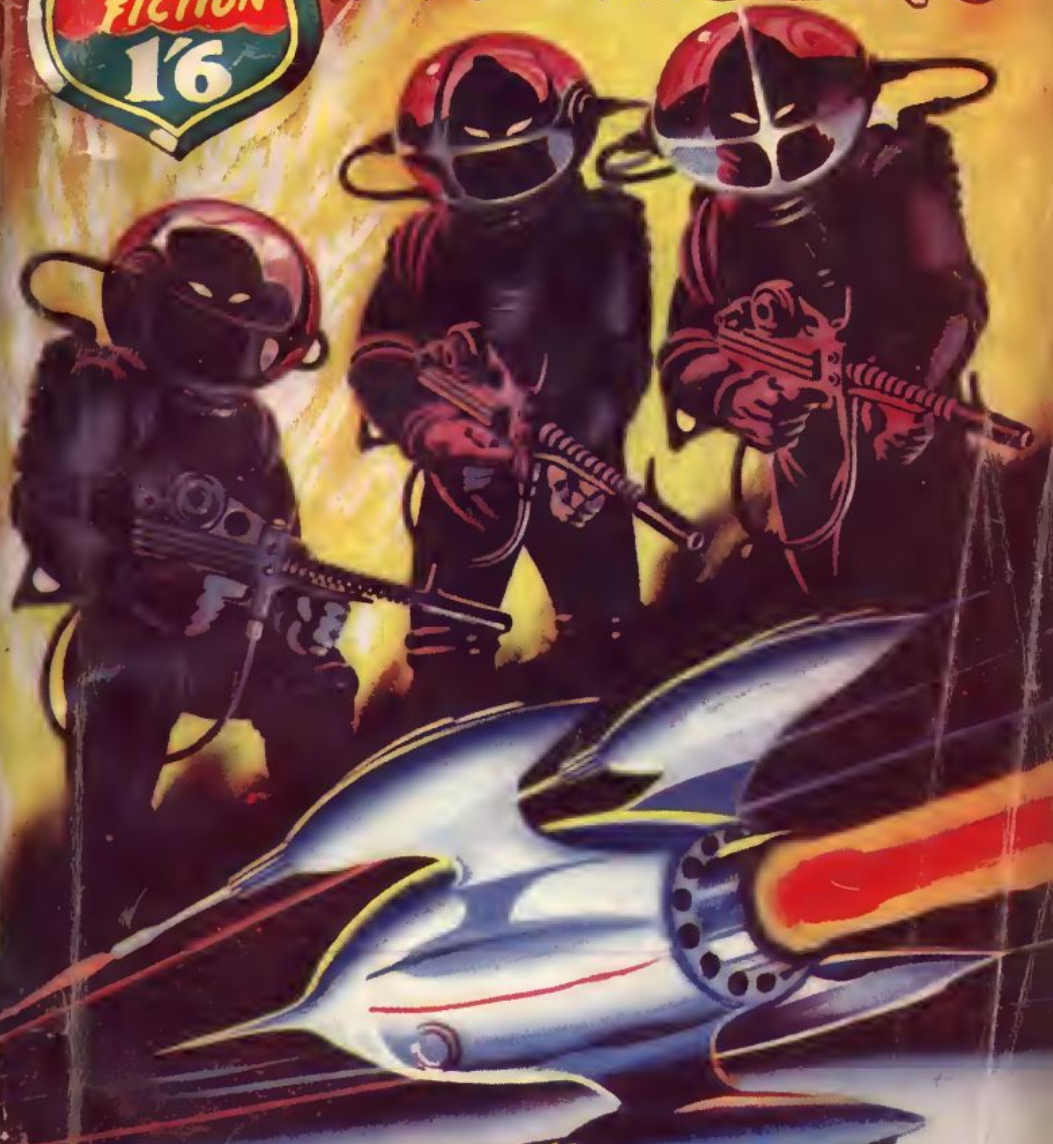




The BLACK AVENGERS



Vargo Statten

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The Black Avengers

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Vargo Statten.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Interplanetary Court was in session, Judge Montrose presiding. The accused, twenty-five years of age, tall and weedy, with a slope-chin, listened without interest to the indictment read out by the Clerk to the Prosecution.

“Hear ye, hear ye, all men of Earth and the neighbour inner worlds! Know ye, men of Earth, Venus and Mars, that there stands before you one Dayton Ralsor, Earthman, accused in this year of Two Thousand and Seventeen of fraudulently converting the finances of the Pioneer Space Corporation to his own uses. Know ye that the learned Prosecutor will prove without malice or prejudice, that the accused has broken the law and must thereby incur the penalty . . . The court is now in session, Judge Montrose presiding . . .”

A gavel banged. The faint murmuring from the packed assembly in the giant courtroom—an assembly made up of inhabitants of the three inner worlds of the System, Earth, Venus and Mars—became muted. The Prosecutor began speaking, taking up point by point every article in the indictment.

Dayton Ralsor himself hardly listened. For one thing he was too weak in health to care particularly what happened; and for another he knew the whole business was a frame-up engineered by the three industrial giants who had long been attempting to oust him from his position as Governing Director of the Pioneer Space Corporation.

Raising his eyes for a moment Dayton Ralsor searched the faces of the watchers. One by one he picked out the men who were responsible for his now being at the mercy of the ruthless Prosecutor. There was Harving Lerab, big and bloated, the fabulously wealthy diamond king. He sat like Buddha, smiling inscrutably, content to watch the destruction of an innocent man.

Not far from him on an upper tier of spectators sat Emris Cafton, the precision instrument maker. Emaciated, never-smiling, fiendishly immovable and efficient, concerned only at the moment with seeing Dayton Ralsor legally eliminated from the scheme of things.

And lastly there was pink-faced, deceptive Valcent Drolag. He had a smile for everybody; he paid good wages; he was thought to be a genial money-maker and philanthropist. Yet he was an arms magnate on a colossal scale and interested only in the swelling of his coffers at the expense of innocent lives. Of the three men who had climbed to power by their ruthless cunning and callous disregard of all human rights, Valcent Drolag was by far the worst. Under the perpetual smile was the mind of a killer and the cruelty of a tiger . . .

“And it is submitted that the accused, inheritor of the Pioneer Space Corporation from his father, Ilsan Ralsor, did variously and separately convert the finances of that organisation to his own uses, in proof of which I will submit to your Lordship signed evidence, provided by such respected men as Harving Lerab, Emris Cafton and Valcent Drolag. They, with their great business acumen, were aware of the double-dealing being indulged in by the accused and rightly brought the fact to the notice of the authorities . . .”

Dayton Ralsor smiled bitterly to himself and closed his eyes. One or two people nearest to him studied him. He had a characterless face, as far as the chin was concerned, but the forehead was high and the nose straight. But for an illness which no physician had been able to diagnose, and which made of his great frame a barely covered skeleton, he would have been a big man. The height and build were there, but not the flesh and muscle. Dayton Ralsor was

obviously dying on his feet, and there was not a soul in the world who gave a damn about it

...

“And I demand,” the Prosecutor continued, pointing an accusing finger, “that for such deliberate conversion of public funds the ultimate penalty be exacted!”

Ralsor still kept his eyes shut. There were murmuring in the court, the whirr of recording apparatus, and then the level tones of the Defence Counsel. But he was fighting a lost cause, a fact of which he had been painfully aware ever since preparing his brief. This plot against the ailing ruler of the only existing space line had been so thoroughly laid, every ramification of it so thoroughly checked, that it was impossible to prove it wrong in any particular.

In half-an-hour Dayton Ralsor heard himself pronounced guilty and opened his eyes to meet the hopeless glance of his counsel.

Then Judge Montrose spoke—impartially, his lemon of a face vignettted by the traditional wig still worn by the high legal authorities of the Interplanetary Court.

“You have heard the case against you, Dayton Ralsor,” he stated. “You have been accused and defended, and pronounced guilty by a sane and just quorum of your fellow Earthmen. It remains only for me to sentence you—to direct that you be removed to the penitentiary on the planet Jupiter, there to work out the remainder of your natural existence, banished from the society of those whom you sought to deceive. If you have anything to say, say it now. The law gives you twelve seconds in which to voice an utterance.”

Ralsor merely shrugged his bony shoulders—but his defence counsel rose up, his face grim.

“I take leave to protest against the sentence, Your Lordship! My client has been found guilty, and against that I have no redress, but I am allowed to lodge protest against the form of penalty. It would be plain murder to send him to the penitentiary on Jupiter! He is obviously ill, and under the appalling conditions reigning on that planet he would be dead within a week.”

“The physical condition of the prisoner is not my concern,” the Judge answered briefly. “You will kindly remember, Mr. Baratok, that I have to be impartial. All convicted persons are banished to Jupiter—which, I would remark, is a great improvement over the old days when each world had its own jails! A far-away world containing all the prisoners and outcasts of society is a sure means of keeping our social order free from defilement.”

The Defence Counsel opened his mouth to speak again, but the thump of the Judge’s gavel intercepted him. Ralsor gave a grim smile and a tired shake of his head to the counsel, then he turned away in company with the warders . . .

Three men in particular watched him go, and the same three men met half-an-hour later in an exclusive up-town restaurant and discussed the matter over rich wines and softly fragrant cigars.

“Nicely handled, my friend,” observed the emaciated Emris Cafton, and Drolag’s perpetual moonlike smile widened a little.

“All a matter of organisation, eh, Harving?”

Harving Lerab drank his wine and then nodded. “As you say, organisation. We cannot afford to have an ailing fool like that at the head of the biggest money-making concern in the System. Isn’t to be thought of! He hardly knew what he was doing, anyway. Inherited the damned thing from his father and automatically became Governing Director. I started the whole campaign against him, chiefly because with that space line in my hands—or partly, sharing with you boys—I can vastly increase my diamond concern. Venus crawls with

diamonds, and without owning a part of the space line my transactions have been limited. Now it will be different.”

“And different for me,” mused the emaciated Cafton. “I must keep up my supplies of rubies, emeralds, and so forth for use in my precision instruments.”

“And I must continue to have uranium,” added Drolag, all smiles and pink cheeks. “Altogether, gentlemen, we have accomplished a masterpiece. With Ralsor out of the way our claim to taking over the space line can very easily be substantiated. Certainly we have money enough to buy it, and there will be no serious opposition.”

“Unless it’s from Razlon Sneed,” Lerab pointed out “He is a powerful man in the Space Corporation, and probably did most of the controlling with Ralsor as the figure-head—”

“Soon be rid of him,” Drolag interrupted, and the venom in the man leapt into his voice even though he smiled. “Sneed is a financial director outside of his connection with the Space Corporation. A little judicious pressure in the right places can—and will—bankrupt him. Then he’ll be in no position to talk. We’ve come this far—and we’ll finish the course.”

The arms king raised his glass slightly and grinned as the two other glasses clinked against his own . . . And, on the reverse side of the picture, the law was taking its pontifical course and Dayton Ralsor was languishing in his cell.

That same evening, however, six hours after the trial, he was removed from his cell and taken to the chamber wherein he was legally divested of all civil rights, even to his name, and given a number instead. Henceforth he would be DR/7654, life-worker in the Jovian penitentiary. He took it all without comment, the fire dulled out of his eyes and his weak shoulders drooping.

Once this legal banishment was completed it was merely a matter of awaiting transport—and it came a week later. With three other unfortunates he was thrust into the stinking bowels of a prison spaceship and carried in darkness and the smell of rocket exhaust through the great deeps of space. Neither he nor his fellow prisoners were allowed to see anything except their cell. They were given just enough food to keep them alive and slept as best they could on hard bunks—until there came a day when they felt the crushing pressures of the giant planet beginning to embrace them, and from this point onwards their miseries really started.

