was only necessary when the environment of the world below was entirely hostile to mankind. Even an airless world like the Moon had no need of an artificial satellite; ships could land upon its surface and men could walk there, if they wore protective suiting. Space stations served as a base for operations against a world whose treacherous elements made ship landing entirely impracticable. That could not be said of Dellora Planet. The



clang and shudder were the results of a magnetically coupled airlock joining the ship to the station.

The two guards unfastened their belts, and Argyle did the same. The faint hiss of equalising pressures reached his ears as they crossed the cabin towards the airlock, and one of the guards pulled at his arm, halting his progress.

"Watch yourself as you cross over, mister."

Argyle looked at him questioningly, but no further information was forthcoming. He stepped from the ship through the lock and into the entrance to the station. As he did so his stomach heaved and his head spun dizzily. He reached for a handhold to steady himself.

The gravity of the station was less than one quarter Earth normal. Either the gravity unit wasn't functioning properly, or—more disturbing still—the gravity was normal for the station.

The tall guard chuckled. "Gets you doesn't it?"

"Is it always like this?"

"Sure."

"What the devil for?"

The man laughed again. "You'll learn, mister."

A wide corridor led away from the airlock, and as they went along it large doors—larger than normal—were set at intervals in the metal walls. Through one of them, swinging open, Argyle could see wide, high rooms that were three or four times larger than the usual fifteen foot, square cabin that was usual in a space station. The fittings were ornate and the furnishings luxurious, that much he could see at a quick glance.

His senses quickly attuned themselves to the light gravity, though there were momentary spells of dizziness and a slight feeling that he was falling if he happened to lift his feet from the floor too quickly.

The wide, main corridor ended at the hub. It opened out into a giant, vaulted room with curved walls and a high, domed ceiling. The circular shape gave Argyle the clue that the room was, in fact, the hub of the station. He wondered at the feat of engineering which allowed the machinery of

the station to be placed elsewhere and leave the hub available for occupation. The overall impression of the vast room confirmed the earlier ideas he'd had in the corridors. Nothing that Argyle had ever seen or dreamed of in his life before, could approach the staggering panorama that lay before his eyes. There were hangings and draperies around the walls that billowed slightly in the light gravity. The colors and designs of them were strange and wonderfully alien. The far corners of the Universe were represented here, in this one great room.

"Wait here." The voice of the taller guard broke his wonder. As he turned he saw the backs of the two men disappearing along the corridor.

He walked forward slowly and carefully, fearful, almost, to let his booted feet touch the smooth delicacy of the carpet. His eyes ranged the walls, flitting like a bee among a myriad brilliant blooms, over the kaleidoscopic colorsapes. He had seen such pictures before. They could be bought—at a price—anywhere in the Galaxy, but none that he had ever seen before could approach the fantastic beauty and perfection that he saw now. Every one was a window on a different world, or the frozen image, captured and immortal, of a different person. He looked and he wondered.

"Good evening, Mister Argyle."

The voice boomed at him, deep and sonorous, from a far corner of the fantastic room. He turned abruptly, startled out of his wonderment.

"I am Pietro Dellora."

The man who spoke had entered from another corridor on the other side of the great room. As his eyes rested on the owner of the voice Argyle knew with a mixture of horror and pity, why the station gravity was so low. The figure that stood before him on the far side of the room was a mountain of human flesh; an obscene, puffy caricature of the human form; a bloated, bulbous body topped by a white haired head that rested, neckless, upon the obesity beneath. The arms and legs were half hidden from view by a white, toga-like garment that floated about the figure, but the white,

pudgy hands with their sausage fingers bore witness to the remainder of the hidden limbs.

Only the eyes were compelling without being repellent. They were black, luminous orbs that gazed steadily out upon the world through unhealthy rolls of fleshy fat. They alone, gave notice of the being that lay imprisoned beneath the obscene facade of flesh that was Pietro Dellora.

The overlong silence was broken by a soft, wry laugh that sprang from Dellora's lips and rippled his puffy cheeks.

"Not all my power, Argyle," he said in answer to the unspoken question. "I hold the Galaxy in the palm of my hand, but I cannot control the outrage of my own body."

Argyle licked his lips and strove to speak. He could not.

"Sit down, sit down." Dellora floated, rather than walked, across the room towards him, and waved him to a divan set back against one curved wall. "The gravity is sufficient for that." He relaxed his own great body against another divan, oddly shaped and with an arrangement of sloping cushions that puzzled Argyle, until he realised with mounting horror, that Dellora was too fat even to sit down.

"I . . . I . . ." he stammered, and stopped, horrified by his sudden inability to utter even one coherent word.

"I know, I know. You pity but you cannot speak of it. Well," Dellora waved a hand to the room around, "at least I have the means to alleviate my discomfort. Were I a poor man I should have been dead these twenty years past."

Argyle made a visible effort to pull himself together. No useful purpose could be served by allowing himself to be overcome either by horror or by pity.

"You wanted to see me," he stated abruptly.

"Ah, yes." Dellora nodded. "Tell me, how did Spiros die?"

"He was murdered."

Dellora said nothing. The dark eyes held steady upon Argyle's face for a long minute as if seeking complicity in the crime. Argyle went on speaking slowly and deliberately, telling of the events which led up to the mysterious death of the teepee.

"And so," he ended, "we have a teleport somewhere in the Galaxy."

A shadow passed over Dellora's face. He sighed. "It had to come."

"You believe the Lawman's explanation?"

"Of course. If teepees and pyrotics can exist and increase, why should not other powers grow into the human race?" He chuckled slightly. "I am somewhat gifted myself." He waved to a table at the side of the divan on which Argyle was seated, and from it an ornamental vase rose, wavering, into the air and floated across the room to rest in Dellora's hand. "Do not be too impressed, my friend," Dellora told him, "there is little gravity here to hinder me. Under Terran conditions I would only be able to slide it from the table so that it shattered on the floor."

"A kineticist." Argyle had seen such men before, chiefly in night clubs or theaters that specialised in human entertainment.

Dellora nodded. "But you didn't come here to talk about me. My gift is small and my troubles are great." He paused. "Your wife loved you until her death. Believe me, I know."

"She is dead, then?" Numbly, as he spoke, Argyle realised that he had been nursing an absurd hope that Spiros had been wrong with his information, and now, that hope was slipping away.

Dellora nodded, and the hope was gone for good.

"Angela was a great and gifted woman," he said, "just how gifted you never knew for she never told you. She could foretell the future."

Argyle looked dazedly at the old man. "What?"

Dellora smiled thinly. "Witchcraft? Magic? No, don't look so incredulous. She had a mind that could sift and sort information with far greater accuracy than any computer ever designed. Even she didn't know how she did it. From the overall picture of a given sequence of facts and figures she could extrapolate the probable end result of a certain course of action with about ninety-eight percent accuracy."

Argyle sat stunned and bewildered. This was his wife? The

lovely girl with the naivete of a child, whom he had married because he fell in love with her simplicity? This fortune-teller!

Only when Dellora snapped, "No, not that, Argyle. She had a gift and she used it," did he realise that he had been speaking out loud.

He lifted his eyes from the gyrations of the fabulous carpet.

"Was that why she . . . she left me? Why she disappeared without trace?"

Dellora paused as if considering the point, then shook his head. "I do not know. She did not speak of it. She saw something in the future of your lives together that drove her from you even though she loved you. She came here and I employed her. But to me she was more than just a means to greater power. She was my friend and I respected her. I trusted her judgment, and she was seldom wrong. She spoke of you often, and in every word she uttered she showed that her love for you was as great as ever."

Argyle sat silent. He could not doubt the truth of every word that Dellora spoke. There was a sincerity which could not be denied.

"Then why did she leave me?" he asked suddenly.

"If she did not tell you it is hardly likely that she would tell me."

Argyle nodded wordlessly. The fact was slowly sinking into his brain that Spiros had not been wrong.

"Do you know how . . . how she died?"

"No, I don't. She went on a business trip for me to the planet Calgon. She never arrived there and she never returned. The wreck of the ship in which she was traveling was found months later. There was no one on board still alive."

That, it seemed, was the end; the final nail driven solidly home. They sat in silence for long minutes while Argyle tried to absorb all that Dellora had told him. The fat man sat—or lay—quietly, waiting, his eyes fixed dispassionately on the younger man. It was as though he realised, instinct-

ively, that here was a moment in the life of the man before him that could not be broken by word or deed; a sad oasis of loss that it was beyond the power of any man to reach. He sat quietly, and waited for the turmoil to pass.

Argyle stirred at last, and moved uncertainly in his seat. He felt out of his depths. His mouth twisted in bitter resentment, and Dellora saw it, and acted to break the spell that Argyle's mood was building.

"And now," he said softly, "the subject is you."

"Me?" The spell was broken as Argyle raised his eyes in surprise.

"Do you think Angela did not foresee her own end?" Dellora nodded slowly. "She did. She saw it all too clearly, months before it came, though the manner and timing she could not foretell. She asked a dozen times that, if she died, I find you and tell you of her love. That I have done. My debt to her is paid by doing that and by offering you employment with the Company Dellora." He lifted a pudgy hand as Argyle made to speak. "It is not charity. A few months ago it might have been, but, in searching for you I have learned a great deal about you. All of it confirmed that what Angela told me was right and not just the ideas of a woman in love." He leaned forward as much as his gross bulk would allow. "I learned enough to think it worth while offering you a position because good Space Engineers are not easy to find. You would earn your keep, if you choose to accept."

"Why should you do this for me?" he asked brusquely.

"I think you would be good for the Company," retorted Dellora.

Argyle shook his head. "No, I don't think that's the reason," he said thoughtfully. "Why should Angela have foreseen her own death, Dellora? What was she doing for you that made her dangerous to someone else?"

The dark eyes regarded Argyle with somber respect as Dellora weighed his words. "You have a sharp mind, Argyle. Too sharp. The years she worked for the Company were the richest and most successful in its history. The Company Dellora is bigger and more powerful than it ever was, and,

naturally, someone had to suffer for that growth. Our gain was someone else's loss." He waved a hand in vague dismissal of an unpleasant fact. "It happens all the time. While there is competition there will be intrigue, and this time the intrigue went as far as murder."

Argyle went cold inside as the shock of Dellora's words hit him.

"I did not mean to tell you that, but I think you have a mind quick enough to work it out for yourself eventually. I cannot bring Angela back to you, but I can try and make up, in some small measure, for her loss to both of us. You don't have to decide now. Think about it for a while, and come and see me again."

He touched a button at the side of the divan on which he lay. In seconds, the two escorting guards were standing in the entrance to the giant room.

"Take Mister Argyle back to his hotel. When he wishes to see me again you will bring him to me."

Argyle rose slowly, still dazed by the shock. Angela murdered! Even if he had half guessed at the fact before there had been no cushioning of the effect of Dellora's cold, hard words.

"Until we meet again," said Dellora softly.

Argyle found himself out in the long, luxurious corridor with the guards on either side of him. He walked in silence for several dozen yards, and then halted as a thought struck him.

"Wait here," he ordered abruptly. "I want to see Mister Dellora again."

He turned before they could object and went quickly back to the giant hub room of the station. He reached it in time to see Dellora's massive form disappearing through the far exit.

"Mister Dellora," he called sharply.

The figure halted and turned back towards him.

"So soon?" The voice was slightly mocking.

Argyle shook his head. "No, not that. I wanted . . . look, do you have any idea who . . . who—"

"Who killed Angela?" Dellora gazed sadly across the room. "No, I cannot tell you that, Argyle. I only wish I could. I'm sorry."

Argyle turned back into the corridor. Even that knowledge was denied him. He was punching pillows trying to pin the blame on any one person or group. He rejoined the guards who eyed him curiously, and together they went to the waiting ferry.

## CHAPTER FIVE

IT WAS after two in the morning when Argyle arrived back at the Hotel Dellora. He went to his room and sat down on the bed. Reaction was setting in, bringing with it an ache to the limbs and somnolence to the mind. He undressed slowly, leaving his clothes in an untidy heap on the chair beside his bed, and lay down. Bodily weariness overcame him and he slept without knowing that he did so.

Argyle awoke to a sound he could not place, and to a flash of light that seemed without reality. His heart pounded as if he'd run a dozen miles, and his eyes probed wide into the darkness around him without seeing anything but the expected black of night.

He lay still and tried to calm his pounding nerves, to convince his waking senses that a nightmare, and not a sound, had wakened him.

And then a voice said, "Put on the light, Argyle. I can't fumble for a switch in this damned darkness."

Argyle's heart leapt; he hesitated, then, slowly, reached to press the switch beside his bed. The lights flowed softly to full brightness. Through slitted lids Argyle made out the form of a man who crossed from the door to a chair beside his bed.

He was a slim, fair haired figure, not over forty, with a pallid face and large luminous eyes. The lower lip was full and gave his red mouth a petulant twist. His face was pinched and ascetic, and his whole air that of a dilettante. It was the



eyes, though, that held Argyle. They were too familiar to be ignored. He wondered where else he had seen such eyes.

"That's better." The man eased himself into the soft chair, and smiled with engaging candor at the half-reclining figure of Argyle. "Tell me, Argyle, how is Preacher Judd?"

So casual was the question, and so ridiculous the words, that for a moment Argyle wondered if this whole scene was not of the stuff of nightmares.

"Preacher Judd?" he queried. "Who the devil's Preacher Judd?"

The other sighed. "Ah, well. I suppose I could hardly expect you to admit acquaintance. However—"

"What the hell is all this?" demanded Argyle angrily. "Is this one of Dellora's little jokes?"

"How little you know old Pietro." The man smiled sardonically. "But perhaps that's just as well. To get back to Preacher Judd—"

"Dammit, I've never heard of the man," exploded Argyle. "The only name I'm interested in right now is yours."

The lower lip protruded more petulantly, and the liquid eyes lost their softness. The whole picture was that of a spoilt child who has had a favorite toy removed from its avaricious hands.

"My identity will do you no good, and it may do me some harm if you learn it now. I have no means to force you to admit your knowledge of Preacher Judd, Argyle, but I will give you a warning which you will do well to accept. I don't know why you came here, except that Pietro sent for you. I can only guess at the message which Spiros gave you. I only know that you have come and that your presence is not necessary here. Get out with just as much speed as you came." He stood up abruptly. "Meddle in my affairs any more, Argyle, and you'll wish you'd never been born."

He crossed to the door and unlocked it, then he looked back at the astounded and bemused Argyle.

"One other thing, give Preacher Judd that same advice when next you see him. I doubt if he will take it, but at

least he will know that I am not ignoring him completely."

He was gone through the door before Argyle could gather his scattered wits. It was seconds before he slid from under the sheet and in four swift strides crossed to the door. He slid it open and stepped into the corridor which stretched away in a gentle curve for several yards on either side of his door. It was empty.

Slowly, Argyle turned back into the room and closed the door behind him. For an instant he considered raising an alarm, but he hesitated as the oddness of the encounter made him think twice. There was no evidence that it had ever taken place.

He shook himself and shivered slightly, trying to throw off the feeling of blinding insignificance, and moved towards the divan. There was nothing he could do now. As he sat on the edge of the bed a minute gleam of brightness caught his eye, shining against the background of the pillow. He leaned closer and probed at it with his fingers. Panic ran through him, fear greater than he had ever known before, as he drew from the tiny hole that ran deep into the plastic foam of the pillow, the slender three inch dart of a needle gun. His mind flashed back to the sound which had wakened him, and to the half forgotten glimmer of light. The sound had been the sibilant hiss of a needle gun, and the light had, for a brief moment, illumined his sleeping form for the marksman.

The needle had missed him by bare inches.

He looked at it more closely, and the hair at the back of his neck prickled with fear as he saw the telltale brown stain which marred the needle point. Even a scratch would have been fatal. Carefully, he crossed the room and deposited the needle down the waste chute, feeling a little better with the knowledge that it no longer shared the room with him. He sat down again, trembling a little from reaction, and thanked whatever stars were responsible for the luck or bad marksmanship that had saved his life.

Saved his life?

But why hadn't the stranger tried again? He'd had only an

unarmed and sleepy victim to deal with—one who, by his reactions, had shown that the first attempt had passed unnoticed, or at least unrecognized. The very fact that such an attempt had been made showed that his visitor regarded him as dangerous. But why dangerous? Question piled on question in Argyle's reeling brain. Why had Angela been dangerous? Or Spiros? All of a sudden, he felt sick with fear. The ordered regularity of his life had been shattered by events which made no sense, and all of them could be traced back to a dirty, smoke filled bar on an off-beat planet named Jones.

The death of Spiros had fallen into an irregular place in the center of a puzzle whose edges were shrouded in mystery. Spiros had died to prevent him from contacting Argyle. That much was clear. Angela had died, and she had been his wife. Therefore, he had to be eliminated as well.

The key to the whole grim business was, it seemed, a bewildered Space Engineer named Richard Argyle.

At last he lay back on the bed and slept after a fashion through sheer nervous exhaustion.

Waking, later, was a natural process. His sleep had been deep and he lay in semi-wakefulness with the light of day streaming across the room. His tongue moved uncertainly in his dry, furred mouth, and his eyelids were gummy with sleep as he pried them open. Then he realized that someone was knocking on the door of his room.

They knocked again, louder and more insistently. Argyle slid out of bed and padded across to the door. He slipped the lock, shouted, "Come in," and padded back to the bed. As he sat down the door opened and three officers in the gray uniform of Dellora's private army came grimly into the room.

Argyle gazed at them in blank surprise, and then remarked, "Well, this is a pleasure," in a voice which indicated that it was anything but. "What can I do for you?"

One of the officers, a tall, thin man with an odd chin beard and moustache, produced a metal case from an inner

pocket. He opened it and held it out flat for Argyle to see the contents.

"Mister Argyle, have you ever seen that before?"

Argyle looked closer and his stomach jerked a trifle as he saw within the case the slim, deadly form of the dart which he had sent down the waste chute.

"Yes, sure. I . . . I put it down the waste chute myself during the night."

"Why?"

"Well, I . . . I guess I just didn't feel safe with it in the room. How did you get it anyway?"

"One of the hotel staff noticed it this morning and passed it on to us. Its position in the chute, together with other factors, led us to believe that you placed it there."

"Well, so I put it there. You see—"

"It's an odd thing for a man to have in his hotel room?"

"Someone tried to kill me last night," broke in Argyle desperately as he tried to quell the panic rising in his being. "See, there's the hole in the pillow." He stretched it between two fingers.

"Why didn't you report it?"

"I didn't notice it till after he'd gone. He . . . he sat down there and threatened me, and then after he'd gone I saw the needle in the pillow, and—"

"He was a stranger to you, this man?" asked the officer bleakly.

"Yes, I never saw him before in my life."

There was a sardonic gleam in the officer's icy, gray eyes. "So this man breaks into your room, tries to kill you, fails in the attempt, and then sits down to have a chat before leaving. Is that right?"

Argyle sat silent and white faced. He didn't need to be told how unconvincing the story sounded.

"Search the room," ordered the bearded officer.

Argyle gaped in sheer disbelief as the other two men went about their appointed task with an efficiency born of long practice.

"What the hell is all this? What am I supposed to have done?"

"In good time, Mister Argyle. I believe you visited Mister Dellora last night? At what hour did you leave him?"

"I don't know. Must have been about twelve-thirty, I think. I was back in my room soon after two."

The officer nodded. "At least you have told the truth on that point. Although there wasn't much point in lying when you knew there were two escorts to check you, was there?"

A dull, red flush flowed over Argyle's face. "Now, look—" he began.

"Is this it?" He was interrupted by the return of one of the other officers from the toilet room. The man handed over something to his superior which Argyle couldn't see because his vision was blocked by the man's body. In silence they examined whatever it was for long seconds, and then the bearded one asked, "Where did you find it?"

"Wrapped in that cloth at the back of the toilet cupboard."

"Do you recognise this, Argyle?" The beard turned towards him, hand outstretched. Argyle's stomach turned to water as he saw in the proffered palm the gleaming, slender body of a needle gun. He felt himself sag under the shock, and he made a visible effort to pull himself together as he heard the man say in a far off voice, "This will require a great deal of explaining, Mister Argyle."

"I never saw it before. I . . . I've never owned such a thing. It . . . this whole thing's ridiculous. What the devil's it all about?" The utter bewilderment of the night before returned to sweep over him. In desperation he summoned all the authority he could muster to his voice, and said steadily, "I want to see Pietro Dellora. He will listen to my story."

"I doubt if he will, Mister Argyle," interrupted the officer mildly. "Pietro Dellora was murdered during the night; shot by a poisoned dart from a needle gun such as this."

## CHAPTER SIX

ARGYLE's brain reeled under the shock. He slumped mentally and physically. His mouth opened, but no words came. There was a distant roaring in his head as of a great wind rushing down to envelope him. Through it he heard the officer say:

"I believe you went back, alone, to see Mister Dellora, after you had been escorted from his presence. Why was that?"

"What? Oh that." Dimly, Argyle made sense out of the sounds that struck his ears. "I . . . I wanted to ask him a question."

"That would be about half-past-twelve?"

"Yes. Yes, it would."

"Mister Dellora was found dead by his man servant early this morning. He was lying in the entrance to his private suite, and he had been shot shortly after midnight last night."

"I had nothing to do with it."

"That remains to be proved." The officer turned towards the door. "You will remain on Dellora Planet until the arrival of Mister Dellora's son. Alfredo Dellora will arrive in a few days. He has already been summoned. There is no sense in trying to leave the planet, and you are forbidden to go outside the limits of Dellora City. A suitable adjustment has been made on the Central Computer, and we shall know every move you make."

"Why not just lock me up and have done with it?" demanded Argyle bitterly.

"You may have accomplices," replied the officer easily. "And although I don't think you would be stupid enough to try and contact them, they may be desperate enough to try and contact you." He smiled thinly. "Do not do anything foolish, Argyle, it might turn out to be fatal."

Argyle hardly heard the door close as they left him. He sat dazed and stunned by the latest in the series of nerve shattering blows which had been dealt him.

Dellora dead!

The fact pounded in his brain with hammering insistence. He had no doubt whatever that his visitor of the night before was the murderer, and that he was being set up to take the rap. Gradually, his nerves calmed themselves and he began to think with more clarity. The stranger had warned him off, and then had taken steps to see that he stayed off.

The needle shot into his pillow had been meant to miss him. It had been planted on purpose to be found later by the Security Officers who would search diligently for clues to the death of their employer. Argyle realized that he had made things even worse for himself by finding the needle and trying to get rid of it. The Security Men would assume that he'd used the pillow as a target, either to test the murder gun before using it on Dellora, or to unload the poisoned missile afterwards, in safety.

But how had the gun got into his toilet room?"

It didn't seem likely that the killer would return to Argyle's room a second time to plant the weapon. He wouldn't be able to guarantee that Argyle would remain asleep; if, indeed, he slept at all after that first visit. He might have put it there before. But, if so, he wouldn't have been able to fire the shot into the pillow which had wakened Argyle.

Unless—!

He sat up straight with sudden shock as another thought struck him. How was the murderer able to get to the space station and back without being spotted? Dellora was as well protected in his man made world as anyone could be. And, now that he thought about it, Argyle had seen the stranger unlock the door as he left the room; he remembered all too well that he had locked the door before he retired to sleep. There had been no way into the room short of breaking the door down, or using a duplicate key. No physical way!

The words of the Lawman, Sworder, echoed in his mind. . . . "We've never had a teleport in the Galaxy before."

Over the years telepaths had grown in stature from variety

theater entertainers with a limited range, to a group of people whose importance to the Galactic community could not be measured in terms of mere physical wealth. On them had been placed the responsibility of maintaining rapid interstellar communication. The bridge between the stars was impassable without their special gifts. Others had come to join them; kineticists like Pietro Dellora; prognosticators, like Angela; pyrotics, levitators and a dozen others. As Mankind spread through the Galaxy his mind expanded and gave forth its power. The process was slow; so slow that almost no one noticed it except the scientists who probed and picked at the reasons behind the development.

And now there was a teleport.

It wasn't so much the fact of a teleport that disturbed Argyle; it was the more important detail that the teleport had homicidal tendencies.

The stranger was the first known teleport in the Galaxy—and he had fixed Argyle good!

Later, when he had calmed himself, Argyle washed and dressed. He left his room, and went tentatively to the hotel restaurant for a late breakfast, expecting at any moment to be jumped on by one of the gray uniformed Security Men. No one bothered him.

He ate slowly and with little appetite, while his mind wrestled with the problems that confronted him. For all the apparent freedom of movement granted to him, he was as much a prisoner as if he'd been locked in jail. The slight, ever present pressure of the metal disc chained to his wrist was more efficient than any human with human failings.

After breakfast he left the hotel and strolled aimlessly along the wide streets of Dellora City. The alien sun cast brilliant light on the white buildings. Argyle reflected how odd it was that the giant globe which dominated the sky was only a minor star, almost unnoticed so far was it from the great, populous hub of the Galaxy. Even the planet had not been worth colonizing until a distant ancestor of Pietro Dellora had used it as his base of operations, and as headquarters for his ever growing trading company. Now,



it was the center of the largest single empire within the Universe. In terms of power and wealth and strength, not even Earth herself could match the riches of the Company Dellora.

Soon Alfredo Dellora would come to claim his inheritance, and another in the unending line of trading barons would take his place in the halls of the mighty. Argyle wondered just how different from his father would Alfredo be? Physically, he doubted if they even resembled one another; but Argyle hoped, for his own sake, that Alfredo was as tolerant and as friendly as his father had been. In that hope lay his own salvation.

His step was almost jaunty as he made his way back towards the hotel about an hour later. The thought of mid-day lunch made him realize that his appetite had returned. His light breakfast wasn't coping too well with his bodily mechanism. The street around him was busy with people; workers taking lunch, shoppers touring the automarts, young couples enjoying the sunshine. It was so much like Earth.

The mood shattered against an illuminated sign beneath a black shrouded tridiscscope which announced:

**PIETRO DELLORA IS DEAD**

As he looked at the sign it wavered and faded. The wording changed to announce that:

**ALFREDO DELLORA ARRIVES IN TWELVE DAYS**

Above the words, the fading picture of Pietro was replaced by another, this time of a younger man with a thin face and a full lipped mouth; the eyes were . . .

Argyle's heart lurched and his stomach turned over. Suddenly he was back in the middle of a nightmare as he looked into the familiar eyes of Alfredo Dellora. With sudden horror and a sense of overwhelming dismay, he knew who the stranger was who had disturbed his sleep and tried to frame him for murder.

The teleport was Alfredo Dellora.

How he got back to his hotel Argyle never knew. All thought of hunger and food were snatched away as if they had never been; there was only sickness and terror deep

within, where earlier there had been confidence. There dawned the awful realization that, if it was left to Alfredo Dellora, Richard Argyle was going to pay for the murder of his father. He shut the door of his room behind him and sank on to the bed, still dazed by shock. The horror was back with him more strongly than ever, and this time, he knew, it was here to stay. He had to remain on Dellora Planet until Alfredo Dellora arrived, and then . . .

Grimly he knew that he could have no illusions as to the fate he would suffer. He was back to the original proposition that he was dangerous to someone; that someone had coalesced into the person of Alfredo Dellora. Alfredo had wanted his father out of the way, and he had taken a single cold-blooded step to accomplish both ends at once.

Argyle lay back on his bed for a long time, stupefied by the turn of events. His tumbling thoughts sought desperately for an answer, a way out, an escape of some sort. Dully, hours later, he knew that there was one way and only one way out.

He had, somehow, to leave Dellora Planet and lose himself somewhere in the vastness of the Galaxy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

DURING the next two days Argyle kept to his hotel as much as he could. He left his room only to visit the restaurant, for such meals as he could force down his unwilling throat, and he visited the automart next to the hotel for such necessities as he required. The rest of the time he lay on his bed and smoked innumerable cigarettes while he considered ways and means of accomplishing his removal from the Planet Dellora.

At first sight the position seemed to be as near hopeless as it could be. He was on a strange world without friends or even acquaintances. It was controlled by a Security Force which had its own rules, and more important, its own methods of running things. Every move he made and every

step he took was recorded on the Central Computer at the Security Force H. Q. If he made an attempt to leave the planet he would be picked up within minutes of his first suspicious move. He could not doubt either, that since the murder of Pietro Dellora, all strangers on the planet were subject to a special watch.

All his ideas about leaving the planet finally boiled down to only one possibility. The independent freighter on which he had traveled to Dellora was still at the field. It would be there for another four days, or longer if the Security Police decided so. And they would most certainly decide so if he tried to get aboard.

The flaw in the Security Force's method of supervision hit him suddenly and without a great deal of prior thought. He left his hotel room one morning and spent a couple of hours walking round the city. He went to places where local inhabitants congregated; to big automarts, to cafes, to entertainment arcades. And everywhere he went he looked carefully at the left wrist of all the people he could. Not one-in-a-hundred had a metal disc strapped to it.

Therefore, only strangers to Dellora Planet were supervised at H. Q. There were exceptions; for instance, he found that all the gray uniformed police wore a disc, and so did local government officials; but the greater mass of the local population were bound by no such limitations.

The total population of Dellora City was probably in the region of sixty or seventy thousand; the total for the planet was as a whole nearer to the quarter million mark. It would be an almost impossible job for the Security Forces to maintain a constant watch on a such a large number of people, even with the aid of a computer. Therefore, they had to be selective.

Once that fact had been uncovered, Argyle quickly moved on to the next factor involved. While he wore the disc he was under supervision. Once he got rid of the disc the Security Police had to find him in order to re-establish supervision. Without the disc he was a free man; with it he was

a prisoner for they could pick him up wherever and whenever they liked.

Eagerly now he pursued his line of reasoning, always with one end in view—to get aboard the freighter, and once aboard, to escape detection.

During the day that followed he laid his plans carefully, and made his preparations as inconspicuously as he could. He bought, in small quantities, enough vitamin tablets to last him for several days—a week if necessary. He bought two plastic containers of pocket size which held between them just over half a pint of water, and finally a strong metal stylopen. He drew from memory, as much of the general layout of the freighter as he could recall. His choice of hiding place was governed by several factors. There had to be room for him to get inside; there had to be access to the ship's airplant, or he wouldn't last two hours; and, he had to be able to attract attention when he was sure it was safe to come out. He decided that any attempt he made had to be at night. Most of the ships' crews would be hitting the high spots in Dellora City, and the staff at the field would be the minimum required. Ships did not usually land or take-off during the night hours on any planet.

Argyle left his hotel after a heavy evening meal during which he stuffed himself with as much food as he could manage. He knew that personal discomfort would be the result if his plans materialized, but he had to get off Dellora Planet before Alfredo Dellora arrived to nail the lid on his coffin.

Alfredo!

Argyle gave a lot of thought to the teleport even while he was making his plans. He came to several conclusions which he knew he could not justify, but which seemed reasonable nevertheless. It was clear that Alfredo kept his secret supernormal powers to himself. Keeping them secret probably meant considerable trouble. He could not keep disappearing under odd circumstances or someone would be bound to notice sooner or later. Thus, Argyle didn't feel that he was in any immediate personal danger. Dellora

was probably content to leave matters in the hands of the Security Police until he arrived by ship some time in the near future.

He went back to his room from the hotel restaurant and filled his pockets with the vitamin tablets and the water flasks. He had to leave behind his personal belongings. After food the next consideration was money, in case he had to bribe the freighter captain against turning him over to the Security Police if he was discovered too soon.

It was after ten o'clock when he left the hotel for the last time, ostensibly for a late night stroll around the amusement arcades. He wandered aimlessly for a while, watching the crowds grow thinner and the streets become more deserted as the people went home. The cafes began to close and the lights over the tridi-theatres winked out. Soon there were only the late night strollers like himself, the lovers in pairs haunting the shadows and the Security Police maintaining their beats.

Argyle was more interested in the Security Police than the ordinary public since at least one of them figured prominently in his plans. He got as far away from the space-field as he could. Finally, in an off-beat corner of Dellora City, he knew the time had come for him to start moving—and moving fast.

He spotted a Security Guard patrolling in lonely solitude about half way along the deserted street. Argyle walked along the road openly, and as he came abreast of the guard he crossed over and called:

"Excuse me, Officer."

The man stopped and turned to look at him, but recognition was the least of Argyle's worries.

"I'm looking for the Avenida Dellora. I seem to have taken the wrong turn."

The man eyed him speculatively. "You should have turned left a block back. It's about half-a-mile along."

"Thanks a lot."

"Right."

They turned away from each other and Argyle took only

two steps while making sure that the man resumed his beat. Then, quickly and silently, with every muscle tensed for the effort, he turned back and hammered his right fist hard into the unprotected nape of the guard's neck. The man never had a chance. He went down like a log and stayed down; quite clearly he wouldn't move for a long time. Argyle hoped fervently that he hadn't killed him for the fact would be registered at the Security H. Q. and their forces would be along in double quick time. He felt the man's wrist and found a steady pulse.

He looked hurriedly up and down the road. It was deserted and no one seemed to have remarked the incident. To one side a large entrance opened into the private garden of a large house. Argyle dragged the unconscious man into the garden. Working swiftly he stripped the man of his uniform and bound him securely with strips of his under-clothing. He took off his own clothes and donned the uniform, thanking his stars that it didn't fit too badly. Most of the security men were well built and muscular which suited him admirably. He transferred the contents of his own pockets to those of the uniform he was now wearing and made sure that the unconscious man was tightly bound.

He drew a deep breath and tried to steady his pounding nerves for now came the moment he dreaded more than anything. He pulled up his left sleeve and bared the chained disc. It was a strong but neat chain, joined quite safely to the disc with little chance that it would come loose accidentally. From his pocket he took the metal stylopen and inserted it under the chain. He twisted the pen slowly so that the chain began to tighten around his wrist. Pain lanced through his arm as the pressure increased and the flesh on his wrist plumped and turned red as the chain bit hard into it. He noticed with sudden horror that the pen was bending a little. He gritted his teeth and twisted hard, feeling his hand go numb as the pain at his wrist increased. Then, suddenly, it broke. The chain parted and his wrist was free of the disc which shackled him, by invisible bonds, to the Security H. Q.

Hurriedly he threw the disc from him into the shadow of the bushes and started down the road at a jog trot. The spacefield lay ahead of him about a mile distant. He estimated he might have five minutes in which to reach it before the alarm was raised and the hunt was on. All the while, as he ran, he kept his ears open for signs of an alarm. None came. Twice he had to slow down as late strollers came into view.

The main entrance to the field came into view and still there was no sound of an alarm. He walked through openly, and no one took any notice of him in his gray uniform. He turned left making towards the guard room where he had been interrogated when he first arrived. Then, once safely in the shadows away from plain sight of the main spacefield buildings, he sprinted towards the field perimeter where he knew the freighter was.

Still there was no alarm.

He paused on the rim of the perimeter and could make out, ahead of him, the looming hulls of several large ships; the dim blackness of their shapes blotting out a small portion of the starlit heavens above. His eyes became accustomed to the darkness, and there, a hundred yards or more out, he could see the stubby, blunt shape of the freighter.

There were lights in the hull telling him that some portion of the crew kept harbor watch when they were in a strange port. He made for the freighter, moving softly and keeping to the shadows. The night was a vast, silent cloak around him, the stillness could almost be felt.

The ramp leading up to the freighter's airlock was dark and unguarded. He moved up it stealthily, every muscle tensed, ready to slide over the edge and lose himself in the gloom, should it be necessary. The bright entrance of the airlock loomed before him. He moved, cat like, through the open lock. To the right lay the forward control bridge, the officers' cabins and the crew quarters. To the left lay the power plant, the engine room and the cargo holds.

He turned left, still watchful and alert. Whatever harbor watch was being maintained would almost certainly be on

the bridge, and the others aboard would be in the crew quarters reading and playing poker.

The corridor was long and well lit. He went along it hurriedly and quietly, every sense alert.

Suddenly the steady hum of the generators was shattered by the high whine of a siren. As he heard it Argyle's blood went cold. The emergency alarm for the space field had been set off. He knew that great barrages of lights were now illuminating the whole Field. The Security Forces had come into action.

He had little time left now. The ship would be awakening around him. The duty watch would take up their emergency positions. He ran the remaining length of corridor and peered in through the half open engine room hatch. It was empty, but it wouldn't stay that way for long. The duty engineer would soon be along, grumbling about his disturbed night's sleep.

Argyle crossed the engine room, moving between the great bulk of the twin power units and the lesser bulks of the ordinary generators. At the rear of the generators, behind protective shielding, lay the atomic capsules that fed the power lines, and below them lay the fuel tanks.

Flush against the deck, in front of the protective shielding, was an inspection hatch. Feverishly, but carefully, his strong fingers worked at the large bolts which held the hatch in place. There were six of them that gave one by one. Every moment he expected the engine room hatch to open—but no one came.

He levered the hatch up and slid down into the exposed cavity. It was small, but there was just enough room for his body to get in. He reached up and pulled the hatch over him. Then, with fingers which fumbled in the dark, he pulled the bolt ends through the respective holes and screwed them as tight as his insecure grip would allow. He tested the hatch and it seemed reasonably tight, sufficient, at any rate, to escape detection. Then he slid lower into the cramped chamber and settled himself as comfortably as he could for the long wait before him.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

ARGYLE didn't know how long he slept. The noise which had woken him was still there and it was getting louder. The heavy clang of several pairs of boots echoed on the deck above his head, interspersed with muffled voices. Argyle didn't need to be told that the Security Forces were carrying out a search.

He edged his way further into the shelter of pipes and cables, pressing himself as far away from the inspection chamber as he could. The noise came nearer and the footsteps stopped. There was a banging and scraping just above his head, and light penetrated dimly as the inspection hatch was dragged aside. The beam of a torch shone down probing the darkness.

"Empty," said an echoing voice with some disgust.

"I told them he couldn't possibly have got this far," said another. "Dammit, we picked up that patrol man in the bushes back of Massena Street barely five minutes after the Computer gave the alarm."

"Well, he's got to be somewhere. I wouldn't want to be in the Commandant's shoes if we don't get him before Alfredo Dellora gets here."

The hatch clanged back into place and was screwed down. Argyle breathed again. Apparently, he concluded, it was common talk in the Security Forces that Alfredo Dellora wanted to see him very badly indeed.

The darkness was oppressive and he found claustrophobia looming up to add to his troubles. Time became a lost thing. Hunger and thirst were part of his being, and his mind lost the capacity for any action but the recognition of discomfort.

Hours passed.

Twice more the hatch was lifted and dazzling shafts of light speared within inches of his hiding place. On the second occasion a voice complained loudly, "Dammit, when we goin' to get off this planet. We're late already in lifting."

"You'll be later still," was the snarled reply, "unless . . ."

The hatch slammed into place again cutting off the words and muffling the voices.

Argyle sank once more into the stupor of hunger and thirst that enveloped him. Added to his troubles was his own personal cleanliness, which was something that bothered him considerably. There was nothing he could do about it. He hoped, in one of his few lucid moments, that the air conditioning was able to cope with the smell of his body, steeped as it was in sweat and grime and dirt.

Hunger became a physical pain that tablets could not assuage. Thirst cracked his lips and dried his tongue. His moments of lucidity became fewer and fewer, yet some strange bodily mechanism kept him from doing the obvious thing—getting out of his self-imposed prison. He held on and hoped.

The churning of the booster pumps brought clarity to his brain and hope to his heart. In the engine room above him the muffled sounds of men at work echoed down through the deck plates. The boosters slowed and died. Argyle waited in an agony of suspense. . . . And then, low, steady, throbbing through the whole body of the ship, he felt the great engines pulsing out their power in preparation for take-off. The noise grew louder and a shudder ran through the metal around him. The ship began to move and he could feel the upward lift as she rose towards the heavens.

He settled himself grimly to more hours of waiting. He dared not break cover until he was clear of Dellora Planet. It was a five week trip back to Rigel Five. He had plenty of time.

There followed more hours of agony and discomfort until he could not hang on any longer.

He squeezed himself out of the mass of cable and pipe and groped upward to the inspection hatch. He found that the bolts had been screwed in from above and he had neither the leverage nor the strength to move them from below. He managed to take off one of his shoes, and weakly began to hammer at the metal above his head. For a long

time nothing happened, and then footsteps came and with them voices which boomed dully through the deck plates. He hammered again, louder and in a sudden desperate panic to get out of this cramped hole before he died of sheer suffocating claustrophobia.

The bolts above him turned and the hatch was lifted. A voice that was high with wonder and surprise, shouted: "Hey, will you come and look at this?"

Hands reached down and lifted him out.

"Hell, he stinks," remarked another.

Argyle tried to speak but his tongue was too swollen and his mouth too dry, he could only croak.

"He looks in a bad way," said another. "Better get him up to the sick bay and call for the skipper to look at him."

"I guess this must be the guy they were looking for back on Dellora."

"Huh, by the look of him he'd be better off in jail. Come on up, feller. Let's get you cleaned up."