The Jovian penitentiary lay under a dome of metal, deep in the bowels of the mighty planet. The metal of the dome was specially tested to stand the strain of the huge gravity, and was absolutely sealed against the atmosphere, composed of ammoniated hydrogen at a temperature of -120° Centigrade. Jove was a frigid, poisonous hell. The penitentiary was controlled by a Governor, himself an outcast of society, doomed like the rest to rot his life away in the deep underground. The only advantage he had was that every comfort science could devise was his. For the luckless prisoners there was nothing but work, the appalling strain, fitful sleep, and work once more. Until death came. The nature of the work was simple but exacting. Every prisoner spent his time inspecting and repairing the walls of the great underground settlement since the poison in the Jovian atmosphere and the effect of perpetual acid hurricanes raging outside, gradually ate through the proofed metal.

A grim irony, to be forever sealing up the walls that held them in thrall! Those who had tried to let the poison through had died instantly from the very attempt, and others had been rushed to stem the breach. Death, when it came, must be from exhaustion, not from the hell that raged outside.

Into this lighted wilderness of iron-faced men, ruled over by the embittered Governor, Dayton Ralsor presently arrived, the prison ship entering through a vacuum trap which was

sealed immediately afterwards. The officials looked at the worn-faced Earthman as they checked his papers and decided he might last a few hours and no more. For here he was carrying a bodily weight three times heavier than it had been on Earth, owing to the gravity, and added to it was the strain of breathing vitiated atmosphere. Admirable though the air-purifying system was it could by no means equal the natural atmosphere of a planet.

Ralsor was detailed to his duties—the guardianship of a particular section of the mighty rotunda—and assigned his place in the eating-sleeping-living sections where the weary men spent their few “leisure” hours. As he had in court, Ralsor still maintained his silence, accepting every edict without comment and causing no trouble to the warders or officials. They admitted they could not understand his attitude, and they certainly could not define it as insolent. It seemed that he was in a complete daze—as indeed he was. The physical and mental shock which he had received had not even yet registered.

Days in the underworld were reckoned by the clocks, since no view of the exterior could be seen whereby to determine the normal night and day. Not that it would have been very noticeable anyway, Jupiter’s daylight being like pale cloudy moonlight on Earth, his nights as black as the tomb.

Poisonous, deadly world, dragging down with its appalling pressures, making most men wish for early death. But not Dayton Ralsor! That was the extraordinary thing. Weak though he looked he kept on working as instructed. He seemed to sleep peacefully enough, and when he had the inclination he was permitted—as were any of the prisoners—to study the vast array of books in the prison library, or pore over the scientific facts about the Solar System which had been discovered since space travel had come in thirty years before—thanks to the genius and organisation of his father.

No, Dayton Ralsor was not dying yet, and he deliberately fought the eternal pressures dragging on his body, finding unsuspected reserves of strength. Nature was treating him kindly. For the first time in an ailing life he was making a dogged, resolute struggle to overcome his physical deficiency. Indeed, it was forced upon him since every task he undertook demanded of him three times as much energy as he normally used.

And, slowly, he got into the habit of making an effort every time, until gradually the effort became natural. In consequence muscles never properly used began to harden under the everlasting strain. He breathed more deeply of the heavy, somewhat toxic air supply and broadened the capacity of his lungs. Instead of dying within a few hours, as most of the officials had confidently expected, he began to improve as week succeeded week. It was the wonder of those amongst whom he worked to observe how he gathered flesh onto his tall, bony frame, how his face changed from cadaverous hollows to roundness, even the slope-chin was filling out until it was no longer the weak button below his drooping mouth.

Definitely things were happening to Dayton Ralsor, yet according to the prison doctor—himself outcast for some dubious offence against society—there was nothing extraordinary about the metamorphosis. He had seen other men react exactly the same way, not only here on devilish Jupiter but back on Earth in conditions of the most relentless strain.

“It’s a case of environment, Ralsor,” he told him, when he presented himself by order for routine check-up. “Just as you sometimes uproot a sickly plant and throw it away—to find later it has blossomed into a vigorous, beautiful flower in what are apparently adverse conditions, so it is sometimes with men. In making the effort to rise to the demands of this damnable planet they overcome their weakness. Everything here demands you exert three times normal power, you know.”

"I know." Ralsor was gazing absently before him, stripped to the waist, as the medico examined his massive chest.

"You've gained about twelve pounds, Ralsor, and your heart is perfectly sound. Jupiter has apparently pulled you back out of the grave instead of putting you into it."

"Not Jupiter, doc! Hatred!"

The medico gave a glance of surprise. "I never heard of hatred reviving a man! Killing him, yes, but not——"

"I said hatred!" There was cold murder in Ralsor's eyes as he turned. "Hatred begets energy—the furious energy of determination! The determination to live, and avenge, and destroy!"

"Don't waste your time on those thoughts, son. Once you land in this hell hole you never get out. Naturally you hate those who sent you here. We all do. But that——"

"The desire for vengeance has alone built me up into a man," Ralsor retorted. "I was sent here through connivance and corruption in high places. I mean to get out and put things straight . . . So you see, my physical condition is only the outcome of consuming desire. I've *got* to get out! I've *got* to."

The medico smiled wearily. "Many a time I've heard men rave like you're doing now, Ralsor. You just *can't* get out and there's an end of it. Ammoniated-hydrogen atmosphere, cold equal nearly to interstellar space, the everlasting hurricanes which rage around this huge world—— No! You'll never do it."

"I think differently. I've made plans."

This time the doctor was silent. He stood watching as Ralsor rebuttoned his shirt. He studied the determination in the iron set of the face, the bright light of resolve in the blue eyes. He felt that for a moment he understood something of this young man's obsession.

"Men," Ralsor said presently, "occasionally go out to the surface to check on the exterior walls of this dome we're living under. They have pressure-suits, of course, and that's all I need. The problem of a spaceship may be more difficult but I'll overcome it."

"How?" the doctor asked bluntly. "The convict vessels which land here are out of the question. They're heavily guarded and you'd never get aboard one."

"I wasn't thinking of doing so . . ." Ralsor paused and fixed his keen blue eyes on the doctor's face. "I'm wondering why I'm telling you all this, doc. You could easily give me away and have me watched."

"I could, son, but you know darned well I wouldn't. No man in this hell-hole would ever give another away if he thought a chance of escape were possible—— What *are* you thinking of doing?"

"Waiting for that rare occurrence—the arrival of a spaceship other than a convict machine. I've been looking through the library records and, on an average, about six machines fall on Jupiter in a year, most of them belonging to space-trotters who get caught in this planet's terrific gravity-field and can't pull free. Down they come, and more often than not the shock of landing kills the pilot but it does not wreck the vessel if it happens to land in the plasma surface near the Great Red Spot . . ." Ralsor paused and clenched his fists. "Next time such a vessel lands I'm going right after it."

"Good luck," the doctor said laconically. "You're certainly going to need it. As a matter of interest how will you know when such a machine *has* landed? Most of the time this damnable planet is wreathed in vapours."

“The radar equipment at the central control room gives a signal when a vessel has hit surface. I know the times of the convict ships, so one landing outside schedule may be what I’m looking for. I’ve every chance to keep an eye on that radar equipment, and I’ll keep on doing it!”

With that Ralsor took his departure and returned to his normal duties. As usual he went about them efficiently, giving no trouble, not betraying by a single action or word that he intended making a “break” the moment the opportunity seemed to present itself. By degrees he removed the different parts of a pressure-suit to a place of hiding—the helmet, the gloves and boots, breast-plates and audiophones, and finally the major bulk of the suit itself. Because he did it by degrees the impression was conveyed that the suit was awaiting repair, parts being missing, so no official made enquiry.

This part done Ralsor deliberately stinted himself with rations, most of them in sealed concentrate form, and concealed these also against the time when they would be needed . . . The biggest difficulty was a gun, but this too he wangled finally by putting in a request for a flame incinerator with which to seal a breach in the wall on which he was working. Actually the instrument was not a gun within the strict meaning of the word: it was an oxygen jet, used for welding, and the only safe form of fire in an exterior atmosphere heavy in ammonia and hydrogen gas. Once he had the incinerator in his possession Ralsor took good care it remained there—and he successfully dodged the questions from the stores department by insisting that he had lost it. Nobody could prove otherwise, so that was that.

These preliminaries taken care of there was nothing else for him to do but wait for the ideal moment. And whilst he waited he thought, and planned, and weaved schemes—and his fellow workers wondered at his silence and his amazing recovery from the brink of death. By this time he was one of the strongest men in the settlement, constantly accustomed to lifting weights three times heavier than normal. He knew that when the giant muscles he had developed were used under ordinary conditions of gravity they would have a power and impact like a steam-hammer.

Constantly he kept in touch with the radar department, chiefly by means of pretexts which took him there at least three times a day. His calls seemed legitimate, and certainly the friendly convict in charge of the equipment had no reason to suspect anything unusual.

Then at last, six months after he had been brought to Jove, the moment came. He arrived in the radar department to find the technician studying the screen and making rapid calculations. Ralsor felt his heart leap with excitement, but he lounged in casually enough.

“Anything new?” he asked, looking at the electrical tracery on the screen from the radar “echo”. “I’m looking for a number sixteen valve for dredger twenty-eight. She’s——”

“Quiet!” the technician ordered, so Ralsor subsided. Which was just what he desired. He eyed the screen intently but still took good care not to reveal any emotion.

“Something’s definitely dropped,” the technician commented, as the electrical oscillations died away. “Roughly sixteen miles to the north.”

“Sorry for ’em,” Ralsor commented, shrugging. “Sixteen miles northward—— Let’s see, that’ll be near the Plasma Plains, won’t it?”

“More than near them. In them . . . I’ll have to report it for the records, then if—through the visiscreens—anybody’s seen wandering around outside it will be known who it probably is.” The technician seemed to remember. “What did you say you wanted? A sixteen valve.”

“That’s it,” Ralsor agreed calmly, and presently took it as it was handed to him. Without another word he departed, and stayed at his job until the end of his shift; then instead of

heading to the great bunking-house he secretly made his way to the region at the far end of the settlement where he had hidden his various necessities.

He chose his time perfectly. At the change of shifts the guard was lax. In any case it was never very vigilant, it being generally accepted that no man in his right senses would try and escape.

Unnoticed, Ralsor climbed quickly into the pressure suit and screwed the helmet in place. He made sure of his provisions and the various instruments with which the pressure-suit was equipped—then he turned the oxygen-jet upon the base of the curved wall before him and rapidly seared a hole large enough to wriggle through. Immediately the poisonous vapours of the atmosphere drifted into the hole, but not in sufficient density yet to make any appreciable difference in the settlement's atmosphere . . . And in ten minutes Ralsor had resealed the gap into place from the outside and stood up—ready to face the unknown in a bid for freedom.

His face grim behind the dense helmet visor he dragged his tremendous weight, heavier than ever because of the suit, up the rocky slope, at the base of which lay the settlement . . . The upward climb was tough, devilish tough, against the overwhelming gravitation—but at last he did stagger to the highest point and looked about him.

The vapours were not particularly dense at the moment, for which reason he could see for about a mile around him. Below and behind were the gleaming signal lights of the settlement, the warning beacons to incoming convict vessels. Elsewhere was the unknown. Apparently it was daylight, and if around dawn it meant that he had eight hours in which to make his trip—Sixteen miles in eight hours? Might be possible, despite the everlasting downward drag.

So, after consulting the space-suit compass, he set off stolidly. The daylight resembled an earthly twilight, the low cloud wreaths constantly agitated and tossed by the roaring hurricane ceaselessly whirling around Jupiter's huge bulk.

Ralsor came into the midst of the hurricane as he rounded the wall of reddish boulders overlooking the settlement valley, but enormous though the wind was in power gravity held Ralsor down, so the effect finally was little different to bending double on Earth before a strong gale.