Argyle managed to get to his feet with an arm supporting him on each side—and then he fainted.

He awoke with a bunk soft under his still aching body, and lights bright above him. He moved a little, stretching his muscles and trying to ease the ache in them.

"Awake?" The voice was gruff and familiar.

He squinted in the light and made out the black beard of the freighter skipper.

Argyle laughed slightly and nodded. "Yes, I'm awake."

"What in hell were you doing in the inspection chamber?"

"Can't you guess?" countered Argyle grimly.

"Yeah. Yeah, I reckon I can. Dellora's Security Men almost took the ship apart three times looking for you." He pointed a horny finger at Argyle. "I warned you before you landed not to cross their path, mister."

"And now what?" Argyle eased himself into a sitting position.

The ship captain eyed him somberly. "That depends."

"Do you know why I was wanted?"

"Sure. Who doesn't?"

"Are you taking me back to Dellora?"

The man gazed at him in silent contemplation for a long minute. "I haven't changed course yet," he said at last.

"How far out are we?"

"Four days. We were three days late leaving."

Argyle felt suddenly physically sick. He had been in that hole for almost nine days, and now . . .

"You don't have to turn back," he said. "When we get to Rigel Five call the law there and hand me over to them if you think I had anything to do with Pietro Dellora's murder."

"Murder?" The skipper's black eye flashed at him in sudden alarm, "Who said anything about murder?"

Argyle blinked in surprise. "But . . . but you said you knew why I was wanted by the Security Squads? They . . . they told you, didn't they?"

"Sure, they told me you were wanted for robbery with violence. Though I must admit I couldn't see what a feller like you wanted to do that for."

Argyle relaxed in his bunk. So, another factor had entered into the arena. Dellora's security men didn't want to broadcast who was responsible for the murder of old Pietro. Why? Because Alfredo had told them not to. Because he didn't want the news to break outside Dellora Planet—at least, not until Argyle was safely tried and convicted and put out of the way.

"What's this about murder?" insisted the skipper belligerently.

"You knew old Pietro was dead? Murdered?"

The man nodded.

"I am the one who was supposed to have done it."

"But they said—"

"Story invented for home consumption."

"Well, well. They don't change much on Dellora. Tricky as a pack of Venusian weasels."

"I want to get to Rigel Five," Argyle insisted urgently. "Once I'm there you can hand me over to Lawman Sworder,

that's how guilty I think I am. But if you turn back to Dellora, well, I'm a dead duck."

The skipper sat and eyed him, pondering the idea. Clearly, he had no love for the authorities on Dellora. That might be the one factor which would swing him on to Argyle's side.

"All right," he nodded at last. "I'll take a chance. I wouldn't naturally do a damn thing to help those buzzards. They did me dirt too often for me to treat 'em like brothers. Like I said, when you're in Dellora territory you're in the middle of trouble."

## CHAPTER NINE

ARGYLE kept to himself during the trip to Rigel Five. The first few days were spent in the ship's tiny sick bay, getting over the effects of his self-imposed confinement. The rest of the time he spent in the same cabin that he'd occupied on the outward trip. He read books and old journals from all parts of the Galaxy, that were, in themselves, a rough guide to the wanderings of the ship and her crew.

The tough, black bearded captain didn't bother him, save to assure him that he would most certainly hand him over to Lawman Sworder upon arrival.

He stood on the bridge control as they came in to land on the planet city, Rigel Five. He listened abstractedly as the skipper took the landing instructions from the control tower, and passed his own cargo lists for customs inspection and marketing authorities. But his ears pricked up when the captain went on: "Request that Lawman Sworder be on hand at the time of landing to take over responsibility for a suspected felon who stowed away aboard ship on Dellora Planet."

Argyle felt tension return to his body for the first time in weeks as the official confirmation came back. He knew that the ship's captain was only covering himself against the future, but nevertheless, it wasn't pleasant to hear himself described as a suspected felon.

"Don't worry," said the skipper gruffly, almost as if he could read Argyle's thoughts. "I got to cover myself in the official records."

"Yes, sure. That's all right."

He wondered what action Sworder would take. At least it was not likely that he would be sent back to Dellora on a charge of armed robbery, once he had told his own story to Sworder. Suddenly he remembered something that made him turn to the ship's captain who stood beside him.

"Say, skipper. Did you ever hear of a man called Preacher Judd?"

The other frowned. "Judd? Nope, can't say I have—wait a minute, though. Preacher Judd! Name seems familiar." A frown of concentration creased his leathery face. "Preacher Judd. Seems like I heard of a politician named Judd some years back when I last hit Terra. Don't know if that's the same feller. Yeah, I'm sure his name was Judd. Don't know about the Preacher part of it, though."

Argyle nodded his thanks. A politician? And on Earth? Well, it didn't seem a very likely choice. Why should Alfredo Dellora assume that he, Richard Argyle, was on speaking terms with a politician?

After they landed, Argyle went to his cabin and waited with mounting tension for the arrival of Lawman Sworder. He didn't have long to wait.

The gruff voice of the captain in the corridor saying, "In there, Lawman," gave warning of Sworder's coming. He slid open the cabin door and stepped inside with a light, unstartled smile spread across his square face.

"I had a feeling it would be you, Argyle," he said.

They shook hands and Argyle remarked, "I never thought I'd be glad to see the Law."

"Oh, we have our uses at times." He sat down on the edge of the bunk. "Well, what's the trouble. What's all this about. A suspected felon?"

"You mean no word has come through from Dellora Planet?"

"No."

Argyle pursed his lips. The only reason which would account for that was lack of a teepee on Dellora to relay the news. Unless . . .

"We heard about the murder of old Pietro," remarked Sworder quietly.

"Teepee?"

"How else? Look, I don't know what sort of trouble you're in, Argyle, but you'd better let me in on it from the beginning. Last I knew you were headed for Dellora to see Pietro and find out about your wife. Suppose you go on from there."

"It adds up to one very unpleasant fact, Sworder," said Argyle grimly. "I am supposed to have murdered Pietro Dellora."

Sworder sat quiet and digested the information without any show of horror or surprise.

"I can only assume that you didn't do it," he commented at last.

"Well, I'm glad someone believes me. How do you figure that?"

"We'd have a request to hold you on arrival here—and so would every other planet to which ships from Dellora were headed. As we've had no such request I can only assume that someone wants to hush the matter up for a reason best known to themselves. Let's have the rest of it."

As quickly and concisely as he could Argyle went through the maze of events that had entrapped him since he left Rigel Five. Sworder listened without comment until Argyle finished.

"This teleport—you think he's the one who killed Spiros?"

"I'm sure of it."

"But why should he kill Spiros?"

"Because he wanted to prevent Spiros getting to me and dragging me into whatever is going on. You know, and I know, he was too late."

"In other words, he didn't want you to meet Pietro Dellora."

"That's right. Though why, I haven't got around to puz-

zling out as yet. I need more facts and more details. I need to know what is at the back of the whole stinking business before I'll be able to tie in these other threads."

"I suppose you know who the teleport is," remarked Sworder softly.

Argyle nodded and grinned as he did so.

"I thought you might. Well?"

"His name is Alfredo Dellora."

Sworder's black eyes flashed at him in sheer incredulous surprise. He whistled soundlessly. "No wonder you wanted to get off Dellora Planet before he got there."

"He assumed one odd thing, Sworder, when he first visited me in that cabin on the space station. He assumed I knew a man known as Preacher Judd."

"Preacher Judd!"

"Yes, ever heard of him?"

Sworder leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. "How long since you were last on Earth, Argyle?" he asked.

"Oh, five—nearly six years I guess. Why?"

Sworder nodded. "Armadeus Judd—Preacher Judd to the average man—is the President of the Terran Grand Council."

"What?" Argyle felt as surprised as he must have looked. "Dammit, Sworder, I don't know much about politics, but I'd remember a name like that if I'd heard it ten years ago."

"You wouldn't have," interrupted Sworder calmly. "Judd seems to be a very remarkable man. He's come up fast. Ten years ago he was an unknown minor politician; five years ago he suddenly sprang into prominence. In less than a year something happened to him—he became a giant in stature, someone to rank with the great men of history. He's one of the most powerful men, outside of the Traders, in the Galaxy. He's got the reputation of being a miracle worker; someone who'll pull Earth's chestnuts out of the fire before she's gone too far down the line." He shrugged. "I don't see why Alfredo Dellora should assume you know a man like Judd."

Argyle sat silent and puzzled. He did not know why Dellora



should think that he was on speaking terms with Judd. But he knew that Dellora would not leave him alone. Old Pietro and Spiros and maybe Angela—he shuddered at the thought—had been removed. After two attempts that failed, Alfredo would not hesitate a third try. . . . This time making sure that Argyle would be silenced permanently.

There was only one thing to do. Head for Earth and meet Preacher Judd to find out what was going on. Maybe then, he could fight back and insure his life.

## CHAPTER TEN

THE BRILLIANT globe of Earth hung large against the black backdrop of the heavens. Its green immensity dwarfed the stars and made them shrink to insignificance. To Man, it had a beauty which no other star or planet could ever have, because the eyes of Man were tuned to it as no other heavenly body could ever be. It was home.

Here was the heart of an empire, the home of the race, the physical center of the Galaxy. A small sun out on the rim of an island universe had given birth to a tiny world. That world had grown to dominate ten thousand planets and a thousand star systems. No alien birds spread their wings on Earth, and no nightmare creatures strolled their foreign paths. The flowers that grew might not be as brilliant as the lurid blooms of Mekel Four; the sky had not the rainbow hues of Xaranestra nor the deep richness of Clion. To an Earthman none of these things were needed. The superficialities of mere color and size fell away under one, overpowering, all embracing fact. Earth was home.

The two month trip was almost ended. As Argyle gazed out of the tiny viewport of his cabin he felt a sudden hunger to be down there, with the damp grass of an early morning in spring soft under his feet. Six years was too long for anyone to stay away.

He had been lucky in getting away from Rigel Five. His first inquiry at the main travel center had brought doubt to

his mind. The journey to Earth as a private passenger would have just about cleaned out his bank account. Freight and passenger rates had risen sharply during the past weeks as the Traders had jacked up their prices. The independents, finding themselves suddenly overburdened with work had followed suit to cash in on the sudden boom. The protest that went up could be heard clear across the Galaxy—but nothing could be done.

Strong in the minds of everyone was the last occasion on which a civil planetary administration had tried to curb the power of the Traders. Earth had suffered long and hard for her folly on that occasion. The fact that those who ruled the star lanes controlled the Galaxy had been driven home solidly.

Sworder had helped him immeasurably when he knew the difficulty with which Argyle was faced. Inside two weeks there was a well paid berth as second engineer on an independent passenger freighter lined up.

They landed on the broad concrete plain to the west of the Great Rift Valley in central Africa. Argyle wasted no time in getting paid off; he checked through customs and the space crew control office; and took an aircab south to the great spired city of Nairobi. His most immediate need was a headquarters where he could rest and plan what action he would take to get in touch with the Chief Minister, Armadeus Judd.

Here again Sworder had been helpful. He had given Argyle a letter of introduction to Arnold Matheson, one of his former colleagues in the Terran Law Squads. According to Sworder, he and Matheson had joined the Law Squads together, and had worked in close contact until Sworder had felt the call of wider fields. He had taken a post on Rigel Five some ten years earlier, while Matheson had elected to stay on Earth. Both had progressed rapidly, and Matheson was now Chief Controller, responsible for all the security arrangements over a wide area of Western Europe. Most important was the fact that his area of responsibility bordered closely on Southern Europe and North Africa; a region which in-

cluded the city of Athens, headquarters of the World Council, and home of President and Chief Minister, Armadeus Judd.

He chose the towering bulk of the Stanley Hotel as his residence; a forty story building on the wide esplanade of Dellamere Avenue. It was old, luxurious and established, and he was glad that there were Terrans in charge of his needs once more. It was the rule rather than the exception that, on other planets, aliens of various races—generally those native to the planet in the question—were employed in the more menial tasks. Terrans had an antipathy to leaving their own world simply to be employed as messengers, clerks, cooks or bottle washers. A man could stay home and be anything he liked, but on an alien world he had to be the boss or nothing. Generally, he was the boss.

Argyle spent a day or so getting his bearings and picking up the threads of life of his home world. After seven years there had been changes such as he would not have thought possible. The crowded airways had called for new techniques in transport. The first of two giant inter-continental tunnels had already been carved across the world from Europe to the Americas. It had been open a year. The great bulk of goods and passengers was carried in long tubular trains at upwards of eight hundred miles an hour, and at depths up to five thousand feet beneath the surface of the Earth. The second, from the American continent to Asia, was well under way.

The political situation, in which he had never taken much interest, caught his attention now because of his interest in Preacher Judd. He soon found that Judd was the hero who could do no wrong. Indeed, everything he did seemed to be right. The rolling oratory of his speeches recalled the recordings of great men of the past. He had seen Judd in action on the videoscreen one night soon after his arrival. The speech itself was unimportant. Argyle realized later that it had something to do with negotiations between Earth and the Traders, on the subject of freight and passenger rates across the Galaxy. The Terran Government, it

seemed, was seriously disturbed by the rate increases, and Judd gave an outline of his plans and ideas to cope with the situation.

It was the man himself who held Argyle's attention.

He was giant in stature, all of six-and-a-half feet tall, with a broad, heavy frame that was inclined to plumpness. His face was prematurely lined and heavily joweled; deep eyes set in dark sockets looked out on the world with an honesty that illuminated the soul behind the physical facade. His hair was pure white, save at the temples where flecks of black showed. His voice was deep and resonant. He seemed theatrical at first, until one realized that the man wasn't acting; every word he spoke had the ring of utter sincerity and no shade of meaning was ever unclear to the listener. He spoke calmly and without fuss for ten minutes; oratorical showmanship was missing completely, but Argyle felt it to be there, just beneath the surface.

The broadcast ended, and Argyle sat back in his chair, greatly impressed. So this was Armadeus Judd. At least he would recognize him if ever they met.

He stayed in the hotel for several days, making inquiries and checking every possible detail before moving on. His immediate objective was London and the office of Arnold Matheson. He was tempted, at first, to go to Athens and try to see Judd on his own initiative; but his meager knowledge of official protocol, made him think again and decide against it. Matheson was his best hope.

He checked out of the Stanley Hotel, and took passage on a north bound jet liner. In three hours he was in London, and another hotel was added to his collection.

He checked in at a small establishment on the outskirts of the City's Center, but within easy reach of Matheson's headquarters. He realized that he might have several weeks of delay even if he managed to see Matheson quickly.

It was more than nine years since he had last been in London, and that had been for a fleeting visit only. He had always found it more convenient to live in Johannesburg.

Like all old European cities, London was an odd mixture of

the very old and very new. The central part, around the River Thames, had been maintained in all its historic splendor for well over a thousand years; but to the north and south the small ancient buildings were dwarfed by the giant pinnacles and gleaming towers that were teeming New London. The old district names had been retained, but the quarters themselves had long since vanished into the mists of antiquity.

Matheson had his office high in the Law Squad skyscraper which was in the Barbican area. Argyle found that out during his first day. His next objective was to make sure that his letter of introduction reached Matheson personally. The thought of risking it to the Internal Postal System did not appeal to him. Stars alone knew how many private secretaries and other officials it might have to go through before reaching Matheson himself. The next best thing was to send it to his private address—or better still, to deliver it himself. Even if Matheson was not at home, there was a better chance of his receiving personal mail there than at his office.

Argyle spent the rest of the day shopping for a few essentials and visiting a triditheatre.

The next morning he got Matheson's home address from a local directory. After lunch he set out across the city to the residential suburb where the Law Squad Controller had his dwelling. The garden suburb of 'Tring, with its giant blocks of flats, was a bare twenty minutes by aircab across the city. Finding Matheson's apartment took him little time.

He did not expect to find Matheson at home at this time of the day, but at least the initial ice would be broken. The manservant who answered the door had *Law Squad* written all over him, and for the first time, Argyle realized that such a person as Matheson was unlikely to live in unguarded loneliness.

"I have a personal letter for Mister Matheson," he stated as deferentially as he could.

The man eyed him up and down, and Argyle knew that

every detail of his dress, appearance and physical description were being noted for future reference.

"He isn't here."

"Well, I didn't expect he would be." Argyle took out a stylopen and wrote his address on the back of the envelope. "Will you please see that he gets this when he returns, and then perhaps he would be kind enough to get in touch with me at this hotel where I shall be staying for a week or so."

The man nodded, took the envelope, and closed the door. Just as quickly as that, thought Argyle. Probably he would never see the letter again or hear from Matheson. He turned away and took the elevator down to the ground floor. In half an hour he was back in his hotel still wondering whether he had taken the right course.

He spent the evening in the hotel because he thought that Matheson might call him if he received the letter when he got home. It was a faint hope that didn't come off and he went to bed late, with a sense of failure that he could not quite justify.

He spent the rest of the next morning in the hotel growing more anxious by the hour, and cursing himself for a fool in not demanding to see Matheson personally. It might have had unfortunate results, but at least he would have gained the man's attention.

After lunch he went up to his room. Argyle's heart turned over as he closed the door behind him and saw that familiar figure of Alfredo Dellora step from the toilet room with a needle gun in his gloved hand. There was no smile on the petulant face; the eyes were hooded and vicious, as if their owner had long since lost patience with a very difficult puzzle.

"Surprised, Argyle?" were his first words. "I must admit it took me a little time to find you."

"Why did you bother?" asked Argyle dully as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You are becoming something more than just an inconvenient nuisance," snapped Dellora. "You seem to have the luck of the devil himself."

"Or else you're becoming careless. Ever thought about that?"

"I am governed by circumstances like everyone else. All I can do is try to take advantage of them." Dellora seated himself across the room in the lone easy chair with the needle gun pointed steadily at Argyle.

After a few moments silence Argyle asked, "Well, what happens next?"

"We are waiting for a caller. I do not think he will be very long."

"A caller! Who?"

Dellora shrugged. "I suppose you might as well know. His name is Sigmund Grant and he is, by trade, a dealer in precious stones."

"What?"

The visiphone on the table buzzed lightly and Dellora moved quickly to pick it up. He didn't switch on the vision.

"Yes?" he said softly.

"A gentleman named Grant to see Mister Argyle."

"Send him up," Dellora told the man at the other end. "And connect me with an outside line, please."

Argyle sat frozen and unmoving under the threat of the needle gun. He was too stunned to have made any effort, however suicidal, to get out of the latest threat with which he was confronted. Dellora got his outside line and dialed a number which Argyle could not see, because he carefully shielded the dial with his body.

A muffled voice said, "Hello."

"Now," said Dellora softly, and broke the connection. Then he sat down again.

"What the hell is all this," demanded Argyle. There was fear in his heart and he wondered hopelessly what new horror Dellora was cooking up for him. And over all was the dull insistent question. Why didn't Dellora just shoot him if he wanted him out of the way so badly? Was he afraid of the efficiency of the Law Squads? Perhaps even a man as powerful as Dellora had some respect for the forces of the law.

There was a knock at the door to interrupt Argyle's reverie. Dellora opened it with the gun out of sight.

"Mister Argyle?" asked the knocker.

"Please come in," replied Dellora courteously.

Argyle watched with limp horror as a plump, round faced man dressed in expensive clothes smilingly came into the room.

"That is Mister Argyle," said Dellora, still keeping the gun out of the visitor's sight.

"Glad to meet you, Mister Argyle. My name is Sigmund Grant."

Argyle nodded wordlessly.

"I think if I were you, Argyle," remarked Dellora, "I should tell Mister Grant what I have in my hand."

"Eh?" Grant looked at Argyle in surprise.

"He is pointing a needle gun at both of us, Mister Grant," said Argyle dully.

Grant gaped at him in utter bewilderment, the smile sliding from his round face to be replaced by an expression of sheer disbelief. Then the obvious explanation presented itself to his mind, and a look of grim satisfaction spread over him.

"My jewel case has a personal lock, gentlemen. If this is an attempt at robbery I can only assume that you are the most careless pair of thieves in all creation. In fact, I might as well tell you that I have activated my personal alarm which is connected with the local headquarters of the Law Squad. I imagine you have about two minutes of freedom left to you."

"Rather less than that, Mister Grant," remarked Dellora.

Outside in the corridor there came the sound of running feet.

"I'm glad you activated your alarm," continued Dellora calmly. "I rather hoped you would add some confirmation to my own efforts."

The footsteps reached the locked door and Dellora lifted the gun.

"Goodbye, gentlemen," he said, and shot Grant carefully



and deliberately in the left eye.

Argyle watched with horrified fascination as the body of the man slid slowly to the floor from the table against which it had been slumped. He seemed incapable of movement, frozen by the new terror that Dellora had unleashed from his warped mind. And still the significance didn't hit him.

"Catch Argyle," called Dellora softly, and Argyle reached out automatically to catch the slim gleaming object which Dellora tossed at him.

Abruptly, Dellora vanished, and in the next second the door burst open.

The Law Squad trio found the newly dead body of Sigmund Grant and also the frozen figure of Richard Argyle; the murder weapon clasped tight in his right hand.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

ARGYLE reached the presence of Arnold Matheson more quickly and easily than he ever anticipated. The journey was one he didn't remember much about. He was bundled from the hotel, still stupefied by the shock of events and by the calm brutality of the murder he had just witnessed.

If he had ever doubted the cunning ruthlessness of Alfredo Dellora before, this latest outrage removed any shadow that remained. He knew that wherever he went, and whatever he did, Dellora would hound him until he presented no further threat to whatever ambitions he was obstructing.

He sat in the Law Squad aircar that whisked him across the city, with a silently efficient guard on either side of him. They said little to each other and nothing to him. Argyle, for his part, was too shocked and terrified to frame any sensible comment. He had in front of him the ever present picture of a body falling, lifeless, to the floor. In his mind was dull realization that, at last, Dellora had taken good care of him.

The car landed on the flat 'copter roof of the Law Squad building. Argyle sat frozen and uncaring in his seat, until

one of the guards tapped him on the shoulder.

"Out," he said tersely.

He stumbled and almost fell as he went through the hatch and down the short ladder. His legs were weak under him, and he felt physically sick with reaction. The guards took him to a reception office on a lower floor, and there he went, semi-consciously, through the degradation of finger printing, retina patterns, identity checks, and all the other official routine connected with the arrest of a criminal.

Dimly, he realized that he was being charged with murder, but the fact hardly registered on his distraught mind. At last he was alone in a small but comfortable cell, with only his thoughts and fears for company. The edge of the bunk was hard under him as he slumped on to it and buried his face in his hands. His shoulders shook and his body trembled as the intensity of suppressed emotions was allowed to unfold.

Gradually his nerves quieted and his senses regained some of their normal stability. The ability to think more clearly returned when he realized that fear was something he had lived with for many months now; that thought robbed his mind of some of its terror. This was just another phase in the game that he was caught up in. So far each phase had, in turn, brought with it its own answers. It was the unknown that frightened him; the uncertainty of what was going to happen in the future rather than the knowledge of what had happened in the past. The old questions, which were by now so familiar, revolved in his mind. Why did Dellora fear him? Why the elaborate plots to get rid of him? Surely Dellora wasn't so afraid of the Law Squads that he dare not kill Argyle outright? A man with nerve enough to set up the murder of a harmless old man like Sigmund Grant, would surely not stop at murdering Argyle?

There was neither sense nor reason in the incongruity of the situation. He did not believe Sworder's explanation that Dellora was a megalomaniac who needed elaborate extravaganzas to satisfy his ego. Such an idea was too glib, too neat—and it didn't fit the facts.

In some way, that Argyle didn't even begin to understand, he was the central figure in a Galaxy wide puzzle, the key to which was always just out of reach.

Coldly, he realized that Sworder wasn't around to help him this time.

The cell door rattled slightly and opened. Two Lawmen stood in the corridor outside and he rose in answer to an unspoken summons.

"Where now?"

"More questions, I guess," said the taller of the two. "I wouldn't know. We're just messenger boys."

They took him in a lift up the towering bulk of the building. The figure 59 glowed on the control panel before the lift slid to a halt. They got out. A long, curving corridor ran away to the left and right; they turned left and followed it, the soft plastic flooring making no sound as they walked. A door marked 'Private' didn't stop them from entering without knocking. The man at a desk in the small office eyed them questioningly as they entered.

"Argyle," said the tall guard briefly.

The man at the desk nodded and flicked a switch on the intercom unit beside his desk.

"Argyle is here, sir."

"Send him in."

The guards ushered him through the door to the inner office, which seemed bright and large after the cramped gloom of the cell. It was an ascetic room, but tastefully furnished with book shelves lining the walls and comfortable contemporary furniture, which blended well with the dark wooden paneling. Before the single large window was set a huge antique desk, scattered with neat piles of papers, two visiphones and an intercom unit.

The man who sat behind it was dwarfed by its bulk, but he was not a man to be ignored. He was slim and dark, with smooth black hair and a thin, taut face; the lips were firm and the eyes blue and piercing. He might have gone unnoticed in a crowd if it were not for the stubborn set of the mouth and the firm, uncompromising jaw line.

"Argyle, sir," said the tall guard.

The man studied him for a few seconds and waved briefly to a chair before the desk.

"Please, sit down." He nodded to the guards. "I'll call you."

Argyle's eyes flickered round the room and then concentrated on the desk, seeking some clue to the identity of the occupant. The man chuckled drily.

"Nine people out of ten who come into this room as strangers do just what you are doing," he remarked. "It's an interesting psychological point. One day I promise I'll do some research into it to see what it means."

His voice was calm and chatty, and Argyle relaxed unconsciously, his face slipping into a slight smile.

"Incidentally, I believe you wanted to see me," the man went on. "My name is Arnold Matheson."

Argyle sat up straight with surprise.

"You . . . then you got the letter I left at your apartment?"

Matheson nodded. "I must confess, Mister Argyle, that I had no intention of seeing you for some days until this business was brought to my notice. The connection seemed more than obvious. The murder accomplished what the letter would not—at least, for a while."

Argyle sat quiet. There was little he could say that would not seem stupid under the circumstances.

"I may say that I value my friendship with Sworder most highly," said Matheson, "which is why I have asked you here rather than leave this matter to the subordinates who would normally deal with it." He smiled. "As a matter of interest, Argyle, you've rather spoiled my record. I've been in charge of this region for almost three years and this is the first murder that has occurred."

"I didn't spoil it," snapped Argyle. "But I know who did."

"I suppose Sworder has some reason for sending me that letter of introduction. He rated you most highly."

"That's nice of him."

"Which is why I am going to assume that this . . . ah

... incident has something to do with the fact that you want to see Armadeus Judd."

Argyle nodded.

"Suppose you tell me about it," said Matheson.

Argyle blinked in surprise. "All of it? From the beginning?"

Matheson studied the desk top before him. "There's one thing you learn as a Lawman, Argyle. Everything is part of a picture. You can't get the true and proper perspective on anything that happens unless you know the whole story, right down to the last detail. One fact alone, is useless, because when it is placed in its true relationship to all the others it turns out, very often, not to be a fact at all." He looked up and smiled disarmingly. "Yes, I think right from the beginning."

Argyle relaxed and tried to marshal his thoughts. Where did you begin a story like this? Did you start at the time you first met Swarder? Or that day on Jones when Spiros came into your life? Or must you go further back and talk about Angela and how you loved her; how she left you; how you spent over seven years of your life roaming the Galaxy seeking her? He began to talk slowly and disjointedly, going back over his tracks to bring out details which he'd missed. Slowly, the story came. He settled down into the swing of it and it seemed to flow from him as if it was a visifilm that unfurled its contents in accordance with the laws of time and motion.

Matheson didn't interrupt. He sat in his chair behind the giant monstrosity of a desk and listened with hardly a muscle movement to show that he was not a statue.

Argyle told of the murder of Sigmund Grant and stopped talking. His story was ended, up to date, the finish still to be written. He had told all he knew.

He shrugged and eased his body from its tense position in the chair.

"I wish I could tell you more, but I can't. I don't know the answers any more than Swarder does. All I know is that, somehow, Preacher Judd is in it and I'm in it. Until I

see Judd and talk with him I don't know what it's all about."

"He may not tell you," remarked Matheson.

"But still, I have to ask him . . . if I can."

"This murder, then? Your defense is that you were framed by a teleport?"

Argyle's eyes snapped angrily at Matheson when the line that was being taken registered on his mind.

"No, it isn't a defense as you call it. It's cold, hard fact, whether you believe it or not."

"I haven't said I didn't believe it."

"No, but—"

"Look, Argyle. You aren't thinking very clearly. I can't blame you under the circumstances. I arrived home from a trip to the continent to find a letter waiting for me from an old friend. It intrigued me because of the tone in which it was written and because of the unusual request which it contained." Matheson smiled. "Anyone who wants to see Armadeus Judd is unusual. The next thing I know is that a murder has been committed, and the murderer is no less a person than the subject of that letter. Now, if you were me, what would you do?"

"I don't know. What?" he asked.

"I would get in touch with my friend and find out more about the supposed murderer. Wouldn't I?"

Argyle felt a burst of hope surge through him. Matheson wasn't fooling this time, of that he was sure.

"You've been in touch with Sworder?"

Matheson nodded. "I had a teepee hookup with him about half an hour ago. I got the whole story from him; almost word for word as you have told me."

"And?"

"I believe it. Sworder isn't a fool, I've known him too long and too closely. If he says there is a teleport loose in the Galaxy then I believe what he says, and I believe you."

Argyle felt a wave of relief sweep over him. His fears of an hour before seemed entirely groundless now. Of course, he should have known that Matheson would contact Sword-

er, it was the only logical thing for him to do. He thanked the luck that had made him deliver the letter in person to Matheson's residence. He hated to think what complications might have arisen otherwise.

"Does that mean you'll wash out this murder charge?"

"No."

"But . . ."

"I didn't think it wise," continued Matheson calmly. "We'll let it stay on the books with the comment that it is being investigated. We can stall that way for several weeks. Then, quietly, we'll drop it for lack of sufficient evidence."

"What about the press and the video people?"

"They do more or less what we tell them. Don't quote me on that, it would never do. It'll give you time to move around and see Judd. We might lull the opposition into a sense of security if they think you are out of their hair."

Argyle nodded. He could see the sense behind the idea, but something in Matheson's tone opened another avenue of questions in his mind.

"You said *They* when you spoke about the opposition, Matheson," he said. "What do you mean, *They*? As far as I'm concerned there is only one person—Alfredo Dellora."

Matheson looked at him grimly, his blue eyes hard and his lips a taut line. "I don't want to be rude, Argyle," he commented gently, "but you haven't really the right outlook for this sort of thing. Things are going on around you all the time. You see them; you read about them; and you are part of them, but you don't know it. There is a simple two and two which you can put together quite easily if you think about it. It's now almost six months since Pietro Dellora died and his son Alfredo took over. What has happened in those six months?"

"How the devil should I know?"

"Did you happen to hear Judd's speech on the video the other night?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did."

"Do you remember what it was about?"

Argyle frowned, casting his memory back to the speech

he'd watched barely a week earlier. He had watched it to see Preacher Judd, but as he thought about it he remembered that it had something to do with the Traders and increased freight and passenger rates. He mentioned as much as he could recall and cocked a questioning eye at Matheson.

"That's right, more or less. Judd didn't give you the full picture because of arousing public panic. I told you I've just come back from the continent."

"You mean you've been with Judd." For once Argyle was ahead of him.

"That's right. Before the death of Pietro Dellora there was a kind of status quo in the Galaxy. Enough trade for all the ships and all the companies Alfredo Dellora takes over and suddenly, no more status quo. I don't know what it all means, but Judd does and he's worried. The Traders are building up to something and I have only a faint inkling what it is, Argyle. For centuries they've been the real power in the Galaxy, but they have been content with what they had because it was more than any one man or any group of men could handle. They had power—more power than any individual government had ever had. There was wealth—more than could be spent in a lifetime of spending. The whole Trader Empire has grown up on soundly based rules and policies, and then, suddenly, and for no apparent reason, they start trying to strangle the goose that lays the golden egg." He shrugged and looked at Argyle. "I don't know why, and neither do you, but I think Judd does. I think you ought to see him. In fact, I'll make sure you do see him."

Argyle felt the tide rising up around him once more. It seemed that no sooner had one wave passed and beaten itself to death on the shore, then another, larger and more terrifying than all the rest, pounded up to smash him.

"Why do you think I should see him?" he asked. "You've only known about me for a hour or two."

"Because you are important in some way to Alfredo Del-



lora. Therefore you must be equally important to Armadeus Judd. Perhaps he will be able to tell you why."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

IT WAS early evening by now. Over five hours had passed since Argyle had gone, unsuspecting to his hotel room to find Alfredo Dellora waiting for him. It seemed like five years.

Matheson proposed taking him home for the night, rather than leaving him to the dubious comfort of the cell to which he had been allocated.

"I don't want you to go back to the hotel at all," he told Argyle. "I'll have your things removed by one of my men. You can stay with me tonight, and tomorrow I'll make arrangements for you to see Judd. In the meantime, the quieter you're kept the better. I doubt if Alfredo will get any news about you if we're careful."

"Heaven forbid," replied Argyle with feeling.

"I can imagine how you feel. Having a teleport on your back is no fun." Matheson shook his head. "This is new and it's big, Judd will want to know about it in detail. We shall have to find out if there are any more teleports in the Galaxy, and that might prove difficult."

"One is enough for me."

"New things mean new techniques," Matheson told him. "When a thing is new people only see danger in it. They have to be taught not to fear, and that can be difficult. There's another side of it, too. We have to find out how we can best make use of people with teleport talents. It might take time. With teepees it took years to kill public fear, and more years to fit them into their proper place in the scheme of things. Now," he shrugged, "it's a crime to commit a crime against a teepee because on them rests the speed and security of inter-stellar communication. But it took a long time. If you read your history you'll know how many telepaths were hunted down and murdered before we got the public educated to them."

He got up from behind the desk and stretched his lean, wiry body.

"Well, I expect you've had enough excitement for one day. There isn't any reason why we shouldn't head for home and a meal and a good night's sleep. Tomorrow may be a big day."

"Are you sure this is all right?" asked Argyle, "Your wife—"

"—is holidaying in Melbourne with the children," Matheson grinned. "And my home is more comfortable than that cell."

A Law Squad aircar took them swiftly out to Matheson's home. The same man opened the door who had taken the letter from Argyle when he had called previously. He eyed Argyle carefully, but without apparent interest.

They ate a neatly served and well cooked meal, and then chatted for an hour. It was only a little after ten when Matheson showed Argyle to his room and bid him goodnight.

Argyle lay awake in the darkness for some while. His body felt tired and yet he could not sleep. There was too much in his mind; too much to think about, too many questions to be answered, too much speculation. His earlier talk with Matheson had opened up vistas which he hadn't even imagined existed. He had been in the center of all that had been happening, and yet he hadn't seen what it all added up to.

Matheson had pointed the way that things were moving; the Traders stepping up their rates was a minor thing itself. But when a man of the importance of Armadeus Judd got to be interested, then there was more at the back of it than mere commercial exploitation. He knew vaguely of the previous occasion, almost two hundred years before, when the strength of one company, The Company Dellora, had pitted itself against the entire might of Earth—and had won. Little was made of it in the history books he had read at school, because it was an episode that few people wanted to remember, but it had happened. Earth had lost, and the ancestor of Alfredo Dellora had won.

Was this another unseen war with economy instead of guns? With money instead of bombs? There seemed to be forces abroad in the Galaxy whose power was greater and more terrifying than any mere war fleet whose weapons could be seen.

Argyle slept at last, but not peacefully.

He was awakened the next morning by the stony faced servant who told him that Matheson was already up and wanted to see him in the lounge as soon as he could manage it.

Matheson was seated in the lounge talking to someone on the visiphone and he merely nodded and waved Argyle to a seat. Something in his face and manner sent a coldness rippling through Argyle's body. The relaxed composure of the night before was gone and in its place was the cold efficiency he had first met with in the office high in the Law Squad building.

Matheson broke the connection and leaned forward in his chair.

"We're in trouble, Argyle," he stated grimly. "The story broke in three different news sheets and two videocasts first thing this morning about the murder of Sigmund Grant."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said," snapped Matheson. "I wan't counting on our friend Dellora and the Traders. Every news sheet responsible is under Trader control. Naturally, after that first edition, the other papers took up the story, and so did the video companies. Can't blame them I suppose."

Argyle felt a sudden panic sweep over him. "But how does that affect me?" he demanded.

"You're named as the murderer."

Argyle gaped at Matheson in horror.

"They quote secret sources," went on Matheson, "but they make it pretty plain that you are in the hands of the Law Squads and that your guilt is merely a matter for confirmation. We could slap an injunction on them, but it wouldn't do any good now that the cat's out of the bag."

"What else do they say?" demanded Argyle grimly.

"How do you mean?"

"Don't play tag, Matheson. I'm growing up in this rat race. What else is there? Dellora didn't just break the story for its news value, there's more to it than that."

Matheson pursed his lips and looked at the floor.

"Well?"

"It's not pretty. They're after your blood, Argyle. The first murder for profit in more than twenty years."

"Profit?"

"Of course, Sigmund Grant was a dealer in jewelery. They're playing up the robbery angle and demanding that action be taken."

"What sort of action?"

"Immediate trial. Psycho treatment, long term of imprisonment as a lesson to others."

Argyle ran a hand through his hair in sheer bewilderment. "But dammit, Matheson, what's at the back of it?"

"They don't want you to see Preacher Judd."

"How the hell do they figure this will help?"

Matheson laughed ironically. "Don't be so damned naive. Do you think Judd would see you now? However badly he may want to it's more than he dare do, and Dellora and his pals know it."

Argyle felt fear plucking at him again, the same fear that had been with him on far too many occasions lately.

"You could fix it in secret."

"Oh, for heavens sake. Dellora has friends in high places, you can bet on that. Judd won't dare come within a hundred miles of you with things the way they are. What sort of story do you think that would make for the Trader controlled press? Earth's Chief Minister keeps date with a murderer. They'd start asking questions and giving the answers, or what would pass for answers in the eye of Joe Public. Judd's position would be hopelessly compromised. When you were an unknown it was all right, even the murder couldn't hurt so long as it was kept quiet. Now, you're something of a celebrity in a negative sort of way, and Judd wouldn't dare have either a public or a secret interview with you."

Argyle sat white and shaken. Last night everything had seemed so simple. All he had to do was to see Armadeus Judd and everything would be all right. Now? He was labeled as a murderer, and his name known to everyone who read a paper or watched a video screen.

"We'll get you off Earth. Fast."

"What?"

"I called Judd as soon as the news broke, and he decided that was the only thing to do. He daren't come within a hundred miles of London while you're here, and he agrees that the only thing we can do is get you off Earth and put someone in your place until the heat dies down."

"Who's going to be fool enough to sit in a cell in my place?"

Matheson chuckled. "Any Lawman who wants a quick promotion."

"Where shall I go?"

"Rigel Five. I'll get a teepee hook up with Sworder and tell him to look after you."

"What do I do? I can't keep running."

"You won't have to. Judd will come to Rigel Five in a few weeks as soon as he can fix it."

"The mountain and Mahommet, eh?" Argyle smiled wryly. "I just hope Dellora doesn't catch up with me again."

"He won't. There'll be two men with you every moment of the way to Rigel Five. I don't think Dellora will want to advertise his abilities more than he has to."

"You said you spoke to Judd about me?" Argyle looked at Matheson. "How did you convince him I was important enough to take all this trouble over? I don't mean anything to him."

Matheson looked at him somberly. "I'll have to disillusion you on more than one point, Argyle. Judd does know about you. He seems to know more about you than I do. His reaction when I told him you were here, on Earth, showed that he considers you a very important person. One whom we must take very great care of in the future." He nodded slowly. "Oh, yes, Judd knows you, Argyle, and he's been

waiting to see you for a very long time."

He turned back to the visiphone.

"You'd better go and grab some food in the dining room while I'm fixing things up here. As soon as we can we'll get you aboard a ship for Rigel Five."

"A Trader ship?"

Matheson glanced at him sardonically. "You're a big boy now, Argyle. We're laying on a Law Squad ship specially for you. Direct orders of Armadeus Judd."

Stunned, Argyle went slowly into the dining room. As he sat down at the table and sipped the steaming coffee he could hear Matheson's voice droning unintelligibly through the half closed door. Direct orders of Armadeus Judd! He felt the fear run through him again and what slight appetite he had, vanished. Judd knew all about him, Matheson said. But what could he know? Judd had been waiting to see him for a very long time. Why should Earth's Chief Minister be interested in a third-rate space engineer with a propensity for getting himself into trouble? Somewhere the pieces were falling into place, but too many were still missing for him to be able to form a clear picture.