So Ralsor plodded onwards, a lonely figure in the alien waste, wandering over hard, relentless rock, all of it red. Once it had been part of the molten region of Jupiter—the Great Red Spot—but now it had solidified. The Great Red Spot itself, a seething hell of molten metals, was somewhere to the east, and the Plasma Plains—half molten and half solid areas like metallic quickmud—were to the north, whither he was now heading.

So far as had been discovered Jupiter possessed no natural life of its own. It was utterly deserted and poisonous. The only life at all, if such it could be called, loomed up after Ralsor had been on his way for three hours. He found himself facing a crystalline jungle, looking exactly like solid fronds of frost and growing branches even as Ralsor watched them . . . It was a singularly beautiful sight, this life form existing in below zero temperature. Of necessity Ralsor went forward through the midst of the crystalline jungle, the branches snapping off as his heavy space-suit brushed against them. There was nothing resembling sap from the broken stumps. Instead new branches shot, crept, and festooned gently into the poisonous air, bending slightly but not breaking before the eternal wind.

Walking in the shards which his clumsy progress created Ralsor got the impression he was plunging along amidst diamonds. The shattered facets reflected every colour of the spectrum in the washed-out daylight filtering through the scurrying clouds. Not only diamonds, either.

Some of the crystalline pieces had the flaming red of the ruby; others the deep molten green of the emerald.

A thought twisted through Ralsor's mind—a half crazy one. Emris Cafton, one of the men who had sent him here, would have liked to see this wilderness. He specialised in jewels for the making of precision instruments. Probably the bloated Harving Lerab, diamond king, might have found a paradise here also . . . Ralsor's jaw tightened at the thought—and still he plodded onwards, finding the crystal jungle extended for perhaps five miles.

When he came to the end of it he had only open rocks in front of him once more, so he settled down for a while to rest and eat the tabloid foods and concentrated liquids he had brought with him. Releasing them into the vacuum trap through his helmet was simple. Squatting, resting wearily with his back to a rock, he munched and surveyed, and meditated.

It was beginning to dawn upon him how desperate was the chance he had taken. Definitely a one-way ticket, for if he failed in his objective of finding the fallen spaceship he would only be permitted to return to the settlement under a death sentence. He would be speedily lethalised for daring to try and escape—or, as was more probable, he would be shut out from re-entering the settlement.

These morbid speculations quickly got him on the move again, revived by the rest and the rejuvenating tablets. For a long time he kept on going across the rocky desolation, then at length the vapours began to draw in more closely, limiting his view to only about ten or twelve yards. For this, he reasoned, there could only be one explanation: he was approaching a region where warmth was mingling with cold, the condensation thickening the fog. And warmth on a sub-zero world could only mean the Plasma Plains, those vast volcanic regions left behind from the original eruptions of the Great Red Spot.

Stopping once he studied his pedometer and found he had covered fifteen-and-a-half miles. Not far to go now—but he went much more slowly than before, his view so limited he was afraid of plunging unaware into a danger spot.

He reached the outermost fringe of the Plasma Plains suddenly. One moment he was crossing the solid rock; the next his massive boots had plunged over the ankles in a metallic, steamy treacle. Tepid lava indeed, amalgam which could not solidify whilst volcanic activity lay far beneath it. In the course of centuries the hard crust would form.

Ralsor hesitated, unsure of himself, then as he found he did not sink any lower, solidity existing apparently at about twelve inches below surface, he ventured onward, tugging from his instrument belt yet another of the scientific devices intended to help the space explorer. It was a detector, reacting to any atomic power-plant within a space machine, and by which all of them were driven. Whether the power-plant was operating or not did not signify. The radiations given forth from the uranium in the plant affected the detector and pointed the way unerringly.

So it was in this case. Ralsor's eyes gleamed as, in pressing the control button, he saw the guiding finger immediately leap into position and remain there unwavering, pointing to a spot somewhere to his left.

Ralsor changed position and peered into the vapours. At the moment there was nothing visible, but knowing the instrument could not lie and that its radius of detection was roughly five miles he squelched onwards through the plasma, cursing the fog, the strain, and the weight.

Then he came upon it, and stopped. It suddenly became clear to his vision—one of the more luxurious types of spaceships, sporting a great deal of rustless plating and fitted with the

popular bow-window type of front outlook port. From the look of it it was a two-man flyer and of exceptionally fast design. What was more it had the blazoned “E” on its prow, which meant it had come from Earth.

Ralsor grinned to himself. The machine, inspiring though its lines were, was in a most undignified position. It had dropped with its rear exhaust fins high in the fog and its nose buried to about six feet in the plasma. There did not appear to be any signs of life so Ralsor went on again and finally reached the vessel.

Holding on to it to prevent himself sinking, for the impact the vessel had made with the plasma had softened the surface for a wide area, Ralsor gradually made a circumnavigation, ending at the front observation port. Intently he peered but could detect no interior lights. Feeling for his torch he switched it on and directed the beam within the vessel . . . A girl lay sprawled on the floor, the back of her head against an upright, which probably accounted for her unconsciousness. Ralsor judged her at about twenty-five. Her hair was chestnut-brown and her face somehow familiar, though he could not place it. She appeared to be alone and was dressed in the conventional silk shirt and grey fabric slacks of a space-pilot.

“Dead or alive, sweetheart, you have a machine—and that’s all I need!” Ralsor murmured, and thereupon he set himself to find the exterior clamps of the emergency airlock.

CHAPTER TWO

After some ten minutes he found that which he was seeking—the emergency “lid” on the sharply angled roof of the vessel. Quickly he spun the screws, raised the heavy cover, and dropped below into the vacuum-chamber. In another moment or two he was through the subsidiary lock and had lowered himself into the control room. Pulling off his heavy, suffocating suit he breathed more freely and then hurried across to where the girl lay sprawled.

Gathering her limp body into his arms he laid her on the nearby bunk fixture and made a quick examination. As far as he could tell it must have been the blow on the head which had knocked her out. There was a bruise there as big as a pullet egg, together with dried blood. Moving to his space-suit he removed some of the restorative tabloids he had brought with him and forced one into the girl’s mouth, then attended to her injury.

As the tabloid melted and she involuntarily swallowed the liquid she began to revive, passing a weary arm over her forehead and then opening her eyes. They were very bemused and deep hazel in colour. Very slowly, as she looked wonderingly about her, a red flush began to creep into her ashy cheeks.

“Where—where did you come from?” she asked at last, fighting into a sitting position. “What happened?”

“You crashed—and I came from outside,” Ralsor told her briefly. “Feel better?”

“Heaps, thanks. But——” Her eyes darted about her in alarm. “Where’s Lendar? Haven’t you seen him?”

Ralsor’s expression changed a little. It became shaded with disappointment.

“Lendar? Your husband, you mean?”

“No, no—my brother. He was aboard with me—— Look for him, please!”

Ralsor nodded promptly, his gloom vanishing. He hurried to the regions beyond the control room where lay the sleeping compartments and storage quarters. In the latter he found Lendar, flat on his face in a corner, into which he had evidently been hurled at the moment of impact. He stirred almost immediately as Ralsor heaved him to his feet—no easy task in the Jovian gravity for the girl’s brother was a man of considerable proportions, about matching the measurements of Ralsor himself.

“Whew!” Lendar held his head and swayed slightly; then he looked at Ralsor. “Thanks—whoever you are. Where’s my sister?”

“Asking for you. Come into the control room.”

By the time the control room had been reached Lendar seemed to have about recovered. He crossed to his sister, gave her an affectionate embrace, and then looked at Ralsor.

“Seems to me your coming was exactly right,” he commented. “Probably you can tell us how we can drag free of this metallic quagmire we seem to have landed in . . . Going to be difficult with our tail fins overhead.”

“We can straighten that out,” Ralsor answered. “I suppose Jove’s attraction snared you?”

“’Fraid so,” Lendar admitted. He had hazel eyes similar to his sister’s and at the moment they were pretty sombre. “Our idea was to try and land on Rhea—one of Saturn’s moons, in case you don’t know—but we came too close to Jupiter in the attempt and down we came.”

“What the devil was your idea in trying to reach Rhea?” Ralsor asked in astonishment.

“We’ve heard about it,” the girl explained quickly. “It’s a little paradise to live on. And we’ve nothing left on Earth, so we thought we’d try it.”

“Nothing left?”

“She means we’re bankrupt,” Lendar said, his face grim. “Our father was driven to suicide by the total collapse of his finances, and we just couldn’t keep going without the money he granted us. So we gathered together what was left of the wreck and set out for Rhea, determined to make a home there . . . As you’ll have gathered, we’re devoted to each other.”

Ralsor nodded slowly. “What brought about the collapse of your father’s finances? What was his name?”

“Sneed,” the girl said. “Razlon Sneed. He was one of the biggest men in the Pioneer Space Corporation—then when Dayton Ralsor was deported to Jupiter for life father took over control. But the same men who broke Dayton Ralsor also broke father.”

Ralsor gave a slow smile. “Which means you are Magda Sneed? I thought your face was somehow familiar. You used to call at the Corporation administrative offices quite a deal, didn’t you?”

“When father was alive, yes, but—” The girl’s eyes were wide. “How do you know? Who *are* you?”

“Dayton Ralsor.”

There was a silence and brother and sister looked at each other. Then Lendar laughed shortly.

“That’s impossible! I saw Dayton Ralsor in Court—we both did—and many a time in telenews reels and photographs. He was a stoop-shouldered man who looked as though he were dying on his feet. Sunken cheeks and a receding chin . . .”

“I am still Dayton Ralsor.” Ralsor clenched his fist. “I escaped the prison settlement when I knew this machine had dropped. I’ve only one ambition—to destroy those men who sent me here and robbed me of every civil right to further their own insatiable ambitions. I know I’m changed, but that is partly the effect of my mental condition, and partly the demands made on me in six months by this hell planet.”

Both brother and sister were silent for a time, studying him intently, then at last the girl nodded slowly.

“Yes, I can see the resemblance now—but you have put on so much flesh and muscle nobody would ever know——”

“All to the good. When I return to Earth, as I fully intend, I don’t wish to be recognised.” Ralsor motioned, and all three of them sat down at the table. “This isn’t just a coincidence,” he said quietly. “I’m convinced Providence willed it that you two happened to be aboard this vessel. You bear as much grudge against Drolag, Lerab and Cafton as I do. Right?”

“More,” Lendar assented grimly. “But there’s no possible way to avenge ourselves on such men. They’re the most powerful men in the world to-day, and they’ve seen to it that they’ve made themselves controllers of the space line. There’s just nothing to be done.”

Ralsor gave a grim smile. “Don’t be so sure of that. I’ve had six months to think things out, and I believe I have the right plan. That is if you two are willing to renounce everything and turn into pirates.”

“Pirates!” The girl gave a look of shocked surprise.

“I don’t mean the kind with a coloured bandeau and a skull and cross-bones. I mean black-clothed avengers, heavily masked, who will make the spaceways unfit to be travelled.”

“And how will that bring revenge?” Lendar asked, puzzled.

“The point is this,” Ralsor said deliberately. “Harving Lerab is a diamond king. His whole existence depends upon his sale of diamonds and the maintenance of his reputation. Once let his diamonds let him down and he’ll be finished. The same thing applies to Emris Cafton, precision-instrument maker. What would happen if his jewels proved worthless? If he made several deals and was found to be selling paste gems not worth a red cent? Last of all, Valcent Drolag and his uranium, the basis of his arms works . . . Yes, that’s a bit of a problem, but I think I can also fit that into the scheme of things, too. My aim is to find the Achilles heel in each of our enemies and so destroy him!”