Old Pietro Dellora had known about him from Angela, and had wanted to see him. To offer him a job, he had said? Argyle doubted it very much in the light of later happenings. That had been a stopgap to keep him interested and to keep him near to Pietro while the old fat man had found out what he was really like. And then Alfredo had come on the scene, and had found Argyle closeted with his father. He had assumed that Argyle knew Preacher Judd, for some reason best known to himself. He felt endangered and murdered his own father.

For months Argyle had been caught in a web of mystery and intrigue that he didn't even begin to understand, and now that some glimmer of light was showing he realized that he was more in the dark than he had been before. What had earlier seemed to be merely a mysterious personal vendetta between himself and Alfredo Dellora had developed into something much bigger. The Traders were involved, so too

was Armadeus Judd. The Dellora Company and its successive heads—Pietro and Alfredo—were central figures. So, too, was a scared, bewildered space engineer named Richard Argyle.

Matheson came in from the other room to disturb his reverie, and he realized that his food was cold before him.

Matheson gestured at the untouched plate.

"Better eat up, Argyle. Everything's fixed, and you've got a long trip ahead of you."

Argyle summoned the remains of his tattered sense of humor. "You mean I won't get anything more till I reach Rigel Five?"

Matheson laughed and nodded his approval. "You'll do. I think Alfredo Dellora had better leave you alone if you can still find a joke in this business."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE NEXT few hours passed in a whirl of activity, bustle and secrecy. Before he had very much time to think about it Argyle was in a Law Squad cruiser looking at the receding disc of Earth. The cruiser was a small inter-stellar craft with a crew of eight, and sufficient armament to make her feared by many a larger craft. The crew were all Lawmen; tough, trained out of surprise, and quite unconcerned at the strangeness and speed of their assignment. How much they knew Argyle couldn't guess, but a last minute instruction from Matheson had puzzled him and set his nerves on edge once again.

"Don't tell anyone more than you have to about anything," Matheson had said. "The less anyone knows the less they'll be able to pass on to anyone else. Don't discuss the matter with the crew. They have their orders and they will carry them out. Beyond that, they aren't interested." He shook hands with Argyle and was gone from the small cabin.

Five minutes later the ship had taken off.

As the days passed it became clear that the crew—from the captain down—had received similar instructions. Argyle was made welcome in the mess, he ate with them, played games with them and chatted away the long hours. But never, even by the briefest comment, was there any reference to his presence aboard ship or the reason for it. True, he found the ship's captain eyeing him speculatively on more than one occasion, but the speculation was never translated into words.

They were ten days out from Earth when the captain, a hefty young man named Palatzer, came to his cabin as Argyle lay reading on his bunk.

He knocked on the door and called, "Can I come in, Argyle?"

Argyle swung his legs off the bunk. "Sure. Come ahead."

Palatzer slid the door open and stepped inside with a brief nod and a smile. He waved a white envelope at Argyle.

"This," he announced with ironic pomposity, "is zero hour. Matheson ordered me to give you this on the morning of the tenth day out from Earth. And here it is."

Argyle frowned and felt apprehension tug at his nerves. He took the envelope and broke the seal. Inside was a single sheet of white paper, and he read the few lines on it with ever growing bewilderment.

*My Dear Argyle,*

*You are not going to Rigel Five as you suppose. That was purely for local consumption. Even Palatzer doesn't know differently yet. Judd decided that it was far too risky for anywhere as open and populous as Rigel Five to be used for a meeting place, and I agree with him. He knows what we are up against and I trust his judgment. I give below a set of space co-ordinates which you will hand to Palatzer. He is to change course for them as soon as he receives this note which you will pass onto him, and from then on the matter is out of your hands and in his. Good luck.*

*Arnold Matheson*



Argyle read it through twice before the entire meaning made itself clear on his surprised mind. Matheson and Judd weren't taking any chances. Wordlessly, he passed the letter to Palatzer who read it through with pursed lips and a deepening frown. When he'd finished he cocked an eye at Argyle.

"Any ideas about this?"

Argyle shook his head.

"Well, I'll make a note of these figures."

"You'd better keep the letter," Argyle told him. "I shan't want it."

"It looks as if Matheson is being cautious to me," commented Palatzer. He grinned at Argyle. "Not that I have any idea as to why he has to be. I'll let you know at lunch how long it'll be before we reach our new position."

When Argyle went to lunch in the mess an hour later Palatzer grinned at him. "We don't know much more," he said. "Those co-ordinates are just empty space."

Argyle frowned. "That means another ship."

"Probably." Palatzer's gray eyes were fixed steadily on him and Argyle realized that the captain hoped he would continue talking. He applied himself to his food with some regret. It would be a relief to talk to someone, but Matheson said he shouldn't!

Palatzer sighed audibly, and bent to his own meal.

"Sorry." Argyle lifted his head and smiled across the table.

Palatzer grinned in reply. "One thing they don't do in the Law Squads, and that's take care of curiosity." He shrugged. "Well, at least it doesn't stop me thinking up impossible ideas."

They reached the co-ordinates indicated in Matheson's letter four days later, and, as Argyle had assumed, another ship was waiting for them. It was a Law Squad ship of similar design to the one in which he had traveled from Earth. There was a brief exchange of light signals before Argyle was shipped over in a powered space suit. During the entire exchange radio wasn't used once even though

the nearest star was—according to Palatzer—four light-years distant.

The skipper of the second ship was an even younger man than Palatzer. He was short and stocky with a rakish air of adventure, and he was obviously treating the whole affair with great seriousness. His name was Achmed Khan, and that, together with his dark skin, bespoke his Asian ancestry.

He showed Argyle to a cabin; then proceeded to bombard him with a tirade of questions about every aspect of what he termed, *this secret operation*.

"You've been reading too many adventure stories," Argyle told him after a while. "Didn't they ever teach you not to ask too many questions in the Law Squad?"

"Oh, sure." Achmed Khan was quite unabashed. "But who cares about that? If you don't ask questions you don't get any answers. If you do that, how the hell are you going to know what goes on around you?"

Argyle grinned. "Look, Achmed. You've had your orders. Right?"

"Sure."

"What are they?"

The youngster looked slightly embarrassed. "Well . . . er . . . that is—"

"Can't tell me, eh?"

"Well, no, I guess not."

"Same with me. All right?"

Achmed Khan nodded vigorously and a huge grin spread across his chunky face. This was a man he could understand. Argyle knew he had handled the youngster in just the right manner. There would be no further questions.

Their destination didn't show for six days, and when it did Achmed Khan didn't tell Argyle until the very last minute: even then he didn't say where they were. He called Argyle to the bridge on the morning of the sixth day, and pointed to a bright disc of planetary size that gleamed in the heavens before them.

"There is it," he announced.

Argyle studied it with more than academic interest. There was slight apprehension as he realized that the comparative peace of his journey across space was over, and soon he would be back in the center of the conflict.

As they drew near Argyle realized that they were headed for a dead world. There was no aura around the globe as there would have been had there been an atmosphere of any sort. It shone brightly, like a giant emerald, by the light of its parent star. The markings on it were not familiar to Argyle. There were scores of tiny globes scattered through the Galaxy whose only function was to guard and maintain the great trade routes. They were oases of civilization in the barren wastes of deep space that could render aid to stricken vessels who would not, otherwise have reached the haven of a larger world. The great inter-stellar liners passed them by and ignored their existence, unless they were in trouble.

They landed on a wide, flat plain. It was daylight, early afternoon from the position of the parent sun, but the sky was jet black and the surface of the world was shimmering with sheer, black shadows. To the right of the field a large, elliptical dome swelled, gleaming, from the flatness of the terrain. It shone with inner lights and the low bulks of small buildings could be seen within it. Three smaller domes flanked it at safe distances, and Argyle knew that these housed the air plants and power rooms on which the tiny colony relied for its existence. On the edge of the great rock field he could see the shining bulks of four other ships. He realized that this was a security base. He climbed into a space suit which was given him and went out through the airlock with the captain and two other men. They crossed the uneven ground towards the gleaming bulk of the dome. There an armed guard passed them through the airlock into the interior.

Argyle snapped the catches on his suit helmet and lifted it from his head. As he did so he saw a group of men coming towards him from the entrance to one of the buildings. They drew nearer until he was able to pick out individuals.

The leader was Arnold Matheson.

Sheer incredulity made Argyle stop in his tracks. Matheson's face broke into a smile of pure delight as he saw the expression on Argyle's face. They shook hands, and Matheson said calmly, "Nice to see you, Argyle."

"How the hell—"

"Did I get here?" Matheson chuckled. "You don't even know where you are, that is, if my orders were carried out."

"Well, where?" demanded Argyle. "I've been shunted around so much I don't know whether it's Christmas time or . . . dammit, where am I?"

"Centaurus One. Planet named Leemos," Matheson told him.

"What?" Argyle's astonishment was complete. He knew of Leemos. It was the nearest extra solar planet to Earth and was used only as a crash depot. Earth was a bare four light-years away.

"Let's go inside," Matheson took his arm and they went into the building and along a short corridor to a small but comfortable private room.

"This is yours while you're here," Matheson told him. "You'll stay here until Preacher Judd can get away from Earth. That might be in a week or two."

"I still don't see why you didn't just bring me here without all that fuss with Palatzer and Khan," he said. "I've spent nearly three weeks traveling a distance that need only have taken three days."

Matheson pursed his lips seriously. "Judd and I thought it necessary to take as many precautions as we could. He couldn't get away for several weeks and we thought it preferable to have you moving around as much as possible, instead of sitting in one place. It was just as well we did."

Argyle looked at him quickly. "Why?" he demanded.

"Palatzer's ship was attacked by two unidentified craft sixteen hours after you left it."

"My God!"

"There were no survivors."

Argyle dropped into a chair stunned and sickened by the news. The narrowness of this latest escape was not something which worried him. It was the fact that another attempt had been made; that Dellora had sufficient resources to track him in a Law Squad ship through the tightest of security blankets; and finally, that a Law Squad ship had been attacked and destroyed.

"How did you know?" he asked suddenly.

"We had a teepee aboard," said Matheson. "There were half hourly checks with your ship from the time you left Earth. That's how much Preacher Judd values your safety."

Argyle rubbed his hands down over his face. The feeling was back again, stronger than ever, that he was part of a chain which both Judd and Dellora were fighting over. Judd was trying to keep it intact; Dellora was trying to break it; and his own fate rested on whoever was successful.

There could be no doubt now that the Traders were in earnest about their challenge to Terran domination of the Galaxy. True, they were Terrans themselves, but racial pride had long since been subjugated beneath the ever growing power that they had accumulated. Unless Judd was strong and clever enough, the future of the Galaxy lay in the hands of the Traders. From what he had seen, Argyle did not relish the prospect.

The next few days were spent in idleness and speculation. Matheson didn't leave him alone for long, and even when Matheson wasn't there two of his agents were always within reach, ready and waiting to blast anyone who appeared too suddenly or too suspiciously. Together he and Matheson toured the tiny post that nestled beneath the dome. It was fascinating for both of them. Matheson had not been this far into space before, and Argyle had never before landed on one of the smaller Terran outposts.

During the long period of waiting Argyle had the opportunity of talking for long hours with Matheson. He was able to develop and extend his ideas under the Lawman's careful interest and prompting. There opened before him vistas which he hadn't considered before, and Matheson con-

firmed many of the ideas which he had already thought out. The only disagreement was on the subject of Dellora's original attempt to murder Argyle. They talked about it on several occasions and Matheson said suddenly one day, "I can't see it as an attempt not to kill you, Argyle."

"That's double talk, I must say."

Matheson grinned. "No, what I mean is, Dellora meant to kill you. He wasn't simply trying to frame you with his father's murder. That came later when he realized he hadn't killed you."

"I don't understand."

"Look at it this way." Matheson leaned forward in his chair. "It couldn't matter to Dellora whether you were dead or alive. No one knew he was a teleport, so what was the point of trying to frame you for murder? You would have been as well out of the way dead, as you would have been locked up in prison with a murder charge hanging over you. I think he tried to kill you and missed his aim in the darkness."

"But I told you he flashed a light."

"Still, it might not have been enough to make sure of his aim. Once you had woken he decided against another attempt since it was obvious that you didn't realize what had happened. Then he saw a brilliant opportunity to put you out of the way without any more trouble. He planted the gun and tried to frame you for the murder of his father. He'd have succeeded, too, if you hadn't managed to get off that planet."

"He's had ample opportunity since then to put me safely out of the way," Argyle pointed out morosely.

"Yes, that puzzles me." Matheson studied his fingertips for several long seconds. "One can only assume that he hoped to avoid actual murder."

"Look, Matheson, I've been over this a hundred times in my own mind," broke in Argyle. "Why should he want to avoid actual murder when he already killed two men—one of them his own father?"

Matheson nodded reluctantly. "There's something that just

escapes me. I don't think I have quite enough knowledge to put all the facts together. Somewhere there is a key—"

"Preacher Judd has it."

"Yes, that's probably true," admitted Matheson. "All we can do is to wait for him to come."

He slept heavily and was awakened early by Matheson who knocked on his door and entered without waiting for an acknowledgment.

"You'd better get up and dressed, Argyle," he said abruptly. "Armadeus Judd is arriving within the hour."

"What?" Argyle was awake in an instant.

"Just had a call from his ship in code. You'll have time for breakfast and that's about all."

"Right with you." Argyle jumped out of his divan and set about a hasty toilet. He joined Matheson in the canteen fifteen minutes later and they ate a hearty breakfast together.

Argyle felt a mounting tension of excitement within him as the minutes ticked by and brought the arrival of Preacher Judd nearer.

"Worried?" asked Matheson as they drank a third coffee.

"No." Argyle grinned. "No, not worried. A little apprehensive, maybe. I've lived with this thing too long to be worried any more. I just want to know what I'm fighting, that's all."

Matheson nodded. "Some things can go on too long."

"That's an understatement. Three attempts to kill me and you say it can go on too long."

Matheson smiled. "I still keep thinking—" He shook his head. "I don't know."

"I believe you're more worried than I am."

"No, just puzzled. Somewhere along the line there is a link that I can't fit in, and when a thing like that happens I can't forget it. I suppose that's what makes me a good Lawman."

A bell rang, muted, over the station's intercom and a voice announced, "Ship for landing in five, repeat, five minutes. Landing crews close up."

They left the canteen and walked the few hundred yards

to the main airlock. As they arrived they could see the distant line of lights that marked the approaching ship as she came down from the star flecked heavens. The light within the dome dimmed their view but they could see enough to know that the ship was big. High above, almost out of range of the naked eye, Argyle could make out other dots of light that circled slowly and twisted in and out in a complicated pattern. He pointed up to them and asked Matheson what they were.

"Escort," replied Matheson briefly. "Judd isn't taking any chances, and I can't say I blame him."

The great bulk of the ship came down as gently as a feather, to rest on the white bed of the rocky field. Amidships a blaze of light announced the opening of the main hatch and several bulky, space suited figures appeared. They moved laborously down the landing ramp and walked towards the airlock.

Argyle watched them in silence.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A SLIGHT feeling of awe brought apprehension to him as Judd stepped forward with his hand outstretched.

"Mister Argyle. I have been waiting for this meeting for a very long time."

His grip was as powerful as his frame promised it to be, and Argyle had full and early knowledge of his physical strength. He towered over the figures grouped around him, topping Argyle's own six foot one by a good head. The bulky shapelessness of the space suit added weight and power to his figure, and the dark pools of his eyes had an almost hypnotic aura about them. Argyle realized, too, that the speech he had heard on the videoscreen had robbed Judd's voice of a lot of its inherent power. The dozen words which had been addressed to him in greeting made a deeper and more lasting impression than the several thousand that had boomed at him from the speaker of the video set.



In all his presence, Armadeus Judd, was a figure of imposing dignity and frightening power.

Argyle tried to say something in reply but his mouth was dry and his tongue got tangled up somehow. He bobbed his head in greeting and managed a slight, ineffectual smile.

"Everything quiet, Matheson?" asked Judd.

"Yes, sir. No trouble since we arrived. I expect you know about the ship which brought Argyle from Earth?"

"Captain Palatzer? Yes." Judd's lips tightened and his face settled into hard, uncompromising lines. "A bad business. It gives us a clear idea of what we are up against. The Traders are beginning to show their hands. They must be well informed of our intentions."

"I think," remarked Judd, "that I should like to get rid of this suit as a first step."

Matheson smiled. "Of course. Your quarters are ready, sir. How long do you think you'll be staying?"

"I do not know. It depends on the situation at home. I think it unlikely that I shall stay longer than three days. I may be forced to leave tomorrow."

They moved slowly away towards the building in which Judd and his party were to be housed. Matheson went with them and so did Argyle. Two of the party had *Lawman* written all over them, and Argyle knew they must be Judd's personal bodyguard. He tagged aimlessly in the rear of the party and looked at the others who made up the group. Two of them were sleek haired young men who carried stylo-pens and notebooks, almost as if they were weapons. Two more were clearly spacemen, the gleam of their officer's markings showing on the shoulders of their suits. The last and most unobtrusive of the group was a small, thin man of quite indeterminate age who seemed lost in the bulk of a small sized suit. Argyle studied him with interest but he could not see his face, and he could not even begin to label his use in Judd's official party.

Judd and Matheson chatted together as they walked, and from their glances and gestures it was clear that Judd was asking questions about the dome and the colony which

nestled beneath it. Once Judd turned to one of the sleek haired men and made a long comment which was noted on the pad.

The whole group paused inside the entrance lobby of the accommodation building and one of the staff indicated which rooms had been allocated to each person.

"I hope you will be comfortable here, sir," said Matheson. "It's the best we can do under the circumstances."

Judd chuckled cavernously. "Comfort is the least of my worries, Matheson. At least, while I am here, I shall not have every pompous politician on Earth dropping in to see me with his latest idea on how to solve the troubles we are in." He turned his attention to Argyle. "I should be grateful, Mister Argyle, if you would call upon me in a short while. I want to have a long talk with you as soon as possible, in case I am forced to return hurriedly to Earth. Matheson, perhaps you will check with Janus about nine-thirty? That should give me time to make myself comfortable."

"Of course, sir."

Matheson turned away down the corridor. Argyle wandered after him, feeling like an interloper to some high and important group who hadn't noticed his existence. He expected to be thrown out any minute.

"Who's Janus?" he asked Matheson as they reached the main lobby.

"Janus? He's Judd's personal attendant," replied Matheson. "The little fellow with the face like a pekinese."

"Was that him who followed Judd into his suite? I didn't get a good look at him."

"Yes. Judd never lets him out of his sight. He goes everywhere with him."

"Everywhere?"

Matheson nodded. "Acts as secretary at all his meetings and conferences, takes notes, keeps records, handles all the important correspondence. He's Judd's servant too."

Argyle's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"And bodyguard," continued Matheson. "Shares Judd's quarters, carries a needle gun." Matheson shrugged. "You

name it, and Janus is it as far as Judd is concerned. Let's have some more coffee. I can do with it."

Moodily, Argyle agreed. Some of the tension was slipping from him, leaving a sense of anti-climax. After weeks and months of taut, anxious expectancy there was an emptiness inside him now that the time had come. His first meeting with Preacher Judd was over; the second and most important was barely an hour away, but he felt listless and disinterested. How could Judd help him? If it came to that, how could he help a man like Judd?

He drank hot coffee with disinterested silence, brooding and moody, until Matheson asked, "What do you think of him?"

"Judd?" Argyle shrugged. "He seems quite a guy. That's quite a party he totes around with him."

Matheson smiled. Not half as big as those of his predecessors in office. The Minister before him never went anywhere without at least thirty people tagging along.

"Judd gets by with five normally—seven when he leaves Earth. When you consider all the work he has to do, it's a wonder he manages with so small a staff. I've heard it said that he can give a decision on anything in two minutes, and he's never wrong. That's the secret of his success. He has the ability to study any problem objectively for a very short time and then to give a prompt and concise evaluation of it without needing to think about it for days on end. He rarely calls in any experts to advise him, and that saves a lot of time, of course."

"He sounds quite a man."

"He is. I think he is the only man I know who could cope with things as they are in the Galaxy today."

Argyle looked up quickly, and saw from the set of Matheson's face how utterly sincere he was.

"You mean—the Traders?"

"And Alfredo Dellora." Matheson looked at his watch. "Wait here, I'll see if Judd's ready for us."

By the time Argyle had drained the last of his coffee Matheson was back.

"Ten minutes," he remarked briefly. "If we stroll across now and take it slowly we shan't be too early."

They left the canteen and made their way at a leisurely pace towards the accommodation building once again.

Matheson knocked, and the door was opened by the tiny figure of Janus. As Matheson had said earlier, Janus had a face like a pekinese now that Argyle could see it clearly. He smiled and opened the door wider to let them in.

"Mister Judd is ready for you now."

Janus waved them to separate chairs and disappeared into the inner room. A few movements later the massive figure of Judd appeared, clad in a black dressing gown with a dazzling floral design woven in gold and silver thread against the midnight background.

"Ah, gentlemen." He smiled impartially on them both. "I must apologize for keeping you." The black pools of his eyes settled on Matheson. "And I must apologize further to you, Matheson."

"To me, sir?" Matheson looked surprised.

Judd nodded. "In advance. I wish to see Mister Argyle alone. What we have to talk about is for our ears alone."

Matheson turned his startled gaze on Argyle who met it with equal bewilderment. There was a moment of silence while Matheson gathered the remnants of his shattered pride around him and retired with as much dignity as he could muster.

"Please, sit down, Mister Argyle."

Judd took his seat in a deep chair facing Argyle, and the small figure of Janus settled in another chair at the side of him. On a table was set a tridimap of the Galaxy; a transparent block about a foot square, the interior of which shone with myriad points of light and the center was a globe of red. Not quite a globe, Argyle realized as he looked at it. It was oval shaped with slight irregularities here and there as though the maker's hand had trembled as he fashioned it.

"I carry that with me everywhere I go," remarked Judd softly as he saw Argyle's eyes fixed upon it. "It isn't a very

accurate representation of our Galaxy. There are only about one tenth of the stars depicted there that exist in the reality. Only the most important are shown." He sat on the edge of his chair and pointed his finger deep into the heart of the shimmering cube. "If you look closely into the center of the red sphere, Mister Argyle, you will see a small, blue dot. It is a little bigger and brighter than the rest of the map."

Argyle leaned closer and looked as Judd directed him.

"Yes," he replied, after a minute. "Yes, I see it."

"That dot represents our sun, Argyle, the sun of Earth and Mars and Venus. It is very small compared with the vastness around it. You will see that it sits almost in the center of the red globe, and that red globe encompasses the sphere of Man's conquests." The black eyes swiveled somberly and fixed Argyle's gaze with almost hypnotic compulsion. "I carry that tridimap to remind me of the greatness of the human race, and to remind me of the vast responsibilities which lie on my shoulders, and on the shoulders of every living man, be he Earthman or Colonist or Trader. Whatever he is, and whatever he does, the responsibility, in some small measure, for that vast area is mine and yours and Matheson's. Every man owns some part of it. Earth is a small world on the rim of the Galaxy. But by her own power and by the power of her people, the center of Galactic affairs rests on that small planet. Without that center of control can you imagine what would result?" The dark eyes bored into Argyle's. "In a word, Mister Argyle, chaos."

Argyle sat very still, a feeling of awe sweeping over him as the resonant voice hammered home facts which he had never even bothered to think about before. In a few short sentences Preacher Judd had shaped and altered his entire concept of human life and responsibility.

"A long time ago, Argyle," went on Judd more softly now, "two men met by chance at a dinner party given by an obscure Terran ambassador on a planet whose name really doesn't matter any more. Whether it was the influence of good food and good wine, or whether it was the simple meeting of like minds, is not important either, but that meet-

ing changed the lives of both of them. In a few short minutes they opened up between them the concept which I have just outlined. Because they knew a little more than the average man and cared a little more than the average politician, they were able to determine the road along which mankind was heading. Neither of them liked very much what they saw. Any other two men might have left it at that—just another stimulating conversation that was an offshoot of a dinner party, but these two were different. They parted after an hour and never met again. But they kept in touch, and what they did, separately and together, thereafter went a long way towards shaping the destinies of the human race and of the rest of the Galaxy.” He paused and drew in his breath deeply before expelling it in a long sigh. “Now, those plans are threatened. One of these men is dead, and without his power and help the other is very nearly helpless.”

The words drifted away into silence as Argyle sat tense with concentration.

“I think . . .” he whispered and stopped. He had spoken without even realizing that he was going to.

“Yes?” asked Judd softly. “What do you think, Argyle?”

“I think that one of those men was you.” He stopped in sudden fear at his own boldness. Then, encouraged, he said more loudly, “And the other was Pietro Dellora.”

Judd chuckled drily and nodded. There was a note of sadness in his voice as he said, “Yes. The other was Pietro Dellora. I only met him once and yet we were closer than brothers. That meeting took place nearly thirty years ago, just before Pietro’s father died and he succeeded to the ownership of the Company Dellora. And that, really, is the beginning of the story.” He relaxed in his chair, and so did Argyle as he sensed that Judd was going to take his time in the telling of his tale.

“Pietro Dellora was very much the senior partner,” went on Judd. “He was born to power, and he inherited power. I had to work for it and earn it the hard way. Only in the past eight or nine years have I been able to match Dellora’s

ideas and help him in their execution. Before that time we both planned the way things should develop, but only he was in a position to do anything about it. I could only stand and watch, suggest, criticize and applaud."

Under the deep, sonorous voice of the speaker Argyle's mind built up the picture that it was meant to see. The appellation *Preacher* was a natural adjunct to the oratorical abilities of Armadeus Judd, and every word he spoke came alive in the mind of the listener. Judd told of the growing power of the Traders, of Dellora's fight to keep the growth of mankind where it truly belonged, in the hands of all men, not just the select few. The Traders had the power and the means to finance, to explore, to colonize and to exploit the vast outer reaches of the Galaxy. By the power of their fleets they could strangle the economy of Earth and the Solar System, and force the colony worlds to accept domination and control of their resources because of one, simple factor. The Traders controlled communications.

The vast industrial and financial empires of Earth in pre-Stellar days, had financed and built the ships for the stars. They had been backed by government co-operation and their price for the services they gave was franchise in the territories that were to be conquered. It had seemed a small thing in those far off days when Earth had spawned her stellar legions. But from small beginnings had grown the mightiest empires of power that Man had ever known. They were greater than governments; more powerful than ministers; their wealth grew with their power, and the centers of that power shifted, inevitably, outwards and away from Earth. The bonds of sentiment died under the demands for more power, and as the Traders grew so did Earth's dominion dwindle. Only one thing held them in check. Pietro Dellora!

"And now, Pietro Dellora is dead," ended Judd sadly. "Only one person stands between the Traders and the complete domination of the Galaxy."

"Armadeus Judd." Argyle's statement was flat and hard.

"No, Argyle." Judd shook his head. "Not I. On my own I

can only strangle myself in the web which the Traders are weaving."

"Then who?"

"You, Argyle." Judd leaned forward in his chair, the black eyes boring into Argyle's. "You are the only man who stands between Alfredo Dellora and his personal ambition as leader of the Traders. All they are waiting for is for Dellora to give them a positive sign. Were it not for you, that sign would have been given months ago."

Argyle didn't feel surprise or shock. This was what he'd waited to hear for so many weeks. Sworder had been right when he suggested that Judd could supply the answers. Now, apprehension was all Argyle felt. The months of wonder and tension had built to a climax which was dead of all emotion.

"Why me?" he asked slowly.

Judd relaxed again. "In a moment. First, you must realize that the Company Dellora is the largest and most powerful of all the Traders. Through old Pietro and his ancestors it was pledged to support and aid the home world—Earth. In the face of a combination like that the rest of the Traders dare not make a move."

"Go on."

"Second," Judd ticked the point off on the fingers of his left hand, "Dellora knew his son. He knew his lust for power, and he knew in which direction it would turn. He knew, too, that Alfredo was a teleport."

"What?" Argyle sat up straight, shocked by the information. "How?" "Do you think a son—a growing boy—could keep such a secret from his father?" Judd shook his head. "Pietro was a shrewd man, and he kept to himself those things that would show no profit by being revealed. He could not trust his son with the power that was represented by the Company Dellora, so he took steps to remove that power from Alfredo's reach." Judd sighed. "I know just how long old Pietro searched for a solution. He realized, when Alfredo was in his late teens, just what his son was like, but it was only in the past six or eight years that he had



the means to do something about it."

Argyle stirred restlessly.

"Your wife provided the solution," said Judd softly.

"Angela! But—"

"As a result of what she told Pietro about you, and as a result of inquiries over a long period, Pietro Dellora decided to nominate you as the head of the Dellora Company on his death."

The silence which followed Judd's words could almost be felt. Argyle sat more stunned and shocked than he had ever been in his life—than he had ever believed possible. He gripped at the side of his chair and swayed slightly in sheer, numb surprise. The confusion in his mind raged and roared like a maelstrom as utter disbelief tried to flood the sense of Judd's calm statement.

"That's ridiculous!"

"But it is true."

"I . . . but, why me?" Argyle stared blankly at Judd as he found his voice was able to express his torrent of incredulity. "He . . . he never knew me. We only met once, and he was dead an hour later. It just doesn't make sense! Dammit, Judd, I wanted answers not fantasies."

"It isn't fantasy, it is true," persisted Judd calmly.

Argyle could have no doubt that Judd was speaking the truth. He wasn't the sort of man to make wild, unproven statements in such circumstances as these. If he said it was so, then Argyle could be very sure that indeed it was so. When he thought about it, was it so ridiculous? At least it would account for Dellora's murderous attacks which, until now, had made no sense whatever. A motive such as that would account for almost any homicidal effort which Alfredo Dellora might try.

"The will was registered secretly in the Inter-Galactic Bureau of Records about a year ago," went on Judd. "A large block of private shares was transferred to your wife and, through her death, to you. Six medical specialists testified to Pietro's sanity—without knowing why they were called upon to do so."

Argyle leaned forward, his head in his hands.

"Only Pietro, his lawyers, your wife and myself knew of this; but with the precautions he took, any authority in the Galaxy will unhold your right to the succession of the Company Dellora, unless . . ." Judd paused significantly.

Argyle lifted his head. "Unless, what?"

"Unless you disappear."

Argyle laughed without humor. "Or die, is that it?"

"I heard a recording of the story you told to Matheson after the murder of that Jeweler," remarked Judd with sudden incongruity.

"Sigmund Grant? What has he to do with this?"

"Nothing. The most important thing was the story you told Matheson. I listened to it, and while I listened the whole thing fell into place. All the facts which you found so puzzling were quite clear to me." He shrugged. "I must admit to having some prior knowledge—more, at any rate, than you did. Even so, I think you could have come up with the right answers if you'd thought sufficiently about it and allowed your imagination more reign. All the clues were there for you to see."

Argyle rubbed his hands over his face. His head ached slightly, and his pulse was racing. He felt suddenly angry at the pressure of events that were piling up around him. He was annoyed with Judd's methodic logical extrapolation of facts and events.

"Hell," he snapped. "Get to the point, Judd. Only one thing makes sense. With me dead Alfredo would inherit the Company Dellora with no one to stop him, right?"

Judd chuckled. "Ipso facto. Yes. Argyle, how many attempts have been made on your life?"

"Dammit. Three."

"Correction. One?"

"For heavens sake!"

"Only one," went on Judd calmly, "and that was the poisoned needle gun after the murder of Pietro."

"Then what the hell do you call the others?"

"They weren't attempts on your life, they were mere

efforts to put you out of the way, and so render the conditions of Pietro's will invalid."

"What's the difference?" demanded Argyle angrily.

"Argyle," Judd leaned forward in his chair. "Why didn't Alfredo kill you on any one of the half dozen opportunities he had? Why didn't he kill you with the needle gun that killed his father?"

Argyle shrugged. "He tried and missed, that's why."

"Then why didn't he try again?"

Argyle was silent.

Judd stabbed a finger at him. "You thought he merely wanted to put you out of the way because he dare not murder you. Yet he dared to murder Spiros and his father and Sigmund Grant—and your wife."

Argyle's head jerked up. "You think he killed Angela?"

"I know he did. Now. With all that behind him, why should he stop at killing you?"

"I don't know—perhaps he feared me?"

"Don't flatter yourself. He didn't fear you that much," taunted Judd. "Hasn't it dawned on you yet, Argyle. Dellora didn't kill you because he couldn't."

Argyle gaped at him dazedly.

"You can't be killed, Argyle," said Judd softly.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ARGYLE felt his brain reeling on the verge of insanity as shock was piled on shock. He wanted to laugh hysterically and deny the whole stupidity of Judd's statement as a joke. An idiotic, sadistic jest that was perpetrated in the warped mind of a madman. Deep within himself he knew Judd was sincere, and in that knowledge lay insanity and hysteria. He giggled insanely and stifled the sound as it bubbled from his trembling lips.

"The Galaxy is aswarm with novelty," Judd's voice droned on deep and sonorous. "The mind of Man is giving up its secrets, Argyle, because Man himself is being forced

to adapt itself to new and ever changing conditions. When we were mere planetary creatures we needed nothing but our own ingenuity and ability to think. Then, as our world expanded around us, so the mind of Man expanded too. We stretched our wings out across the deeps of space and reached the stars. With the changing status of our race the mind of Man gave forth its power, so that Man himself could adapt to the ever changing needs of the Universe. We accept the teepees for what they are—the means by which we communicate across the vastness of space between the stars. Levitators and Pyrotics are just growing out of the low status, of clever entertainers. Your wife was a prognosticator—possibly one of the best we know of to date. Dellora is a teleport, and his father was a kineticist. All these things are new and unexplored, and there are a dozen others which we know about, who can be useful in the growing community of Inter-Stellar Man. In every generation there are more people born with odd gifts that show the adaptability of the species to new and strange conditions. You, Argyle,” Judd paused for one instant, “are the first of a new branch of the family—the Immortals.”

Argyle gazed at him in stark horror.

Judd smiled slightly. “It’s a frightening name, but not strictly correct. The average life span of a man today is one hundred and seven years, roughly. The term Immortal applies to a person whose life span is more than treble that period. There have been several of them known to us over the past century or so. Men and women whose bodily metabolism is so slowed down that the aging processes do not act so quickly or so effectively on them. They are in the prime of life for periods estimated at two and a half centuries. I say estimated because those we know of are still the subject of study and research, and the period of their lives is put at a three and a half centuries by the study of their bodies.”

“And they . . .” the words stuck in Argyle throat, “they can’t be . . . be killed?”

“Oh, yes. They can be killed. It is you who are the next

step in the line. Once the body adapts itself to fighting off old age there are other things to which it must also adapt itself. The destruction of outside causes of death—the sheer, primeval ability to survive. Survival has been the basic instinct of Man ever since he first evolved into a thinking creature, and now his mind has taken up the battle which was, until now, a purely physical thing. For centuries man's body was a prey to many and varied types of death. Germs, viruses and diseases of a myriad kinds took their toll of the human race. The race survived because it adapted itself physically and mentally. It learned to fight artificial death with artificial means until death by disease became a thing no longer to be feared. The ability to survive has spread to the mind and been transmitted to the body. Any form of artificial death at you is nullified by your bodily mechanism which is, in turn, controlled by your mind. That is why Dellora failed to kill you with the needle gun."

"But he couldn't know such a thing," protested Argyle incredulously. "No one could have known. I didn't know myself." He shook his head in sheer dazed bewilderment. "Even now I . . . I can't bring myself to believe it. It's too horrible to think about." He dropped his head into his hands. "No one could have known."

"Your wife knew."

"Angela? But how?"

"Why do you think she left you? After all, she loved you, didn't she?"

Argyle nodded dumbly.

"Do you think any woman could stay with a man who was, seemingly, eternally youthful, while she lost her youth and slipped into the wrinkles and sterility of old age?" Judd shook his head. "No woman could stand that, Argyle, no matter how much she loved a man."

"But she couldn't know."

"She was a prognosticator, wasn't she? A very good one according to Pietro Dellora. She could predict the future based on current data with ninety-eight percent accuracy. You lived together for a long enough period for her to be

able to predict the course of your lives together. And what she saw drove her from you."

There was a dull ache in Argyle's being. His head reeled and his whole body felt as if it had been pummeled unmercifully so that every muscle reflected soreness and distress. His mouth was dry and his brow feverish, his whole physical being seemed steeped in discomfort. He could not doubt Judd's words. Every piece of the vast complicated puzzle that had been with him for so long fell into position, everything was answered, every entry in the catalogue checked, ticked and filed neatly in its own place. The few odds and ends that remained were unimportant details that would, in time, find their own level in the scheme of things.

"Who told you all this?" he demanded dully.

"Pietro Dellora."

"Then why didn't he tell me? He denied all knowledge of it the only time we met."

"Simply because it was the first time. He couldn't tell you much within an hour of meeting you for the first time. He did the next best thing by offering you a job so that you could be with him and near him for a long period. The rest would have come later, if he had lived."

Argyle nodded. He stumbled to his feet, eager only to get out of the room and back to his own quarters. There was too much to think about, too much to know, too much to learn. He could only do it on his own. Judd stood up too, realizing with apparent intuition the need of the younger man.

"If I am called suddenly back to Earth," he said. "Will you come with me?"

Argyle nodded, his hand already on the door handle. "Of course."

He stumbled out leaving it open behind him, and somehow found his way back to his room. He passed Matheson in the entrance lobby, but didn't see him. Matheson moved towards him, and stopped as he saw the white, shaken agony of the man. Too clearly, Argyle needed to be alone.

He reached his room, slammed the door shut, and threw

himself down on the bed with his head in the softness of the pillow. The physical fact of shutting out sight from his eyes was symbolic of the desire to shut out knowledge from his mind. The raging torment of the emotion that swept through him was an unstoppable flood that threatened to engulf his sanity. His hands crammed the pillow around his head and his body writhed in a paroxysm of hysteria.

The seconds passed into minutes and the minutes into an hour as he wrestled with his mental turmoil. Gradually, his body relaxed, his mind quieted, and from the chaos emerged the dull acceptance of inevitability. Questions began to formulate in his mind again. Knowledge only led to more questions, that was the first lesson he learned. Knowledge was not, in itself, the end, it was only the beginning. The first and greatest step he made was when he reminded himself that he was not the first. How had the first telepath felt when he had contacted a like mind? What of the kineticist who first moved an object by the power of his mind alone? Had the first pyrotic, flashing fire on some inflammable object, given up his sanity to the new found power?

Argyle sat up slowly. He looked at his hands as they lay on his knees. He lifted them closer for inspection. They were the same hands that he had possessed yesterday, nothing was changing; there was no stigmata that had not been there before. It was merely a matter of adaptability, of reconciliation with a new pattern of life. He was Richard Argyle, age thirty-four. Yesterday, death had been seventy years away, now it was over three centuries. In the life of a young man death was always a distant, nebulous thing that would not come for a long time. It happened to your friends, to people you knew—but it never happened to you, not for a long time. The seeds of immortality were in every man and woman and child. Death was always too far off to be a matter for concern. Thus, his outlook on life could hardly be very different. As to the rest, there was comfort in knowing that he wasn't at the mercy of any murderous agent that Alfredo Dellora sent against him. He need not

fear accident or murder—as long as the accident wasn't a serious one like being in the center of an exploding ship deep in space.

He chuckled wryly at the thought, and the chuckle marked his regained balance and his grip upon himself once more.

Angela had known. There was a sudden lump in his throat as he thought of the agony she must have gone through in separating herself from him, and carving a new life far away in a strange, almost alien environment. He could feel gratitude to Pietro Dellora for taking her in and making life more pleasant. How had Alfredo known? It didn't take much to imagine how Alfredo had felt about a strange woman who had suddenly become his father's confidante and friend. With his ambitions for power it was quite logical that Alfredo should take any steps he could to find out exactly how close Angela was to Pietro; and having found out, that he should take steps to remove her. It was equally logical that, before removing her from the scene, he should extract all possible information from her. There were a dozen hypno drugs that would give him the key to her mind and all its secrets. No, Alfredo would have little trouble in that direction.

For the first time Argyle realized just how much he hated the slim pale man with the petulant lips. Until now he had doubted that Angela was dead. Somewhere at the back of his mind had lingered a hope that, after all, Pietro Dellora had been wrong. That hope could live no more because of Alfredo's knowledge. There was only one way Alfredo could have learned all he knew about Argyle, and that way led also to the murder of Angela. The inner fury, which built up within him as he sat on the bed, brought with it the determination that settled Argyle's actions for the future. Without that personal hatred he might have tried to loose himself again as he had done before. The Company Dellora meant nothing to him as such; he doubted even if he could obtain the control that old Pietro had desired to pass to him. In his hatred for Alfredo blossomed



the resolve to try, for in that way he could most hurt the man he hated.