“Sounds worthwhile to me!” Lendar exclaimed, his eyes bright. “You mean rob the space-machines of diamonds, jewels, uranium, or whatever it may be, and so deplete the supplies at the Earth end?”

Ralsor shook his head. “Not exactly that, my friend. And in any case we could never steal enough to lower supplies sufficiently. My idea is to replace the genuine cargoes with false materials, which fact is unlikely to be detected until they have been disposed of on Earth as the real thing. Once that happens and our various enemies are known to be selling spurious stuff there’ll be real trouble—for them . . . Anyway, I’ll explain more presently. I have it all worked out, but stuck here in the middle of a Plasma Plain is no place to discuss it. We’ll do that later . . .”

Ralsor got to his feet. “You say you were heading for Rhea when this happened?”

The girl and her brother nodded promptly.

“That idea can go overboard now,” Magda said quickly. “It will be far more intriguing to become pirates, Mister Ralsor.”

Ralsor smiled. “You forget, Miss Sneed, that I have no civilian rights—not even the prefix ‘Mister’. In any case I’m dropping my own name and shall call myself—er—Arnos Bral. Yes, Arnos Bral! Sounds impressive, don’t you think?”

“Something occurs to me,” Lendar remarked anxiously. “Are you intending to return to Earth or indulge exclusively in space piracy?”

“Both, I trust. I am hoping to secure enough diamonds from one of the freighters to enable me to return to Earth as a wealthy traveller under the pseudonym of Arnos Bral. Why?”

“Just that I don’t see how you’ll get away with it. The Jovian authorities will surely report your escape from the settlement? It will be known to the Earth police.”

“Doubtless, but I’ll never be recognised. Even you two didn’t know me, so I’m certain nobody else would. I don’t think it will dawn on the Jovian authorities that it is necessary to mention how much my appearance has changed from the day when I was admitted to the settlement— At least, I’m prepared to take the chance.”

“Then what’s the next move?” Magda asked quickly. “Try and find a freighter ship and—”

Ralsor interrupted her with a laugh. “Great cosmos, no! We have to do this thing properly, believe me. We will head for Rhea, as you had originally intended, and make it our base of operations. Nobody is ever likely to discover us there since it is way off the normal space routes—but before we do that we need a meal. Or at least *I* do, if I may trespass on your generosity.”

“Trespass!” Lendar echoed, getting up quickly. “From here on nothing you can ask can be too much. You’re giving Sis and me the chance to hit back at those who killed Dad, and that’s the best thing that ever happened to us.”

With that the young man turned and set about the task of preparing a meal, a none too easy job owing to the tilt of the control room. Magda seemed about to help him, then she changed

her mind and gave Ralsor an enquiring glance. To her surprise he was watching Lendar with more than usual interest.

“Anything wrong, Arnos Bral?” the girl asked dryly, and Ralsor gave a start.

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking—your brother has very similar dimensions to my own, though perhaps not the strength I developed on Jupiter. His similarity to me in physique may be useful later. I’ll tell you more when the time comes.”

“You propose using this vessel as our pirate ship?”

“With your permission, yes. I know it’s one of the latest and fastest types. It will have to be disguised, of course, but that too can come later. The thing we have to do when we’ve eaten is get the vessel onto even keel. Lendar and I should be able to do it between us; and after that the rest should be simple . . .”

And such indeed proved to be the case. Once the meal was over Lendar and Ralsor donned pressure-suits and went outside. Thereafter, for nearly two hours, they laboured against the crushing gravity, digging away the metallic morass from around the vessel, until at last its own weight caused it to drop down to even keel, albeit sinking several feet into the plasma. The exhaust fins were free, however, and this was the main thing. If it did not rise now under full blast, then there was nothing could be done.

“Will you take the controls, or shall I?” Lendar asked, when they had returned to the control room and rid themselves of their suits. “I freely admit that neither Magda nor I are experts, which is one good reason why we didn’t know what to do to counteract the gravity field.”

“I’m no expert,” Ralsor answered, settling at the switchboard, “but maybe I can do better than you two. My father was the founder of the space line, remember, and he taught me plenty of tricks with various machines. First thing you two had better do is lie down. I can stand strain more than you can, which is another good reason why I’d better do the piloting.”

Magda and Lendar both nodded and eased themselves onto the bunks. Ralsor studied the fuel indicator which showed that the power-plant was three-quarters loaded with uranium—ample for his purpose—then he switched on the current which fired both the under and rear jets. The power-plant hummed under the load, and as rapidly as prudence permitted Ralsor stepped up the voltage to maximum.

There was no other way to overcome a heavy gravity, as he well knew. There were several anguishing seconds whilst the machine quaked and shivered in the plasma. It seemed as though it were not going to rise after all—then, like a fly tearing itself free of a sticky paper, the machine jolted and swept upwards, the jets hurling fumes and expanding gases to the rear, gasses mixed with a foam vapour so they could not ignite an inflammable atmosphere, such as Jupiter and many of the giant worlds possessed.

Going flat out Ralsor drove the machine into the whirling cloud wreaths and the screaming fury of the eternal hurricane. It said much for the construction of the space machine that it stood up to the tremendous strains thrown upon it.

Ralsor did not spare himself in the least. He kept the current at maximum which meant that the machine swiftly reached a tremendous velocity—and held it—the only possible way in which the drag of gravity could be overcome. On the bunks Lendar and his sister began to breathe with desperate effort, their chests barely able to rise enough to permit air to enter into their lungs. Ralsor glanced at them, exerting every ounce of his huge strength to bring his arm into use and handle the controls. Fixedly he watched the meters, perspiration pouring down his face from sheer physical effort.

Then suddenly the vessel sailed clear of the poisonous atmosphere and into the deeps of space. Ralsor glanced about him quickly upon the nine moons of Jupiter, then down towards the enormous planet itself. He still kept up the maximum power, watching the field-of-gravity needle intently. The moment that started to climb backwards on its graded scale it meant that the pressure could be relaxed and that the pull was beyond its zenith.

As he climbed, Ralsor also turned the vessel slightly until its nose was facing dead towards magnificent Saturn. The ringed planet loomed in infinity, with his attendant moons—Rhea amongst them—whilst beyond again were murky Uranus and green Neptune. Little Pluto, “black sheep” of the Solar System, was infinitely far away, the last outpost.

So at last the field-of-gravity needle began its retracement and, little by little, Ralsor cut down the power until the ship was moving at an Earth-norm velocity, which meant it also had a gravity identical with that on the surface of Earth . . . Feeling the pressures easing away from them Magda and her brother struggled up from their bunks and came over to where Ralsor was seated at the switchboard. He glanced at them and smiled.

“We made it all right,” he commented, “and I also learned that we have a machine here which we can trust in an emergency. It’s good stuff throughout.”

“Ought to be,” the girl said. “Dad bought it for my twenty-first birthday and I think he paid in the region of ninety-thousand for it. That’s big money for a two-man space flyer.”

“You didn’t think of selling it, I suppose, and settling down on Earth with the money you could have got for it?”

“No.” The girl’s face was troubled. “Lendar and I felt we could never be safe on Earth after father was driven to suicide . . .”

“Course set for Rhea?” Lendar asked, interrupting anything further his sister might have intended saying.

Ralsor nodded. “We’ll have to be careful, too, when we near that satellite. Saturn, though not as big as Jove, still has a mighty strong pull. Either of you know the fact about Rhea, or are you just relying on the ordinary space reports about it?”

“We only know it’s reputed to be a Paradise,” Magda replied. “A sort of cosmic Garden of Eden.”

“Could be,” Ralsor admitted. “I know all about it from the scientific books I read at the settlement. Rhea is the fifth satellite of Saturn, and fifteen-hundred miles in diameter. It is devilish hot, being only three-hundred-and-thirty-seven-thousand miles from molten Saturn. Rhea revolves, in relation to the sun, in four days, twelve hours, and twenty-five minutes. Gravitation slightly less than Earth’s moon, and has an atmosphere of oxygen and hydrogen, with other elements similar to those of Earth’s own, which atmosphere only extends upwards for two-thousand feet.”

“You should write a cosmic guide book,” Lendar grinned, and then turned his attention to watching the satellites of Saturn growing very gradually larger as the machine flew on with steady velocity.

In space, however, owing to the absence of air, distances seem slight even when really enormous. For this reason a system of shifts was arranged at the controls, each taking a turn whilst one slept and another remained on look-out . . . Actually it took several Earth-days of time before the little satellite of Rhea was anywhere near enough for Ralsor to start using the forward jets and so check the relentless drag of huge, ringed Saturn.

Moving so close to him he was a vision to carry in the memory for ever, his rings flawlessly shaped and revealed now as composed of multimillions of planetoids, asteroids,

and meteorites, all of which gave the impression of continuous matter when seen from a great distance.

Not that the three within the vessel were deeply impressed by the cosmic wonders: their attention was on the little world towards which they were hurtling, already revealed as richly green with low level mountains poking up through infrequent white cloudbanks. Here, positions were reversed. All the moons of Jupiter were known to be frozen and dead, and the almost solid giant primary gave no warmth either. But Saturn was still almost completely molten and poured forth his heat across space to his moons. They, having become solid worlds rapidly because of their small dimensions, were bathed constantly in this warmth and had developed into tropical paradises accordingly, Rhea and Titan being the richest in verdure.

“Here we go,” Ralsor murmured at last, and set the vessel into the final dive, the forward jets blazing full blast to cushion the attraction-pull.

In less than five minutes the machine reached the outermost edges of the shallow atmosphere and hurtled over a richly fertile jungle, thereafter dropping lower and lower as Ralsor searched intently for a clear spot. Finally he beheld one and quickly cut down power. Overshooting the mark he had to make a complete circumnavigation of the satellite until he arrived at the same spot again—and this time he succeeded. With hardly any vibration the vessel dropped vertically, supported by the recoil of the underjets, and finally came to a halt in the depths of a forest.

“Pretty weird looking place for a Garden of Eden,” Magda commented, peering through the bow window, and Ralsor and Lendar nodded silent agreement.

Rhea was only weird in that it had no direct sunlight. The jungle was bathed in the multiple lights of Saturn and the neighbour moons, and since all of them—and Rhea itself—were constantly on the move, the shadows perpetually changed, conjuring up unreal phantasms amongst the trees and rioting vegetation. What light there was from the far distant sun was completely swamped by the nearer luminosities.

Otherwise the Garden of Eden effect was there. There were monstrous flowers, eight feet high and three feet across the face, flaming bushes of red-coloured leaves, and walls of thickly interlaced lichens and vines.

“Fine base of operations,” Ralsor said in satisfaction. “We’ll live in the ship, of course, but the way I have things worked out we’ll also need somewhere to dump stuff occasionally, so this satellite will do nicely——”

“Atmosphere’s perfectly breathable,” Magda interrupted, looking at the instruments.

“And gravity like a feather,” Lendar added. “Which about covers everything . . . So what’s the next move?”

“On a vessel like this you should have various sorts of clothes to cover any planet from sub-zero to solar-tropical,” Ralsor said. “What have you got? We need suits, one for each of us, together with bag-type hoods to conceal our faces.”

Magda promptly departed to the small storage hold and eventually returned with three grey one-piece garments and a roll of grey material.

“We could dye these,” she explained. “They’re ordinary one-piece overalls, actually, but in the chemical department I found some jet-dye used for mineral testing. And this square of material we can make up into hoods. The electric sewer will make them in no time.”

“Okay,” Ralsor nodded. “See what your feminine ingenuity can devise. I’m going to have a word with your brother.”

The girl nodded and hurried off into other regions of the vessel, leaving Lendar looking vaguely surprised.

“Something special?” he asked.

“You can call it that. In this game we’re going to play with our enemies, Lendar, you will have to fill an important and yet insignificant role. That sounds contradictory, I know, but what I mean is: you are going to be a stand-in for me.”