Sworder had asked, how did you fight a teleport? Argyle grinned to himself as he knew that he had the answer. You fought him by taking away his power to be anything other than what he was—a teleport. In itself, Dellora's ability was nothing. His greatest asset was in the power of the Company Dellora—and if Argyle took that from him then he was nothing, a nonentity. Argyle doubted if Alfredo Dellora would be able to survive in such a position.

He glanced at the wall clock and saw that it was well past midday, local time. It was almost three hours since he had first gone into Preacher Judd's suite to talk with him. Those three hours had changed his life. Argyle had wit enough to realize it, and sense enough to recast his thinking along new lines. One inescapable fact emerged from the welter of his new consciousness. Judd had said that only he could save Earth and the rest of the Galaxy from domination by Alfredo Dellora and the Traders. That might be true, but it was equally true that without Judd to advise and help him, he wouldn't stand an earthly chance of coming out on top in any clash with Dellora and the Traders. In fact, if the Traders took it into their heads to act now, then all the laws and edicts and authorities in the Galaxy wouldn't be able to force acceptance of Pietro Dellora's will. The old edict of possession being nine points of the law would hold just as true as it had for centuries past. The trump card in the Trader's hand was their control of communications. Only one power comparable to their own might have existed. That was a combination of Earth and the Company Dellora.

If Alfredo Dellora could separate the Company Dellora from Earth, then his battle was three parts won. Argyle realized grimly that even now action on his part might be too late. Action, if it was taken, would have to be taken now. He would have to see Judd again.

He rose from the bed and crossed to the door, pausing with his hand on the handle before leaving the room. What

happened in the next hour or two might settle the fate of Earth and the whole Galaxy for centuries to come. How different was his position now compared with yesterday. An obscure space engineer named Richard Argyle held the fate of the Universe in his blunt, strong hands. Somehow the weight did not seem heavy on his shoulders.

The gnome like figure of Janus opened the door as he knocked, and there was no question of his admission as soon as the man saw who had knocked. He stepped inside and saw Judd relaxed upon the divan reading a heavy book.

Judd looked up as he entered and smiled his welcome. "How do you feel, Argyle?"

"I'll live."

"Good." Judd put the book down and gestured at it briefly. "I never could get used to microfilm and autoreaders. If people knew I read books it might destroy their confidence in me."

"It might enhance it. The average man has a great regard for idiosyncrasies in his elected representatives."

Judd nodded and smiled. "I shall have to think about that, Argyle. It might be useful if I ever need an election gimmick. Well, what can I do for you?"

Argyle sat down in the same chair that he had occupied on his previous visit. "I don't think you're going to like this, Judd, but I can see only one way of getting at Alfredo and The Traders."

"And that is?"

"Head for Dellora Planet at once and establish my legal right and title to the assets of the Company Dellora. Once we're on Dellora and are sure of our position we break the news all over the Galaxy through the teepees. Until then, we clamp down on teepee communication from Earth and the neighboring systems. That way we might be able to keep Dellora and the Traders in the dark about our movements until it's too late."

Judd looked at him speculatively. "You don't waste any time, Argyle. By *we* I assume you want me to accompany you to Dellora?"

Argyle nodded. "You and your escort ships up there are the only force likely to establish me on Dellora. With your authority and that squadron of ships I might take over Dellora Planet, and that'll be the first step to taking over the Company. After that . . ." he shrugged and left the sentence hanging significantly.

Judd looked away and pondered deeply. Clearly, he was bothered about the fact that he would have to remain absent from Earth for a considerable period.

"All right. I'll come." Judd lifted his head and spoke decisively. "I'll get a teepee hookup with Earth to cover my absence. Janus, fix that." He looked at Argyle. "I'll lay on an Earth ship to bring photostat copies of the relevant documents from the Galactic Records Bureau. Oh, yes, and at the same time they can bring a Central Court Order enforcing the terms of Pietro's will. It's only paper but it will strengthen our hand." He grinned slightly. "People have an odd fear of pieces of paper with legal phrases and impressive signatures. They fear them more than guns or weapons. I'll also freeze the teepee lines."

"What?" Argyle gaped at him. "Can you do that?"

"I can cover Terran controlled planets, and that should be enough. The Trader's own teepees can't operate if there's no one to operate with." He nodded. "Yes, I'll take care of that."

"It may be too late."

"We'll take that chance." Judd got off the divan and waved an arm at him. "Now get out of here, Argyle. I've got to fix up a government on Earth while I'm away. Be ready in eighteen hours. It'll take that long to fix things up. Oh! And send Matheson in on your way out. I'll use him as a messenger in one of the escort ships back to Earth. And you get a good night's sleep. You look as if you need it."

Argyle laughed and turned towards the door. As he opened it Judd called to him again.

"Argyle."

He turned back.

Judd looked at him somberly across the width of the

large room. "As of now, this minute, we've got a fight on our hands, boy. How do you feel?"

"Does it matter?" Argyle smiled crookedly. "If we fail, I'll have three centuries to think about it."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EARTH was far distant now. Sixty light-years and twelve weeks of monotony lay between the squadron and their home world. The single giant cruiser with its attendant guard of eight smaller ships had lanced away from Leemos, bypassing the main trade routes and carving a straight path towards Dellora Planet. In almost three months they had encountered only one other vessel, and that was the small scout that had brought the documents from the Galactic Records Bureau. The prearranged rendezvous had been simply and precisely made, and Judd was as well armed for the future as he could be. The two teepees had made no contact with their fellows on other planets, and Argyle was forced to admit that Judd did things as efficiently as he had promised. The lone exception to the teepee links was that with Earth itself. Judd remained in constant touch with those in the Terran government whom he had appointed to carry on in his absence. For him, at least, the trip was no rest cure. Monotony might dog the rest of those on board, but he stayed in his cabin with Janus and one of the teepees. From him flowed a steady stream of orders and instructions, advice and comment on the conduct of Terran affairs. He appeared at meal times in the officer's mess and for a couple of hours each evening. For the rest, he worked harder than any man on board.

In addition, Matheson had, on his return to Earth, set up a vast security screen that covered every ship arriving on Earth. Quietly, and without fuss his agents trod their way among the passengers, the crews and the officers of every ship that arrived from the stars. Hints and rumors were assembled into an overall picture, and the resultant information was teepeed straight to Judd. With Judd's permis-

sion, Matheson had left open one other teepee hookup; that between Earth and Rigel Five, and from that point, via Earth, came news and rumor from the Galaxy.

The mere fact that Trader ships were still plying their normal business was comfort in itself. As Judd remarked to Argyle, "The moment those ships stop traveling we're in trouble."

But they didn't stop. Traffic from Earth and through Rigel Five remained the same. But from the work of Matheson and his agents a composite picture was built up that was confused, and in part, contradictory. It was important too. Something was happening in the Galaxy, but no one was sure just what. The Traders were quiet, but it was the quiet of a volcano before an eruption. A tension in the affairs of Man throughout the Galaxy was noticeable and it was rising steadily. The freight and passenger rates remained at their high level and the Traders were also applying pressure in other directions. That pressure was slight, but it was there and it could be measured.

"It is," said Judd, one day, "as if they know they can do as they wish, but they are holding back for some reason." His dark eyes had fixed Argyle steadily. "I think that reason is you. Dellora daren't move until he knows what you are doing and where you are doing it."

Dellora Planet was two days away. It was the middle of the night when Argyle was rudely awakened by an officer of the watch with an urgent summons to go to Judd's cabin. He stumbled—still half asleep—from his bunk, and threw on his clothes hurriedly. The urgency of the summons was enough to wash the sleep from his brain by the time he reached Judd's quarters. He knocked and went in as Judd's voice boomed at him.

The cabin was brightly lit, and Judd had obviously been awake for a long time—if, indeed, he had slept at all. Janus was there, fully dressed and alert and so was one of the teepees, a slim young man with a doleful face and long, slender hands. One of the junior secretaries was busy taking notes on a pad.

As Argyle entered Judd glanced up from the desk at which he sat, and one look at his face told Argyle that there was trouble in the air.

"Oh, hello, Argyle. Sorry to wake you."

"Guess you had a reason," replied Argyle.

"Yes. We had a flash from Matheson about half an hour ago. We've got a line on Alfredo Dellora."

"And?"

Judd laid down the stylopen with which he had been scribbling, on the desk and sat back. "The news came from Rigel Five. Dellora is calling a personal meeting of all the Trader chiefs. The invitations went out weeks ago, before we got our teepee blackout working. Two of them, Tamuri Yosaka and Vanden Forester passed through Rigel Five two weeks ago. They were headed for the meeting. There's a rumor that Tabori broke up his holiday on New Earth about eight weeks ago, but that's not confirmed."

Argyle pursed his lips. Dellora was marshaling his forces, that was the only construction that could be put on the rumors.

"This is the first time in centuries that the Trader chiefs have thought it necessary to get together, Argyle," Judd went on grimly. "It means that they are bent on some form of concerted action. And it means that Alfredo Dellora is leading them into it."

"What about the others?" asked Argyle.

Judd shrugged. "Matheson may dig up some more information. But you can bet that Vanderlinden and Heilinger will be there." His fingers drummed lightly on the arm of the chair. "We know where the meeting is to be held as well."

Argyle met his gaze. "Where?" he asked.

Judd grinned humorlessly. "Can't you guess?"

"Yes." Argyle nodded. "Dellora Planet."

"Right."

"Well, then, at least, we have some idea when it will be."

"Yes! It's five weeks flight from Rigel Five so if Yosaka and Forester passed through two weeks ago they won't be there

for at least another two or three weeks."

"And we're two days flight away."

Judd nodded. "I've already thought of that. We'll lie up here and see if Matheson can dig up some more information. If not we'll take a chance and drop in on them about—let's see—the Twentieth Central Galactic."

Argyle felt uncertainty shiver through him as he realized what Judd's plan was. It seemed to him that they were placing themselves at the mercy of Alfredo Dellora and his associates.

"You think that's wise?" he asked cautiously.

Judd's eyes flashed at him. "What else do you suggest? Run away and leave them to parcel out the Galaxy among themselves without so much as a protest." He shook his head. "No, Argyle. We've got a chance here to strike one final blow. It may not come off, but if it does . . ."

"One throw of the dice, is that it?"

Judd chuckled and shook his head. "A neat simile, Argyle. Yes, one throw of the dice. But the dice are going to be loaded in our favor."

On Judd's instructions the fleet slowed its headlong flight, and by the time Argyle awoke, the nine ships were motionless in space. Argyle was late rising after his disturbed night. When he finally entered the officer's mess, Judd was just enjoying a final cup of coffee. Even at that time Judd was working. He had a large notebook and a stylopen and was writing copiously.

While Argyle ate, Judd wrote. At the same time he kept up a running flood of comment and conversation about the projected visit to Dellora. He reiterated the importance of knowing the actual date on which the conference would take place.

"Once we know that we can walk in on them right in the middle of it," he told Argyle grimly.

"Then what?" queried Argyle sourly. "Kill 'em all off at one stroke?"

Judd laughed and shook his head. "I'm a man of peace. No, the only one of them we need fear is Alfredo Dellora.

If he gains absolute control of the Company, and gets Yosaka and Tabori and the rest to line up with him, then we're finished.

"I think the Traders are probably wavering over their final decision to act because they're not sure just how Pietro's alliance with Earth is to be broken. That's why Alfredo has called this meeting, unless I'm very wrong. He wants to convince them that he has control of the Company and that he intends reversing the policies of his father. If he does that, then he'll be able to talk them into concerted action against Earth and the colony worlds. He'll do it too, unless we stop him."

"And you figure to do it by charging in on this conference?"

"Maybe."

"I don't see how," objected Argyle.

"Little bits of paper."

"Those legal documents? Hell, Judd . . ."

"Plus your most important presence as heir apparent."

"I don't see what good I'll be able to do."

"Neither do I at the moment. Only one thing is sure. If you turn up with legal proof that old Pietro nominated you in his stead, then Alfredo's position will suffer psychologically if not physically. Apart from that I think we shall have to act as the situation demands, and that may well depend on your quickness of action."

Argyle eyed Judd morosely. For a man who had shown himself to be so brilliant in the past he seemed to be leaving an awful lot to chance on this occasion. The very fact of walking into the middle of Dellora's domain with no apparent safeguards was not calculated to improve Argyle's humor.

"Worried?"

Argyle looked at Judd, shrugged and nodded. "A bit."

Judd leaned forward in his seat and laid the stylopen carefully on the table before him. "Argyle, whatever happens on Dellora Planet, don't forget that there is a Galaxy at stake. I'm not happy about this and I don't mind ad-



mitting it. We have one or two trump cards to play, provided the circumstances are right for us. If they're not . . ." he shrugged. "Just remember one thing. I could have gone back to Earth and buried my head in the sand. I could have left you to fight your own battles and hoped that everything would come out right." He looked grimly at the younger man. "Make no mistake. If Alfredo is clever and lucky enough, he'll break any attempt we make to unseat him. Then there won't be a thing we can do about it—legal backing or not."

"Then how . . . ?"

"I think we may be forced to kill Alfredo Dellora."

"Kill a teleport?" snapped Argyle. "In heavens name how? Dammit, Judd, I've been asking myself that question for months. You can't do it, unless you can poison his food or set a trap that you're sure he will walk into. Somehow I don't think Alfredo will be stupid enough to walk into a trap with his eyes open."

Judd smiled grimly. "Perhaps I'll have an idea."

"You'll need a good one."

Argyle went gloomily back to his cabin after breakfast, and tried to figure out what was in Judd's mind. He could see the necessity of getting rid of Dellora, but Judd's notions on how to accomplish that desirable end were vague, to say the least. Dellora's death would remove the Trader's potential leader, and it would leave the way clear for Argyle to take over the Company Dellora. Judd's scheme didn't seem either sensible or subtle, unless Judd had something else up his sleeve. None of the Traders would be traveling unescorted, and Dellora's local forces, alone, would be more than a match for the small force which Judd had at his disposal. One mass attack by a trio of heavy cruisers would see Judd dead and the squadron destroyed. And Argyle? He shuddered as he wondered how his indestructible being would react to atomic blasts, to a broken ship and the airless cold of deep space.

The long, monotonous wait was not entirely unproductive. After a couple of days Judd sent the crew of the ship out-

side, in space suits to alter the markings of the vessel. Argyle didn't see exactly what changes were made, but the comment of one of the junior officers was eloquent enough.

"Can't tell her from a damned Trader ship, now. They've even altered the registration number and the name."

Judd was smart, Argyle was forced to admit it. It was extremely unlikely that an Earth ship would be allowed within spitting distance of Dellora Planet once she was recognized. Judd was clearly banking on the excessive amount of traffic that would be heading for Dellora to cover the arrival of one extra ship. The camouflage might see them through.

Ten days after they had stopped, Matheson came through with the news that the conference was scheduled for the Twenty-second, Central Galactic Time, and, equally important, it was to be held on the space station which had been Pietro Dellora's prison.

"I might have expected that," commented Argyle when Judd gave him the news. "It would add to Dellora's stature to stage his act on the scene so closely connected with his father."

"Either that or sheer psychological need," agreed Judd. "He may need some reminder of his father's power to bolster his confidence. Well, we'll make tracks in nine days, on the twentieth."

"What about the rest of the squadron?"

"They stay out here and wait for us. Either they can escort us to Earth or they can take back the news that we failed."

On the twentieth they left the escort behind and slid away into the depths of space, towards Dellora Planet. As the hours passed tension built up in everyone on board. Even the lucky chance that gave them the radar recognition signs for Dellora Planet, didn't help to ease matters. When the planet itself came into view, Judd issued orders for the landing party.

Argyle was shocked when he heard of its make-up. Judd, Janus and himself, unaccompanied by ship's officers and

with no armed escort. For a moment Argyle was tempted to seek Judd out and argue with him, but he knew that it would be of little use. Perhaps Judd was being subtle or reckless, but Argyle could not imagine his being stupid.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SPACE STATION gleamed to one side of the bulking arc of Dellora Planet. The great, spoked wheel with its bulbous central hub, hung motionless against the backdrop of space. Around it like scattered confetti, floated a score or more vessels of varied types and sizes.

The tension that had been with them for so long mounted to a climax as Judd and Argyle stood on the control bridge and watched the scene before them. The wheel of the station grew larger, and the planetary disc slid from view as the ship manoeuvred into position.

A curt, questioning message from the radio control of the station was answered laconically by the cruiser's captain.

"Delegates for the Trader conference."

Judd smiled and nodded his approval. There was a long pause before the station came back.

"Lay to five hundred yards planetward of the station on declination thirty degrees. A tender will be sent to you."

Argyle stirred restlessly. "Alfredo must be getting careless," he commented. "He hasn't bothered to check who the delegates are."

"Why should he?" countered Judd. "I doubt if he's even been told of our arrival. I imagine some minor official is checking arrivals, and he would hardly take any action that might offend either Dellora or his guests. If we say we are for the conference, then he believes it because he has no reason to do otherwise."

"You sound as if you planned it this way."

Judd laughed. "Not planned it. Hoped for it. Luck is with us so far, Argyle. Let's hope it stays with us for the next few hours."

"What do I do when we get to this . . . this meeting?"

Judd looked at him somberly from his dark eyes. "You act as the situation demands, Argyle. I can't give you any advice because I don't know what will happen myself. I can only tell you this, you will be the central figure and you will have to carry yourself accordingly. You are the head of the Company Dellora and you must act as such. You will have to gain a psychological advantage over Alfredo Dellora that can never be challenged in the future whatever happens today." He paused, and then said quietly, "If the opportunity occurs Alfredo must die."

Argyle grimaced in distaste. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"I do," snapped Judd. "Here! Now! Today, you are the most important person in the Galaxy. I am nothing. I can only stand by, once I have created the opening, and watch you take advantage of it—if you can. On what happens in the next few hours depends the fate of the Galaxy for the next thousand years." His eyes bored relentlessly into Argyle's. "The history of the Universe will be shaped by your hands, and yours alone. Don't forget it, Argyle, don't forget it for a single instant."

The cruiser manoeuvred into the allocated position and hung motionless. Minutes later, a small tender shuttled across the intervening gap and made contact with the main airlock of the cruiser. The landing party—Judd, Janus, and Argyle—boarded the tender in silence. Argyle recognized the familiar clang that rang through the tiny craft as it made contact with the station lock.

The lock doors slid open with a whine of hidden machinery, and they stepped through into the lighted brilliance of the station rim. Gravity, Argyle noticed, was normal.

Inside the station three officers waited to welcome them. Judd greeted them imperiously.

"I fear we are late. Has the conference begun?"

"An hour ago, excellency," replied the senior of the three. "What na—?"

"Then by so kind as to conduct us there," rasped Judd. "Dellora will be most anxious."

"Yes, excellency." The man looked unhappy. "But—"

"Come, man," roared Judd. "Don't let us keep our host waiting any longer."

The officer licked his lips, hesitated and was lost. He turned away along the curved corridor that was so familiar to Argyle. Nothing, except the gravity, had changed since his previous visit so many months before. As they walked he felt a tremor in his stomach; his hands were clammy, and stark apprehension plucked ragged fingers at his nerves. The corridor widened before them. He knew that the vast circular room at the hub of the station was the place where the conference was being held. Even as the thought crossed his mind the officer halted and motioned them to wait. Only a sector of the great room was visible, but from somewhere just out of sight the murmur of voices came plainly to their ears.

The murmur stopped abruptly, and the sharp angry voice of Alfredo Dellora snapped into place.

"What is it, colonel?"

"Delegates to the conference, sir."

"What? Dammit, man. Who?"

"Sir, I—"

Judd stepped lithely forward, moving surprisingly fast for one of his build; his voice boomed massively through the chamber, drowning the colonel's attempted explanation, as he announced:

"Armadeus Judd at your service, Dellora."

Argyle moved forward instinctively with Janus so that all three of them stood together in the entrance to the great room.

"Judd!" Dellora's voice hissed at them from a long crowded table that hadn't been in the room when Argyle had last been there. He stood at the far end of it, his blanched face and wide eyes staring, astounded, at the group before him. The eyes moved a fraction and Dellora lurched, his hands reaching for the table to steady himself

as he saw Argyle. His voice croaked and choked in sheer, bewildered amazement.

"You," he whispered. "Argyle!"

This was the moment Judd had spoken about. The opening had been created for him, and now Argyle had to use it.

He felt, rather than saw, Judd and Janus move back a little from him, so that he stood alone. He reacted instinctively. A sense of power and exultation swept through him as he realized that, for the first time, he had the advantage over Alfredo Dellora. Judd was nobody. He, Richard Argyle, was the person that Dellora feared beyond all men. He was the center of the whole grim charade. And Dellora was afraid.

He smiled tightly and stepped forward with slow, steady confidence, his feet sinking into the familiar softness of the flame red carpet. Behind him Judd and Janus moved too, flanking him as he approached the table. His eyes flickered over the men seated there. There were ten of them, without Dellora. The ten most powerful men in the Galaxy. Sleekly groomed, grim faced men with power written in every line of their faces, and wealth in every crease of their varied, elaborate dress. Nearest to him a slim, brown skinned man fixed him with slanted, icy eyes; this, he knew, could only be Tamuri Yosaka. Further along the table the bulking black giant with the cropped hair must be Vanden Forester whose ancestors, centuries ago, had come from the primeval jungles of central Africa. The others he could not identify.

"Argyle!"

He switched his attention back to Dellora who was still staring at him, chalk faced and shaken.

"Good day, Dellora." Unconsciously, he copied the sarcasm that Judd might have used. "I heard that you were trying to usurp my position as head of the Company Dellora. I felt it was time to assert my power."

The short silence was broken by a burst of laughter from the throat of the black Forester. "Head of the Company Dellora, is it? What of that, eh, Tabori?"

The old man with the thin hawk's face sneered, his lips twisting as he did so. "I think that Dellora was right in calling this meeting."

"And I," rumbled Forester. "We know of you, Argyle, and your companion, Armadeus Judd."

"And know this, also," rasped Argyle, "the Company Dellora was willed to me by one Pietro Dellora. His deed and title were registered with the Central Galactic Records Bureau. I have with me copies of the relevant documents backed by a Central Court order from the Galactic Council of Justice."

As if at a cue, Janus stepped forward and laid the folder containing the documents on the table before them.

"If there is to be a meeting," Argyle went on quietly, "it is I who will conduct it, not this charlatan who stands before you."

Dellora had not uttered a word. The silence was stark and impenetrable as eleven pairs of eyes fixed on the slim neat folio with its red cover.

"Did Alfredo tell you of this?" Argyle's eyes swept round the seated men as he asked the question softly and with a tinge of irony. "Did he tell you that his own father had so little trust in him that he took steps to prevent the accession of his son to the control of the Company Dellora?"

The papers rustled slightly as Yosaka lifted the folio and scanned it quickly. He passed it to the man next to him, and slowly it went along the table, passing from hand to hand while silence cloaked the room. Dellora picked it up at last with a hand that trembled; he looked at the papers as if he was in a trance.

"I did not know of this," he whispered, astounded, and for a moment Argyle almost believed him. Then his head came up and his eyes flashed fire and defiance down the length of the table. "These are fakes," he shouted. "My father would never have been a party to such an outrageous plan. Judd, you faker, what trickery are you planning now?"

Dellora carried it off well, Argyle had to admit. The sheer bewilderment, the refusal to admit that such a thing

could be, the indignation, and finally the blunt accusation of trickery. The whole facade was broken and shattered beyond repair by the deep, ironic chuckle that rippled round the room from Judd's own lips. Even without speaking he could be more expressive than any ten men. Argyle was still in command.

"You are not wanted here, Dellora," said Argyle coldly. "The law of the Galaxy does not want you; I do not want you; your own father did not want you. Get out of here, out of this room, this station, this planet."

"One minute." Yosaka's voice was soft and calm after the fire of Dellora and the harshness of Argyle. "You are taking a great deal for granted, Mister . . . ah . . . Argyle. There are ten of us at this table who do not subscribe to your dislike for the presence of Dellora. Let us look at this thing calmly and objectively. You do not appear to be aware of one simple fact. This conference was called to discuss the future conduct of the Company Dellora in collaboration with the rest of the Trader groups. That, and that alone, is the only reason for our presence here today. It is the only discussion which is of importance." The slanted eyes bored stonily into those of Argyle. "What you want is of very little interest to us. Under Alfredo Dellora the Company will come more into line with the accepted ideas and policies of the Traders, and with the needs of the Galaxy. If the control of the Company passes into your hands, Argyle, legally or otherwise, then the state of affairs which held good during the lifetime of Pietro Dellora and his predecessors, would be perpetuated. We do not want that to happen."

Argyle said nothing.

Tabori chuckled throatily. "Well, Argyle? Is that not clear?"

"That being so, Argyle," continued Yosaka, "it would seem that you are the one who is not wanted here. We are not prepared to allow—"

"You are not prepared to allow," broke in Argyle angrily. "Legal—"

"To hell with you and your legality," roared Forester. "We



have waited too long for the death of Pietro Dellora. Control of the Company Dellora is essential to the Trader plan for the betterment of the Galaxy. Through Alfredo we've gained that control. We shan't let it slip from us again."

Argyle walked slowly round the table and stood looking down at the giant, black skinned man. "And how do you propose stopping me?" he asked quietly.

"Please, Argyle," put in Yosaka pityingly. "Spare us these histrionics. We are well aware of your immunity to death. There are several alternatives left to us that will accomplish your removal from the scene. Once that is accomplished we shall only have Judd to worry about, and he has kindly walked into our parlor." He smiled coldly. "Without you to help him, Judd is helpless. Without Judd to lead them, his gang is equally helpless. Therefore, Argyle, we have little to fear."

"Earth would never surrender to you under the terms you would demand," rasped Argyle. "There is an old story about killing the goose that lays the golden egg, Yosaka—"

"Who said anything about Earth?" broke in Yosaka mildly.

Argyle was suddenly nonplused. He glanced hurriedly at Judd who stood, sphinx like, in the position he had held since they first entered the room. There was no comfort there.

"Let's get rid of them," Dellora quavered, his voice harsh and almost unrecognizable in his anxiety. "Yosaka, let's—"

"I repeat," Yosaka's eyes were hard upon Argyle, like two bright diamonds, cold and without emotion. "Who said anything about Earth?"

"Yosaka—"

"Be quiet, Dellora," rumbled Forester impatiently.

"Well, Argyle?"

Desperately Argyle sought for a reply, knowing that in his own hesitation lay the diminution of moral ascendancy.

"When you spoke about Judd and his gang," he said, grudgingly, "I thought—"

"Ah, and there we have it." Yosaka sat back in his chair,

his face alight with understanding, a grim smile on his lips as he turned his gaze on Judd. "Tabori what do you think of that? And you Forester? Heilinger?"

The silence lay like a cloak over the ornate luxury of the room. Argyle could feel the initiative slipping from him fast as the slim brown man pulled it easily from him.

Tabori rose in his seat, his hawk eyes wary, hooded, yet with a gleam of surprise.

"I think, Yosaka," he said, "that our friend, Argyle, does not know as much as we thought he did." He looked at Dellora. "Alfredo, you told us that Argyle was a member of Judd's group."

Dellora was white faced and clearly panic stricken. His hands flapped in vague despair as he stammered, "I thought he . . . he was. I . . . he seemed . . ."

"Seemed?" roared Forester "You're a fool, Dellora I would to heaven you had your father's guts. Get to the point, Yosaka."

"Ah, yes. The point." Yosaka looked back at Argyle. "Would you care to explain, Judd? You may if you so desire?"

Judd's chuckle echoed again through the room, humorless and menacing, as if the man himself was quite unsurprised.

"No," continued Yosaka, "perhaps not." He turned to Argyle again. "When I spoke of Judd's gang I was not referring to Earth, nor was I referring to the political group which Judd leads. I was talking about his other activities as leader of an organization which has no name, no identity, no headquarters."

"What in hell are you talking about?" snarled Argyle. "Talk sense, Yosaka. Judd is here as the representative of Earth and her stellar empire."

"With what object?" Yosaka queried softly.

Argyle cursed luridly. "I thought Dellora was master in his own house."

"I repeat, with what object?"

"To keep the Company Dellora out of the hands of you and your associates," shouted Argyle.

"I am sorry to disappoint you on both counts," smiled

Yosaka, unperturbed. "Alfredo is master in his own house only so long as he conducts it in a way which meets with our approval. Isn't that so Alfredo?"

Dellora was silent, a pale, shaken shadow of the man he had been bare minutes earlier.

"As to the second point, Argyle, Judd is not so altruistic as you seem to think. True, he wishes to keep Earth and the Galaxy free, as he calls it, but for an entirely different reason to the one you have given." He sighed. "Once upon a time, Argyle, there was a telepath—only one, and there was a pyrotic—again, only one. To them in due time, were added others of their own kind, telepaths, kineticists, immortals and a dozen more. In the beginning there were riots against these—these freaks. But later came tolerance and acceptance when it was realized what benefits these people could bring to humanity as a whole. Then, at some unknown point in time, there occurred a phenomenon which seems to afflict the Human Race. When people of like mind or like outlook or like ideas meet, they become something more than just people. They become a mass, a living entity, with power and ideas and ambitions which grow stronger as the entity itself grows stronger. These people, with their special powers, did just that. They grew together, first for protection against those who would destroy them and then because they could find sympathy only with their own kind. Later came ambition. Much later came Armadeus Judd."

Argyle felt the fear rising within him once again as Yosaka's calm voice built up a picture in his mind that he fought to deny. He did not need more words to help him, more explanation to bedazzle him. Judd stood, five yards away, as if carved from stone, his head thrust slightly forward, his whole attention riveted upon the scene before him. The scene which he had created.

"Judd wants the Galaxy for himself, Argyle," said Yosaka softly. "He wants it whole and intact and unfettered, so that he and his kind—your kind, Argyle—will inherit it from the people who hold it at present. We are these latter people. We represent the ordinary masses of Mankind who

do not know what is going on around them. If they did I fear that in their anger they would rise up and fall upon you and destroy every last one of you. Even if you are immortal, to all intents and purposes, I do not think your life would be very pleasant."

There was a long pause after Yosaka finished speaking, and then Forester said, "Now you know why we must control the Company Dellora. Without it we are nothing. With it we can fight Judd and destroy him. We can keep the Galaxy free forever from your kind, Argyle."

Your kind, Forester said. Argyle strove to retain his sanity. Panic was born and died in the same instant. Whoever Judd was and whatever he was, he was a part of Argyle just as Argyle was a part of him. You could not separate a teleport from an immortal, a pyrotic from a telepath. You could not embrace one and kill another. Vaguely, he wondered what power Judd possessed! If Judd went down then Argyle went down with him, and so did Pietro Dellora and all that he had tried to do. So did Spiros. And Angela. She had known Pietro Dellora and had trusted him. She had known Judd, if not directly, at least well enough to trust his judgment and support his ideals. She had given her husband the future of the Company Dellora as surely as if she had guided Pietro Dellora's hand with her own as he drafted the documents which gave power to Argyle and took it from his own son. Alfredol

Argyle turned to look at Alfredo. How long his silent immobility had lasted he did not know. Probably not more than a few seconds. Alfredo was still standing as he had been when they first entered the room, pale, frozen faced, shocked beyond hope of recovery. He, who had for so long relied upon sudden shock, was lost in the face of a similar weapon. He had striven hard to protect himself behind a wall of ignorance, and he had failed. That failure was plainly written upon his terrified face. Argyle knew well, just what he had to do.

"You don't like telepaths, I take it?" he asked mildly.

Yosaka shrugged. "They have their uses."

"Of course." Argyle nodded. "They have their uses, and so you tolerate them."

"Don't fence," snapped Tabori. "We tolerate anyone who acts for the good of the Galaxy, and who does not try to upset the status quo. That is what Judd is trying to do. If he has his way, the human race as we know it today will be dead. Mankind must fight the threat which you and Judd represent before it is too late. We are the only people in the Galaxy who are in a position to do it without plunging the entire Terran empire into the most horrible catastrophe in history."

Argyle walked slowly round the table towards Alfredo Dellora. He stopped beside the man and rested one hand in friendly fashion on his left shoulder.

"I am surprised at you, Yosaka," he told them quietly. "You too, Tabori. I am surprise at all of you, who profess to be the champions of all normal human beings. I am amazed that you should have as your leader someone who represents the opposite of your own views."

Dellora croaked in sudden horror as if he realized just what Argyle was leading up to.

"No, Argyle. Please. You can't—"

"What do you mean?" rasped Forester.

"Simply that Alfredo Dellora is a teleport, one of the people against how you are fighting."

Argyle wondered idly if anyone believed him. Yosaka gazed at him implacably, neither belief nor disbelief showing on his face. Forester was grim and equally inscrutable.

"Don't believe him," gasped Dellora. "It . . . it's a lie!"

"Do I need to prove it?" asked Argyle.

"If you are merely trying to sow dissension—!" began Yosaka.

"Why should I? Dissension is already here."

Dellora croaked wordlessly as Argyle lifted his other hand and placed both of them on Dellora's neck. So slowly did he move, and so still did Dellora remain, that it seemed they might be acting a charade for the benefit of those that watched. Then, slowly, the scene changed. Argyle began

to squeeze, and as he did so Dellora came to life. He struggled and clawed at the rocklike grip around his throat. He groped madly while his face went red and then purple. Through glazing eyes he could see the bitter hatred in Argyle's own face. He knew that there was death in those heavy hands clamped so firmly round his throat. There was only one thing he could do.

He did it.

No sound of surprise came from any one of the ten men seated at the table. They sat, paralyzed by the sight of Dellora ten yards away across the room, gasping hysterically while his frantic hands massaged his tortured throat.

"It . . . it's a trick. I didn't—" He choked and coughed horribly, retching as his larynx strove to return to normal.

"You see," said Argyle softly. He walked slowly round the room, catlike towards Dellora. Before the tortured man could move, his hands reached out again and knocked away Dellora's own arms. He gripped the bruised throat as Dellora screamed.

Abruptly, Dellora was gone. The room was empty of his presence.

Perhaps ten seconds passed in frozen silence. Then he was back again, wild eyed and still choking. In one shaking hand he held a needle gun.

Argyle walked towards him again. "You can't kill me, Dellora," he intoned. "You're finished, Dellora. Run away and hide somewhere so that no one can find you. You're no good to yourself or anyone else. No one wants you any more."

Dellora slobbered insanely, saliva streaming from his mouth as he strove to speak. Words came only indistinctly from his writhing mouth.

"Judd did this to me—Judd and you. I can't kill you, but I can kill him. Then where will you be, Argyle? He laughed, choking as he did so. His shaking hand raised the needle gun to point it straight at the frozen figure of Armadeus Judd.

In panic Argyle measured the distance. It was too far. He could only stand and watch with dreadful fascination as

Dellora strove to control the shaking of his hand for one vital instant.

The plop of an exploding gun echoed through the room; Dellora crumpled slowly to the floor, horrified surprise spreading over his face; an expression to be fixed forever as death took hold.

Judd stood unmoving and unmoved. Argyle's gaze flashed wildly round the room and he saw the massive figure of Forester replacing an ornate, jeweled weapon into a shoulder holster. The giant slumped into a chair, and as Argyle looked at him he could see only dullness in the black eyes and a slackness in the great body which did not seem natural. His mind whirled at the sudden turn of events. Dellora dead; the conference in confusion; even Yosaka had lost his innate calm. And Forester? Why had he turned so unexpectedly on the man who controlled the destiny of them all? Why should he save Judd's life at the expense of Dellora's?

"Get out of here, all of you." Judd spoke for the first time, his heavy voice sweeping through the room like a great blast of wind. "The conference is ended; Dellora is dead; killed by your own hands. Go, and take your lives with you before I decide otherwise. Take your fear with you back to your private worlds and pray that we shall have more pity on you than you would have shown to us, in the same circumstances. Begone, you little men!" The bitter scorn of his voice lashed them like a whip, and first Tabori, then Yosaka moved slowly away, too stunned to do other than obey the compulsion of his manner.

One by one they went their separate ways, slinking slowly at first, like men in a dream who cannot control their own movements; then, faster, until the last one scuttled and almost fell in his eagerness not to be left alone in the presence of these men, who were more than men.

Only Forester remained.

A black giant slumped in his chair, with unblinking eyes gazing dully on the scene he had helped to create. The sprawled body of Dellora lay in the center of the flame red

carpet with a tiny trickle of blood to show where the needle had pierced his skull. Janus stood, a tiny figure to one side of the entrance. Argyle dared not move. He was too stunned even to think properly; too shaken by the turn of events which had shattered the opposition so thoroughly. The seconds ticked into minutes, and then, after what seemed an age, Judd relaxed.

"All right, Janus," he ordered softly.

Janus didn't move, but the black figure of Forester shook itself and seemed to come alive. The eyes lost their dullness and bewilderment gleamed in them as the man gazed at the dead figure of Dellora and moaned with sudden horror as remembrance came to him.

"You're finished, Forester," said Judd. "Dellora is dead and the others have fled back to their rat holes. Once they get to thinking about what they saw here this day, they will know that you wrecked any chance they might have had of saving this whole wretched business. I wonder how you will explain yourself and your actions?"

"I'll kill you, Judd. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'll kill you for this."

"Get out of here."

Argyle watched as Forester left the room, stumbling slightly, so that his giant figure lurched as he moved. How had it happened? What manner of man was Judd that he could dismiss such a man by the wave of his hand? There were no answers to the questions that raged in his mind.

"You are the master of the Company Dellora, Argyle."

Judd's voice broke in upon his thoughts and brought him back to reality.

"Is it true?" he asked abruptly.

"About me? About the organization?" Judd nodded. "Yes, it's true. I could not tell you in case we failed. They knew very little about us, but they could have learned a great deal. Janus and I could have removed ourselves from the scene, but you . . ." He shook his head. "Knowledge is a dangerous thing in the mind of a man who cannot be killed."

"You would have committed suicide?"



Judd nodded. "If it was necessary to preserve our organization."

Argyle slumped into the chair lately occupied by Yosaka.

"But why the secrecy? Why don't you come out in the open?"

"We dare not." Judd smiled wryly. "The human race has a hatred of anything new. If you've read your history you know of the early teepee massacres. Can you imagine how much worse things would be today if people knew that those whom they think of as servants and freaks and entertainers—that these people had an organization that protected its members and planned for the future?"

He shook his head.

"No, Argyle, we must move slowly and build even more slowly. We are few and they are many. The Galaxy is not ready for us yet. The present greatness of Mankind lies in their hands, not in ours. We have the future, and it is for the future that we must prepare. That is why Pietro and I chose you to carry on where we left off."

"Chose me?" broke in Argyle. "You chose me?"

"I helped," admitted Judd. "You will be here long after I am gone. In three centuries of life you can weld the Company Dellora closer to Earth than it has ever been before. Forester and Tabori and Yosaka and the rest count for nothing now. Their day is done, their time is short. You will be here when they and their sons, and their sons' sons are dead and buried. And after you, will come others to build and to prepare for the day when we are Mankind. When men like Yosaka are in the minority. When that day comes Man's greatest era will be born. I shan't be here to see it, and neither will you. But what we have done here, today, you and I and Janus, will shape the Universe for a million years."

"Janus?" asked Argyle.

Judd chuckled. "Oh, yes. Janus is one of us. He is the reason why I am such a successful politician. I am a telepath, Argyle. But not just another telepath. I can read minds, any minds, yours and Dellora's and Yosaka's—the mind of any living being is an open book if I wish. But

Janus can do something more. He cannot see into a person's thoughts but he can shape them for me. He can create receptibility in the brain of another to receive my ideas. I know what others want, and Janus convinces them that they should want what I think it best for them to have." He smiled. "You see, already we are shaping the future."

"Is that why Forester shot Dellora?"

Judd nodded. "It is what I planned before we came here. That was why Janus accompanied us. Alfredo Dellora had to die and that was the way I planned that it should be. It was the only way. His whole attention was focused on you and on me. He would hardly be fearful of his own associates, whatever the circumstances. Janus had instructions to act as soon as an opportunity presented itself."

"The opportunity almost passed me," said Janus in his high, fluted voice.

Argyle's head whirled. Under everything was a sense of power and jubilation that he had never thought possible. Dellora was dead and the Traders were broken. He need have no more fear of the unknown. There lay before him three centuries of work and effort for a cause whose end he would never see. He wondered how Angela had felt when she knew of all this. No, he didn't wonder. She had thought enough of it to give her life in its defense, and in that lay the answer. If men and women could die for an ideal then it could not be bad. If people like Judd and Pietro could see the ultimate end of all their efforts then there might be doubt as to their motives, but they would never see that end. They could only live with hope that they would be successful and with the unconquerable knowledge that they were right.

Argyle's only worry was in his own ability to fulfil the obligation which was being placed on his shoulders. He would have three centuries of responsibility before him, and Judd would not always be there to guide and help him.

"There are others," said Judd softly. "And after them there will be more. There are thousands of us spread across the Galaxy, Argyle. You will never be alone."