“Take your place, you mean?”

“On certain occasions,” Ralsor nodded. “When I am on Earth, and suspicion may just possibly centre upon me, a raid will be made in space—with you as me, masked and of similar proportions—and so the thing will be watertight. In that direction you’ll have to follow whatever orders I give you. Understood?”

Lendar nodded promptly. “There’ll be no argument about that. Sis and I are agreed that you’re the leader.”

“Good . . .” Ralsor felt in the pocket of his convict shirt and brought a well-filled notebook to light. Dumping it on the table he flicked over the pages. “These are notes I made during six months of thought and study concerning this plan. The first person we concentrate on will be Harving Lerab, the diamond king. As you perhaps know he obtains all his diamonds from Venus. They exist in the Venusian mountains, created by the hot winds from the day fusing with the cold of the night hemisphere. The carbon in the mountain summits forms into diamonds, as Lerab well knows. Now he has control in the space line he’ll have no limits on his diamond transportations and right here I have notes of the times the freighters leave Venus. Thanks to that we’ll know when to attack.”

Lendar nodded silently, intently listening.

“The first attack will be on a freighter from Venus, which will be bound to be carrying diamonds, destined for Lerab, as well as passengers . . . I use the term ‘freighter’ loosely, since any passenger vessel carrying cargo as well—as they all do—is called a ‘freighter’ in the technical spaceway jargon. However,” Ralsor continued, “your sister and I will go aboard the freighter, and you will keep out of sight aboard this vessel. Whilst your sister takes possessions from the passengers—purely for the sake of effect—I will visit the storage hold and change the diamond deposits for false stones. I’ll work out exactly how later. The false stones will come from Jupiter.”

“Jupiter!” Lendar gave a start. “We don’t have to go back there, surely?”

“Definitely we do. There is a crystalline jungle there which contains perfect imitations of precious stones. I want a storage hold full of them for the furtherance of our plan. No need to worry. We’ve proved we can leave Jupiter without undue harm, and necessity demands that we do it again . . .”

Ralsor glanced up as Magda returned from her task, her fingers significantly stained with ebony dye. Deliberately Ralsor repeated his plan to her and she nodded thoughtfully.

“You mean I just rob the passengers for effect?”

“Right,” Ralsor conceded. “We will call ourselves the ‘Black Avengers’ and give the impression we merely rob the passengers, which will be a blind for our deeper motive. If our activities make the spaceways unpopular, all the better. That being settled let’s get to more immediate matters. How is the dyeing progressing?”

“Perfectly. Look at my fingers! Soon as the things are dry I’ll fix up the hoods.”

“How much dye is there left?”

“Enough to make several gallons,” Magda answered. “Why?”

“You and I have a job to do,” Ralsor said, glancing at Lendar. “The outside of this vessel has to be made black and all normal insignia and marks taken out. Just for the hell of it we might as well inscribe ‘B.A.’ on the prow, if we can. It will spread the fear of the ‘Black Avengers’.”

“Suits me,” Lendar grinned. “Let’s get started.”

They set about the task immediately, enjoying the warm natural air of Rhea as they worked. By the time they had finished the absolutely fast dye, stronger and more ineradicable than any paint, had dried and the space machine was ebony from stem to stern. The only part left free was where the “B.A.” showed, a rough stencilling of paper having been placed over the bright metal facing of the nose.

“Which brings us to real action,” Ralsor said, when the job was done and he and Lendar were back with Magda in the control room. “Jupiter’s crystalline forest is the next stop. You two can either stay here, or come with me. Depends if you trust me.”

Magda smiled, serene confidence in her hazel eyes. “I trust you, Ral—if you don’t mind my calling you that—to the end of the universe. Whether my brother does or not I don’t know.”

“You know me better than that, Sis!” Lendar objected. “You go ahead, sir, and do what’s necessary. Frankly, Sis and I would prefer to stay here than risk Jupiter again.”

Ralsor nodded promptly. “So be it. Collect whatever necessities you need—and Magda, is the electric-sewer run by its own battery or from the power plant?”

“Battery—Oh, I see what you mean! I can get busy making the hoods and getting the suits to correct size whilst you’re away?”

“That’s it. Anything to cut down time.”

The plan agreed upon they all three set to work to remove all the necessities, leaving Ralsor just enough provisions and an oxygen-jet for his Jovian excursion. So, when the evening was settling on the crazy little satellite, he took his departure, watching the two waving to him as he drove swiftly into the upper air, beyond its limits, and was gone . . .

He was absent three Earth weeks, then to the delight of Lendar and the girl, the machine reappeared in the Rheaian sky, descended swiftly, and finally landed only a few yards away from the rough bungalow the brother and sister had built for themselves in the interval. Ralsor stepped out of the air-lock and hurried towards them in great, bouncing strides against the slight gravity.

“Done it?” Lendar asked eagerly, as his hand was pumped.

“Perfectly! Everything I wanted——!”

Magda gave a little cry of joy and gripped Ralsor’s other hand. He looked at her seriously for a moment and then smiled at an inner thought.

“Come and look,” he said briefly, and before very long both brother and sister were gazing in fascinated wonder upon a storage hold filled to the roof with what looked to be uncut jewels of every conceivable shape and size. The preponderance was upon artificial diamonds.

“Lovely! Exquisite!” Magda cried, surveying the sparkling pyramid in the overhead light. “Have much trouble getting it, Ral?”

“In getting the stuff itself, no trouble at all. My greatest difficulty was in locating the spot again. However, I took my direction from the beacon lights of the settlement, and after that it was easy. I rather expected they might send out scouts to look for me—for my arrival must have been announced on their radar screens—but nothing happened. Here it all is, and we are ready for the first move.”

Ralsor settled down at the table and tugged out his battered notebook.

“I was able to bring my schedule notes up to date whilst on my way to and from Jupiter,” he continued. “Fortunately, the departure times of machines carrying cargoes from Venus and Mars are announced on short-wave for the convenience of passengers. I picked up the time-list and noted them down . . . The liner-freighter ‘Stardust’ leaves Venus for Earth on October Tenth—and that’s the one we’re going to attack. I know from experience that it can carry a good deal of freight, and diamonds are sure to be amongst it since the vessel is from Venus. October Tenth is a fortnight away, which gives us comfortable time to reach an interception point half way between Earth and Venus.”

“And you propose switching the real diamonds for duds?” Lendar questioned.

“Exactly. Incidentally, I was rather afraid this crystalline substance might melt like ice in an above-freezing temperature, but apparently it doesn’t. It must be basically rock-formation and another good thing about it is that once severed from the main organism it doesn’t go on growing. It remains just as you have seen it—like glass.” Ralsor closed and put away his notebook and added thoughtfully, “I’ve no means of knowing how large a diamond consignment will be aboard the ‘Stardust’, of course, but if I put in about a hundredweight—Earth measure—of glass phonies and remove an equal amount, that should be adequate. Best plan perhaps, since the real diamonds and false mixed together will hide the deception . . . Yes, that’s it!”

“You’ve worked out how you’re going to attack?” Magda asked quickly. “One just can’t hold a liner the size of the ‘Stardust’ without being well organised beforehand.”

“You just leave that to me, Magda; I know what I’m up to. How did the dyeing and sewing make out?”

“Okay, I think. I used Lendar’s dimensions as your own, so your suit should be all right. The hoods were easy. Everything’s ready back at the bungalow.”

“Good!” Ralsor rubbed his big hands in satisfaction. “All we have to do now is get a good meal, then load up the ship with everything we need and be on our way . . . And remember, it will mark the commencement of a long, relentless campaign until our enemies are utterly destroyed . . .”

CHAPTER THREE

Exactly two Earth-weeks later the “B.A.” was drifting idly 30-million miles from Earth, and an equal distance from Venus. With her dense black coating she was practically invisible against the glittering hosts of space, except when an occasional burst from the exhausts—to counteract gravity drifts—revealed her presence.

Within the control room Ralsor and Magda sat side by side on the narrow seat under the front observation window, Lendar being at the control board. He had nothing to do but keep the vessel in a comparatively stationary position. For Ralsor and the girl, though, there was the important task of watching the endless deeps of space for the first sign of the approaching “Stardust” coming from Venus. There was only one direction from which it could come, and that was straight ahead where Venus hung as an intense brilliant amidst the mighty hazes of nebulae and cosmic dust.

Ralsor and the girl were in their black suits, and very impressive they looked. The garments covered them from throat to heels, drawn in at the waist by a black belt. They also wore skin-tight black gloves, an addition the girl had made during her sewing activities, and a very necessary one to avoid leaving fingerprints. In the belts reposed guns, with which the ship’s armoury had been supplied—and on the seat, unused as yet, were the bag-hoods with the eyelet holes.

“She can’t be very long now,” Ralsor said at last, raising the night-glasses to his eyes. “Just to make sure again, let me go over our plan once more. On this first occasion there won’t be much opposition to fear because we’ll have the advantage of surprise: later we’ll lose that ascendancy and really have to use our ingenuity. However, to the present affair. The moment we sight the ‘Stardust’ we climb to a position a thousand miles above her. Our exhaust will be taken for an explosion of atomic matter in space, such as often occurs. Certainly our ship will not be detected. . . . That much done we keep up with the ‘Stardust’ and descend all the time, finally using the magnetic attractors to hold us to the roof of the ‘Stardust’. Once that’s done you and I climb outside in our pressure suits and enter the ‘Stardust’ by the emergency lock.”

“Suppose there isn’t one?” Magda asked.

“There will be. Every space machine has one so travellers can be released from outside under exceptional circumstances. You, Lendar, will stay in here out of sight. Your turn will come on some other raid, but not on this one.”

“Whatever you say,” Lendar agreed promptly—and thereafter there followed another long wait as Ralsor searched the void intently through the night-glasses. He was just commencing to think there must be something wrong with his schedule when he picked up the first distant glint of the vessel as it caught the sunlight for a moment. Magda saw his sudden tenseness and waited urgently.

“Yes, it’s it!” Ralsor exclaimed abruptly, putting the glasses down. “Quickly, Lendar! You know what to do. Magda and I have our suits to get into—Hoods first,” he added, as the girl stood up.

Whilst Lendar switched on the power and swiftly raised the machine—or at least drove it to a position a thousand miles “above” the spot where the “Stardust” would presently pass, for actually there is no up nor down in infinite space—Ralsor and the girl drew the bag-like hoods down over their faces and then quickly climbed into their pressure-suits. This task done they

stood watching as the “Stardust” gradually increased in size an interminable distance below them.

“Right,” Ralsor directed at length, with a glance towards the switchboard. “Start lowering, Lendar.”

Lendar nodded, having already been briefed in what he must do. This was not a task calling for a great deal of astronautical skill, anyway. It was merely a matter of keeping up with the liner-freighter—simple enough since the “B.A.” was by far the faster vessel—and gradually descending all the time.

So, by degrees, this was accomplished, and finally Lendar switched on the attractor plates in the base of the “B.A.”, causing it to anchor itself firmly to the roof of the great liner-freighter.

“So far, so good,” Ralsor said, looking keenly outside, his face completely masked behind the space-suit helmet visor. “We don’t seem to have been observed. Since nobody will be on the look-out for pirates that isn’t surprising . . . Ready, Magda?”

The girl switched on her suit audiophone. “Ready,” came her voice, and she did not sound in the least afraid.

Ralsor moved towards the inner air-lock, giving Lendar an encouraging pat with his gloved hand as he did so. In a moment or two he and the girl were both beyond the inner lock and in the vacuum chamber beyond. Then they stepped through the outer-lock, closed it, and surveyed the vast four-hundred foot length of the liner’s roof upon which they were standing, their own machine travelling pick-a-back. Everywhere around them yawned the awesome deeps of infinite space.

Ralsor jerked his head and the girl began to follow him along the metal plates until presently they reached one of the several emergency locks. The great screws clamping them down were thick with ice and under normal circumstances would have needed thawing before they could have been moved. Here, though, the conditions were not normal. Gravity as such was almost non-existent for one thing; and for another Ralsor’s great strength proved equal to the task of slowly getting each screw to move along its heavy thread. There were four in all and he wrestled with them locked in his gloved hands until each was undone. Then, Magda kneeling at his side, he raised the six-inch thick cover and peered below.

There was the darkness of the depressurising chamber and the faint outline of the second inner air-lock. Ralsor did not hesitate. He swung himself easily over the hole and floated below, only the soles of his heavy boots having any weight. In a few seconds Magda had followed him and he closed the upper airlock tightly.

“Get rid of these suits,” he whispered through the audiophone. “They’re too clumsy for us to work in.”

They did so in the utter darkness, then Ralsor felt around for the screws of the inner lock and began to turn them. At length he had the cover up far enough to behold beneath a deserted length of metal passageway—probably the central corridor running the length of the ship. Immediately below was an iron ladder.

“Ready?” Ralsor murmured, pulling out his gun, and in the reflected light the girl’s black-hooded head nodded.

“I’ll take the passenger saloon and you’ll take the control room,” she said. “That right?”

“That’s it—and be on your guard every second.”

Ralsor descended the ladder first, the girl coming after him. In the corridor they parted, taking their direction from the printed directions on the wall. In swift silence Ralsor sped to

the control room and paused outside the partly open steel door. Cautiously he peered beyond it, to behold things just as he had expected. There was the Commander, gazing out of the enormous window onto space; the chief navigator watching his instruments and studying his charts; and the first mate beside the rocket-hold and power-plant intercom, awaiting to transmit every order the skipper gave.

Ralsor grinned to himself and just could not resist the temptation to poke his head round the door edge.

“My apologies, gentlemen,” he said briefly, “but I must keep you out of my way for a while!”

The three men turned in amazement, staring at a black-hooded figure with broad shoulders—then the door slammed upon them and Ralsor quickly dropped the clamps in place. At top speed he hurtled down the corridor and presently reached the main passenger saloon, occupying half of the ship’s great bulk. All the men and women were seated or standing motionless, and in their midst Magda was wandering with apparent unconcern, her gun levelled and her free hand taking whatever jewellery or valuables she could extract or observe.

“Everything all right?” Ralsor asked cheerfully, and she gave a nod.

“Perfectly. From the looks on the faces of these people, piracy in the spaceways seems to have caught them unawares.”

“No harm is meant, ladies and gentlemen,” Ralsor said, his keen eyes studying the people through his hood. “Even outcasts must live—and that is what we are doing. Sorry to relieve you of your valuables, but if we find we have too many we’ll return them to you.”

“How?” a man barked. “This is a damned outrage!”

“True, sir, but a necessary one. At a later date, if we deem it necessary, we will return your goods and chattels to the Earth-London spaceport authorities and you can have a free-for-all finding which belongs to whom. You’ll be advised: I promise you. In the meantime you can tell your friends that you have met the Black Avengers . . . Now you must excuse me. I have work to do whilst my charming partner carries on for me.”

Ralsor hurried away across the saloon and out at the opposite doorway. The alarms were ringing now throughout the ship, operated throughout the control room. This was no more than he had expected—but barring blast guns the men in the control room could never escape, while on the other hand they were not being prevented from doing their legitimate job of safeguarding the piloting of the ship.

Outside the door to the storage holds Ralsor found things as he had expected—two guards on duty, looking vaguely about them with their guns ready, alerted by the alarm clanging noisily throughout the ship.

To Ralsor time meant everything now. He came upon the two guards abruptly from the right-angled passage leading from the passenger saloon. Immediately he dived low as he saw guns levelling at him, and brought the nearer man to the floor with a flying tackle. The searing needle from the second guard’s gun bit a line in the floor not three inches from Ralsor’s shoulder—then he was on his feet, his fist clenched.

There was no time to level and use his own gun so he lashed out a smashing uppercut. The guard who received it never knew what happened. His head went back as though his neck were hinged whilst his body, heavy though he was, flew backwards nearly three yards and then crashed to the floor. Ralsor stared in amazement, surprised how superhumanly powerful the drag of Jupiter had made him.

He turned back quickly to the remaining guard who was trying to get up from the floor. A knee in the small of his back and an iron forearm forcing up under his chin changed his mind for him.

“Keys—quickly,” Ralsor snapped. “To the storage hold!”

“There are no keys: it’s a—a combination lock.” The guard stopped with an anguished gasp as the pressure nearly broke his back.

“You know the combination?”

“Yes . . . For God’s sake, ease up . . .”

Ralsor stood up, seized the guard by the collar of his jacket and pulled him to his feet, spinning him around dizzily so he faced the storage-hold doors.

“Get ’em open quickly!” Ralsor dug his gun in the man’s back.

The guard had more sense than to argue under such circumstances. He opened the doors rapidly and swung them wide.

“Go ahead of me,” Ralsor ordered. “If there’s a consignment here for Harving Lerab from Venus point it out and save my time.”

“There,” the guard said, and indicated three large crates isolated from the main cargo. Across each, in black stencil, was the inscription—LERAB OF EARTH, PER VENUS.

“Take the lid from the top one,” Ralsor snapped. “There’s a jemmy in the wall-rack there.”

Because he could do nothing else the guard did exactly as he was told. Ralsor moved forward as the lid was finally lifted and his eyes gleamed at the sight of thousands of uncut diamonds.

“All right,” he said briefly. “There should be another storage hold beyond this——”

“There.” The guard nodded to a clamped neighbouring door.

Ralsor grinned behind his mask, forced his man ahead of him, and swung the door clamps up. Then he bundled the guard beyond and re-locked the door upon him. This done he hurried out of the storeroom, glanced once at the still motionless guard he had knocked out—and probably killed—and then raced on his way to the passenger saloon again.

He found Magda at the end of her “frisking” activities and standing in a position where she could fire her gun the moment anybody decided to make a false move. Otherwise the situation appeared to be under control. As Ralsor well knew, the crew in the rocket hold and power plant rooms could not desert their posts to investigate. Their jobs demanded every moment of their attention. And evidently the rest of the crew—the stewards and so forth—were leaving it to the normal ship’s guards to find out the cause of the alarm. But before long they would probably catch up with events, and then—

“Finished?” Magda whispered tensely, as Ralsor reached her. “I may look calm, Ral, but my knees are knocking.”

“Hang on for a while,” Ralsor murmured. “I’ve some fast work to put in switching the diamonds for duds! If you’re attacked don’t argue. Shoot to kill. Our lives are as valuable as anybody else’s!”

With that he was on his way again, and it seemed an interminable time before he reappeared, this time in his space-suit and carrying a box on his shoulder. The passengers watched him in silent amazement, and not a little smouldering fury, as he hurried across the saloon and disappeared through the further door.

In about five minutes he was back, still with the box on his shoulder, his flame-pistol in his hand. He turned and fired twice as he raced across the saloon, dropping two guards who had evidently at last come to investigate these select quarters.

“Run for it, Magda!” Ralsor yelled through his audiophone. “I’ll keep you covered!”

The girl bolted instantly, just as another guard came in through the opposite doorway. He levelled his gun immediately and Magda flung herself to one side, missing by a fraction the searing flame which jetted towards her. The guard stood no second chance. Ralsor’s own gun stabbed venomously and the guard dropped with a smoking hole torn through his chest.

“Where to?” Magda panted, as Ralsor reached her.

“Up the ladder, quickly!” He shoved her out into the corridor, and within seconds they reached the ladder to the inner air-lock. As the girl scrambled up the rungs the ship seemed to be alive with jangling alarms, the sound of feet racing down the metal corridors, and the savage banging of the control room crew on the door imprisoning them.

Ralsor glanced about him quickly as Magda’s feet vanished in the trap above. A guard came speeding round the opening in the passage centre and Ralsor lashed out with his gun. There being no chance to aim it and fire he bludgeoned instead—with good effect. Struck at the base of the skull the man crashed to the floor and became still.

Ralsor hardly waited to see the result of his blow. With his box still on his shoulder he clawed his way upwards and tumbled into the narrow depressurising chamber, slamming down the lid.

“Where are you?” he asked through the audiophone, and after a moment Magda’s breathless voice reached him.

“Just getting into my space-suit— There, I’m fixed. Let’s go.”

Ralsor reached upwards and felt around for the airlock clamps. He had the operculum open in a matter of seconds—and left it open. If guards followed unprotected the frightful cold of interstellar space would make short work of them.

The mere act of leaping, arms upflung, was enough to carry the two outside, helped by the slight escaping pressure of air from the lock. After that they made their way along the great liner’s summit to where their own vessel was still magnetically anchored and tumbled in through the air-lock.

Ralsor closed it, and the sigh of relief he gave came clearly to Magda through the audiophone. They went through the second air-lock, closed it, and Lendar—still seated in readiness at the control board—looked at them eagerly.

“Quickly—on our way!” Ralsor ordered, and began to unfasten his helmet.

By the time he and the girl were completely out of their space-suits the fast little flyer was winging away rapidly into the void at a speed the freighter-liner could never hope to equal, if indeed there were any such intention. Apparently there was not.

“Excellent!” Ralsor murmured, rubbing his hands. “In about another ten minutes, Lendar, cut the speed to zero. I don’t intend going straight back to Rhea . . . Now let’s take a look at our prize.”

He moved to the box he had put upon the floor and placed it on the table. Raising the lid he looked within upon the mass of uncut diamonds. Magda looked also and caught her breath.

“How wonderful, Ral! How superbly, fascinatingly wonderful!”

“So says the heart of a woman,” Ralsor smiled, putting two of the largest gems in her palm and then closing her fingers over it. “To you—just beauty. To me, power and money and the means to an end. These here are worth a vast fortune, of course, and what I need to form the backing for Arnos Bral.”

Ralsor paused, considered, and then said briefly, “Set the course for Earth, Lendar.”

“Earth!” Lendar turned in surprise. “But surely that’s just asking for it!”

“To Earth I have got to go just the same and lay the foundations of the second part of my scheme. I’ll rejoin you on Rhea as soon as it is justifiable. In the meantime both of you will carry on, you, Lendar, taking my place. You will use your own ingenuity to hold up space liners and rob the passengers, and that will be *all* you will do. When it comes to cargoes that is my own speciality. Understand?”

“Absolutely,” Magda agreed. “But it won’t be easy from here on. Now we have our names up every space liner commander will be on the watch.”

Ralsor nodded soberly. “I know. That is one of the risks which have to be taken—but to make the spaceways as uncomfortable as possible for passengers is your especial task. The reason is that I intend to found a rival spaceway back on Earth and get all the passenger clientele in my own hands if I can.”

Lendar frowned. “That won’t be easy, sir!”

“Easier than you think. I shall publicise my line as being proof against pirate attack—and naturally it *will* be, providing there are no other pirates than yourselves.”

“Which will immediately look suspicious,” Magda pointed out.

“Not the way I’ll handle it, my dear. I have everything weighed up—— Incidentally, what happened to the various articles you took from those passengers?”

Magda began to unload her uniform pockets of various small articles of value—rings chiefly, with costly wrist watches, strings of jewels, bracelets, and so forth. Ralsor looked them over and then nodded.

“Put them in a safe place when you and Lendar return to Rhea. At a later date they’ll be returned to their owners—same as all other stuff which may be taken in the future. No reason why innocent passengers should suffer for our scheme of revenge.”

“Regarding future attacks,” Lendar said, turning from setting the course of the flyer towards Earth. “Shall we be able to know the starting times of vessels by reason of the departures being broadcast on short-wave?”

“You should be able to pick up the desired information, yes,” Ralsor agreed. “But if the authorities stop the broadcasts—as perhaps they will—your only course will be to select a point in space near the recognised space lanes and act as you see best.”

Which, as far as Ralsor was concerned, finished that particular phase of the business. His attention now was concentrated on the problem of reaching Earth without undue detection.

“Seems to me,” he said finally, after the subject had been discussed from various angles, “that the best way will be to drop me by night reasonably near to civilisation, and then you can take off again immediately. By night, and with the black covering the vessel has, detection won’t be easy—and our exhaust flare will be assumed to be from one spaceship or another since they’re always leaving and returning, privately and commercially . . . When I need to come to Rhea I’ll find my own way of doing it. Just drop me—and the diamonds—and that will be all I’ll need.”

CHAPTER FOUR

The complaints which deluged the executives of the Pioneer Space Corporation once the “Stardust” touched London, Earth, were so numerous and vitriolic that the ordinary officials gave up trying to cope with them, and instead shifted the responsibility to the heads. So Lerab, Cafton and Drolag met in private to discuss the problem.

“Quite beyond me!” Harving Lerab declared, pounding up and down the office like an agitated bullfrog. “Piracy in the spaceways! Whoever heard of such a thing!”

“Those within the ‘Stardust’, evidently,” Emris Cafton replied dryly. “It doesn’t particularly surprise me. It’s the interplanetary version of ‘smash-and-grab’—probably engineered by a couple of damned outcasts who are too lazy to work for an honest living.”

“Apparently,” Valcent Drolag remarked calmly, lighting a cigar, “the thieves are only interested in petty valuables—the jewels of the women passengers, the costlier watches of the men, and so forth. None of the cargo appears to have been interfered with—”

“That’s what you think!” Lerab turned angrily. “One of the ship’s guards reports that the man partner of these—er—‘Black Avengers’, or whatever tomfool name they’ve given themselves, deliberately smashed open one of my diamond consignments, or at any rate ordered the guard to do it for him. He may have taken some of the diamonds. Though the weight of the case is about the same as that on the manifest I wouldn’t know if several handfuls of diamonds had been removed. The weighing isn’t that accurate.”

“Can’t blame a robber for trying,” Cafton remarked. “The loss of a few diamonds here and there, won’t make much difference to you, H.L. The part that worries me is the effect on the morale of the passengers—not just those who’ve recently gone through the experience, but those who’ll go through it later if these damned pirates strike again.”

Drolag spread his hands. “My dear friends, what in the world is all the fuss about? Whoever these pirates are they’ll never get away with it again. We’ll form the Interplanetary Patrol, made up of the toughest and most ruthless men we can find. We should have done it when we took over the Space Line, only it never dawned on us that piracy in space would ever happen.”

Lerab nodded slowly, his anger cooling. “Yes, an Interplanetary Patrol. That’s one good idea you have there, Drolag. We’ll see what we can do about that right away . . .”

And no time was wasted. In the weeks which followed the necessary spacemen were enlisted, drilled, provided with fast machines, and given their orders. Just the same, during this period there were reports of further hold-ups in space, accomplished so quickly that the commanders of the vessels concerned had no chance to strike first. Magda and her brother took their lives in their hands with each of these “token” raids, but they planned them well enough to get away with them . . . They only slowed up their activities and retired to Rhea for a while when over the radio they heard the news of the formation of the Interplanetary Patrol.

Lerab, Cafton, and Drolag all congratulated themselves when the first of these patrols set off to police the spaceways, but their complacency was short-lived. Only a month after the full establishment of the I.P. startling news—for the Pioneer Space Corporation anyway—burst across the newspapers and telecasts. A new space line company had opened, to the south of London, the Zenith Spaceways, and guaranteed immunity from all pirates and the hazards of the void.

Again a hurried conference, not only of the three principals of the Pioneer Corporation, but all the big men and women connected with it.

“Who *is* this damned upstart that dares open a rival spaceway?” Lerab demanded, glaring upon his colleagues. “Doesn’t he know that we have the exclusive rights over space travel?”

“We haven’t the *exclusive* rights,” remarked the Corporation’s lawyer worriedly. “That’s just where Arnos Bral has us whipped.”

“Whom?” Lerab snapped.

The solicitor looked up tiredly. “Naturally I’ve made all the necessary enquiries, and it seems this company has been prepared in secret and launched suddenly, so as to catch the public eye. They have a fleet of twenty first-class machines—small liners, fitted with every modern device. The governing director of the company is one Arnos Bral. I suppose there are others behind him: that I can’t find out.”

“Arnos Bral?” For once Valcent Drolag had lost his perpetual smile as he glanced in puzzlement about him. “I never heard of him, either in the city or astronomical circles.”

“A very wealthy man, I understand. Has big diamond interests.”

“The biggest diamond interests are mine!” Lerab declared doggedly, his jawls shaking as he thumped the long table. “No man can be bigger in diamonds than I am.”

“Why not?” Emris Cafton asked. “Certainly you have the monopoly of Venusian diamonds, H.L., but there may be other places where diamonds exist, and Arnos Bral may know exactly where that other place is.”

“I still say he’s poaching on our preserves,” Lerab snapped, “and it’s up to you, as lawyer to the Corporation, Malidek, to issue an injunction.”

“No use, Mr. Lerab. The charter of our Corporation states specifically that we shall operate a space-line from central London, within a radius of twenty-five miles, making direct contact with the inner planets thereby . . .”

“Well? That’s exclusive right, isn’t it?”

“Legally, no. There’s a large-sized loophole, and Bral has used it. He has placed his departure grounds well *outside* the twenty-five mile limit, and judging from the brochures he’s turned out, he intends reaching the planets in an ellipse, which discounts the legal *direct* contact. In other words he’s taking a long way round in order to stay within the law, and since the machines he has are of a faster type than ours he’ll do the journeys in about the same length of time.”

“Clever,” Valcent Drolag sighed, smiling to himself. “I must grant the fellow that much!”

“I’m not granting him anything.” Lerab banged his fist down again. “He’s a blasted impostor and I mean to have him uprooted. As for that idiotic declaration that he guarantees immunity from pirates—well, it’s impossible! Nobody can guarantee that. Unless he’s a pirate himself.”

“Hardly,” remarked Emris Cafton. “The pirates have been busy whilst Bral was organising his space line.”

There was silence for a moment or two, the members of the Board either sitting thinking or looking before them in vaguely puzzled annoyance. Then Valcent Drolag seemed to come to a decision.

“There’s only one thing to do, my friend. Bral offers a most enticing prospect to the interplanetary public, and since we have no legal weapon against him we must try the next best thing—compromise. I would suggest that I go and see him and see if anything can be done.”

“Why you particularly?” Lerab asked bluntly. “Aren’t we all involved in this?”

“Definitely—but you have a temper, H.L., and it might spoil our chances. You, Cafton, are not a good wrestler when it comes to words—so that only leaves me. I have an—er—disarming air.”

“Take a vote on it,” Caftan suggested—and the result was unanimous.

So, later that morning, the smiling Valcent Drolag made it his business to be driven across the city, and his famous name was sufficient to gain him an immediate interview with the enigmatic “Arnos Bral”—the very thing Ralsor had been expecting, and waiting for day by day.

He realised the moment the arms king entered the office that there was no question of recognition. It was not acting. Drolag just did not recognise the powerful, broad-shouldered man who came forward with extended hand.

“Arnos Bral?” Drolag questioned briefly, after the handshake.

“The same, Mr. Drolag.” Ralsor motioned to a chair. “Do be seated, please. Cigars? Drinks?”

“Neither, thank you. This is strictly business.” Drolag permitted his moonlike smile to appear as he settled down. “To come straight to the point, Mr. Bral, you have become a rod-in-pickle for the Pioneer Space Corporation.”

“For which I am not apologising.” Ralsor returned to his swivel-chair. “All’s fair in business, Mr. Drolag, of which you of all men ought surely to be aware.”

“Yes, I’m aware of it—and though it hurts me to admit it I must compliment you upon the legal way in which you have circumvented the space rights of the Corporation. Just the same, it’s going to be difficult for both of us to do good business. You realise that?”

“No,” Ralsor answered calmly. “Why should it be?”

“Because on the one hand you are not an established space service—and the public is always chary of anything new; and on the other our passenger list will fall because of their detraction in your direction. Between us we’ll neither of us make much profit . . . Your clarion call, that you can prevent attacks by piracy, is good advertisement but hardly convincing.”

Ralsor smiled. “Convincing or otherwise it is true. No pirate will ever come near one of my ships.”

“Why not?” Drolag’s smile had faded. “Do you realise that that suggests you are in contact with these space robbers, that you can tell them not to attack your own ships but to attack ours?”

“I would suggest you be careful, Mr. Drolag. Linking up my name with space robbers is not very sensible.”

“Maybe it isn’t, but it’s the only conclusion I can draw. Unless you can suggest some other reason for immunity.”

“There is a very good reason for immunity, but that is my secret, Mr. Drolag. When passengers have tried my space-line and assured themselves of its security, the Pioneer Space Corporation will undoubtedly find its receipts falling and my promises justified.”

Drolag was silent for a moment or two and the penetrating look in his eyes made Ralsor think for a moment that the tycoon had managed to place his identity. His next words, however, gave no hint of this.

“Am I to understand, then, that you are not prepared to discuss terms for a merger so we can work in unison?”

“At this stage I am only interested in my own organisation,” Ralsor answered, shrugging. “I am confident of making it a success; I have unlimited finance, and a fleet of the fastest and best space machines.”

“And a well organised spaceport,” Drolag added thoughtfully, gazing through the big window. Then he frowned a little. “I notice your space machines out there are coated in a queer kind of paint. Or *is* it paint?”

Ralsor got to his feet and strolled to the window, the arms king following him. They looked for awhile upon the expanse of the spaceport outside, several machines being lined up for immediate use. Each was coated in some queerly iridescent paint which was silvery and yet almost hurtful to the eye. It made the normally painted “Z.S.”—Zenith Spaceways—stand out in an odd three-dimensional fashion.

“That coating on each spaceship is my guarantee of immunity from piracy,” Ralsor said dryly. “It’s scientific, absolutely certain, and a formula of my own conceiving.”

“What does it do?” Drolag’s eyes were full of questions.

“Guarantees immunity.”

The moonlike smile returned. “I understand. You have no intention of explaining further. So be it— Since we cannot come to any kind of compromise, Mr. Bral, I think it only fair to warn you that my colleagues and I will make every effort from here on to block your progress. No personal animosity, you understand. Just a matter of business.”

“Of course.” Ralsor’s own smile was quite polite.

“Reverting to a more friendly spirit, and leaving out business for a moment, I consider you something of an enigma, Mr. Bral.”

“So?”

“Insofar that you are obviously a wealthy man with considerable interest in diamonds. I cannot understand why I have never heard of you in the city’s financial quarters.”

“I have been doing a great deal of travelling,” Ralsor answered. “Not only amongst the inner planets, but the outer ones as well. What wealth I have has accrued from those voyagings. When I heard of piracy, which I encountered myself whilst in space, I set to work to find a way to combat it and then launch a spaceline. That’s the whole story.”

“*Almost* the whole story,” Drolag corrected, beaming. “But thank you for revealing even that much. Probably we will meet again at a later date.”

Ralsor inclined his head and with that the magnate took his departure. When he arrived back at the Pioneer Corporation’s headquarters he found Cafton and Lerab still hanging around the main executive office, waiting for news.

“He’s tough, uncompromising, and polite,” Drolag summed up, shrugging. “Just the same he wriggles so sublimely when questioned as to how he can prevent piracy that I suspect he is somehow connected with them. Best thing to do is have the radio detection boys on constant duty and see if they can tap any unusual messages being sent into space . . . Arnos Bral is definitely a dark horse, if ever there was one.”

Immediately Lerab switched on the inter-com and gave the necessary orders to the radio detection department—but in the days which followed, slowly becoming weeks, there was never the least sign of unusual radio messages. And newspaper and telecast reports showed that “Arnos Bral” was continuing to direct the destinies of the Zenith Spaceways, *and* he was gathering a fair-sized passenger list. In regard to this there was just nothing Drolag, Cafton and Lerab could do except fume. Their only hope lay in “Bral’s” boast of immunity against piracy proving wrong.

As far as Harving Lerab was concerned his interest in the Pioneer Corporation was less keen these days. He was finding himself up to the neck in accumulating trouble as complaints and then accusations kept reaching him concerning his diamond transactions.

At first he did not comprehend the seriousness of the situation, then it was gradually driven home to him by a series of legal actions that he was definitely in a spot of the worst kind—financially and morally. Apparently the firms to whom he sold his diamonds were all unanimous in their assertions that he was mixing the gems with spurious mineral material, undetectable to the normal eye, but not to the instruments used by the research departments of his various clients.

By degrees he saw his enormous fortune being swallowed up in defending himself in court against dozens of legal suits constantly piling up. To this was added the lack of buyers for future diamond consignments. Having once been proved a double-crosser none would trust him.

He appealed to both Cafton and Drolag to help him, but they merely shrugged. They had their own axes to grind and if circumstances removed Harving Lerab from the Pioneer Space Corporation it would simply mean that there would be one less with whom to share profits.

It was desperation which finally drove Lerab to seek out “Arnos Bral”. And Ralsor listened to the tormented diamond king’s tale of woe in polite silence. The man was shaken, pale with worry, and having none of the bombast and authority he had formerly possessed.

“I’m a complete stranger to you, Mr. Bral,” Lerab confessed, spreading his hands. “But we have one thing in common. We both have our fortunes locked up in diamonds. You must know of the predicament I am in from the reports.”

“Certainly I know,” Ralsor retorted. “If you will mix crystalline with your diamonds what else can you expect but trouble?”

Lerab ran a hand over his forehead. “I didn’t, though. In all honesty, Mr. Bral, I never adulterated my gems at any times. I dispatched the consignments in the usual way to my buyers—and now comes this deluge of accusations! The only possible solution I can think of is that those space pirates had something to do with it. I know they examined my diamond consignment—one case, anyhow—but I’ve no proof they did anything else.”

“You suggest they put crystalline in place of some of the diamonds, taking the diamonds for themselves?”

“I believe so—but that story doesn’t stand up in court, no matter how skilfully my counsel tells it.”

“And what,” Ralsor asked, smiling, “do you expect me to do about it?”

“Help me financially if you will. I know you’re a man of wealth and you understand the intricacies of the diamond trade. You can name your own percentage for a loan.”

Ralsor was silent, reflecting. Lerab eyed him hungrily.

“I’ve *got* to have help, Bral! I’m nearly bankrupt! Everything I have is in ruins—and those two partners of mine won’t raise a finger to aid me. I’d take my medicine if it were my own fault. But it isn’t! I’m completely innocent!”

“So was Dayton Ralsor,” Ralsor said deliberately, and a congested look came into Lerab’s eyes.

“Ral—Ralsor? What’s he got to do with it?”

“He was condemned on a false charge by the Interplanetary Court and banished to Jupiter for life. Remember? I recall that you and your two colleagues were instrumental in bringing that about!”

Lerab gazed fixedly, obviously flogging his memory to unaccustomed effort.

“No—no, it couldn’t be,” he whispered, getting slowly to his feet. “And yet——”

He swung away suddenly and headed for the door. It was Ralsor’s voice which stopped him.

“Your assumption is correct, Lerab. I *am* Ralsor, but very much changed from what I used to be. You can tell your colleagues all about it if you wish: they’ll never believe you. In your condition they’ll put it down to hallucinations. You will have gathered by now that not only shall I not help you, but that I have engineered your entire destruction. There’s only one way out, if you’re man enough to take it.”

Lerab did not say another word. He cast one frightened look back over his shoulder and then left the office hurriedly and slammed the door.

That same evening the newscasts carried big headlines:

LERAB COMMITS SUICIDE! DIAMOND KING’S DEATH

And this was news which also reached Magda and her brother, via radio, on faraway Rhea.

“Which means,” Lendar commented, “that number one has been eliminated. I’ve got to hand it to Ral, he knows how to work out a scheme.”

“And we don’t seem to be doing much to help him,” Magda answered, her eyes thoughtful. “Ever since we heard of the organisation of the Interplanetary Patrol we’ve stayed here in safety—and I don’t think that is what Ral wants. The important thing is for us to act and make it look as though he has nothing to do with the piracy.”

“Maybe, but we can’t tackle the I.P.!” Lendar objected. “All the old initiative has gone.”

Magda rose to her feet and wandered thoughtfully around the “B.A.’s” control room. Lendar switched off the radio and waited for her to say something, his eyes on the riotous Rheaian jungle outside.

“I’m wondering,” Magda said at last, “whether we might not succeed with a raid in which we use speed and also act as a decoy.”

Lendar looked vaguely puzzled. “Decoy? Whom can we get to act as decoy whilst we do the job?”

“No, no, I mean *we* are the decoy. We deliberately show ourselves to the I.P. and then give them a terrific chase after us—preferably into the region of the asteroids where they will be slowed up as though in a maze. Our vessel being faster than anything the I.P. have got we can leave the I.P. trying to find its way from amidst the asteroids whilst we get back to the vessel we’ve selected and attack it.”

“They’ll be alert aboard the vessel, too.”

“That we’ll risk, as we do every time. It’s the I.P. we have to fear most, not the crew of the space liners.” Magda began to search through the list of schedule departure times which she had jotted down at intervals, but at length she shook her head. “No use relying on this. The times are probably all altered now, and since we got so busy they’ve ceased to broadcast times altogether. We’ll just have to take our chance.”

“I’m just thinking,” Lendar said slowly. “Possibly most of the liners will be convoyed these days by the I.P. So, if we decoy the I.P. the liner’s crew will think we’ve bolted and that they are safe from attack. They won’t be so alert when we return . . .”

Magda nodded eagerly. “That’s it. Sooner we’re on our way the better. Better make preparations.”

These were very soon taken care of and within half an hour the “B.A.” was on its way into the void, travelling at high speed, but not so fast as to bring excessive inertia into being.

“Before we’re much older we’ll be needing some more uranium for this power plant,” Lendar remarked. “The next ship we attack we’d better take a couple of spare bars if we can find them.”

Magda nodded briefly, her mind centred on the job they were soon to perform. The idea of snaring the I.P. men into the region of the asteroids was brilliant. In the midst of those closely-packed masses of meteoric rock, the remains of a one-time planet between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, it was quite impossible to move at high speeds unless the vessel was small and very manoeuvrable, such as the “B.A.” To move rapidly would be to invite collision—and destruction.

In the journeys between the inner and outer planets, very rarely made anyway except for exploratory purposes, the asteroids were always avoided, ships flying either above or below them. Indeed, no space explorers had yet made an effort to discover the nature of the asteroid rocks. They were assumed to be the remains of a planet shattered by some inconceivable catastrophe in the past . . .

Magda took particular notice of the asteroid “minefield” when the “B.A.” eventually flew beneath it. She had never before realised just how much of a death trap the region could be, or if not that then a tremendous deterrent to machines in a hurry.

“I suggest we lie off the spaceline from Mars to Earth,” Lendar suggested, when after many Earth-days of time their journeying was nearly over. “It’ll be a nearer hop for the asteroids instead of having to cut across Earth’s orbit to get to the Venus-Earth space-line.”

“Suits me,” Magda agreed, gazing through the main port. “We’re near enough as it is to spot any liners on their way from Mars. Better ‘anchor’ us as soon as possible.”

Lendar nodded and applied a burst to the forward rockets, thereby immediately starting to slow down the velocity. In a matter of two hours he had brought the “B.A.” to a complete standstill, checking drifting by the usual process of an occasional blast from the jets facing the disturbing field.

“Space couldn’t be emptier,” Magda commented. She was standing before the main window, dressed in her black tunic, surveying the wilderness of glittering stars. Mars, gleaming ochre, lay away to the left, and Earth, green and crescented, to the right.

“I’m all ready to do the necessary when anything happens,” Lendar said. “Meantime I may as well prepare a meal and then we’ll take it in turns to rest.”

Altogether the wait was a wearying one. Many Earth-days passed before a vessel began to appear as a remote speck in the distance—not coming from Mars, but from Earth, headed for the red planet.

“Makes no difference,” Magda said, as her brother gave her an enquiring glance. “Just as long as we scare the passengers and keep up our reputation. Hand me the night-glasses, please.”

Lendar gave them to her and for a long time she studied the distant vessel; then she lowered the glasses and gave a little frown.

“That’s queer! No sign of an I.P. convoy. This is going to be the easiest job ever. We may as well forget all about the decoy movement and sail into the attack—— Let her go!”

Lendar moved immediately to the control panel, switched in the power to the full, then hurtled the machine upwards until it was approximately eight hundred miles “above” the approaching ship. As it came nearer, however, he hesitated, staring through the window.

“What kind of a vessel *is* that?” he demanded. “It’s painted silver, or something, and has one hell of a dazzle. Is the Pioneer Corporation trying camouflage, or what?”

“It *isn’t* a Pioneer machine!” Magda had the glasses to her eyes again. “It’s one of our own—or rather Ral’s! Must be one of the first of his new spaceline! I don’t understand the queer painting, but I *do* understand ‘Z.S.’ on the prow. We don’t attack it at any price.”

“Then let’s fly close enough to be seen, and then shoot away again as though the machine’s infected with some kind of plague. That kind of action may help to bolster up Ral’s publicity that pirates will not attack his vessels.”

“Good idea.” Lendar grinned to himself and then applied the power. Straight out of space he came hurtling down towards the oddly painted “Z.S.” machine, flattening out as he came level. For several minutes he cruised around the big vessel, noting the faces pressed to the observation windows, watching him—then, when he had thoroughly impressed upon everybody that the “B.A.” was a pirate’s vessel he veered off into space and allowed the liner to go on its way.

“Very nice!” Magda laughed, turning. “Those people, when they return to Earth, will be full of the news that pirates leave the ‘Z.S.’ ways alone! And that— Hello!” she broke off, watching intently. “I thought that vessel was heading for Mars. Seems to be turning away from the direct track.”

“Naturally,” Lendar answered. “Don’t you recall the radio announcements which Ral made—about his vessels make an indirect journey to the planets for legal reasons? They can’t follow the normal route without conflicting with the Pioneer crowd.”

Magda nodded slowly. For the moment she had forgotten this aspect. In silence, as Lendar gradually brought the “B.A.” to a halt again, she stood watching the distant liner slowly recede into infinity until at last it was no longer visible. Then came another of those long, intolerable waits.

It was nearly three hours later before Magda, busy with night-glasses, finally picked up something. She tensed immediately and Lendar sat waiting, his hands poised over the switches as though he were a musician about to begin a concerto.

“This is it!” Magda exclaimed abruptly, turning. “A liner from Mars, convoyed by four patrol ships . . . You know exactly what to do?”

“Sure thing! Head straight for them and then swing off before we’re in firing range. If they behave as they should they ought to follow us.”

“If they don’t, return and bait them,” Magda finished.

Lendar closed the main jet switches, his nerves taut now the call to action had finally come. The machine jolted from its drifting position and with ever-gathering momentum swept through the gulf, head-on towards the Pioneer liner and the ships of the law surrounding it.

CHAPTER FIVE

That the onrushing advance of the “B.A.” had been observed was proven by the four patrol ships suddenly deserting their charge and swinging into formation position. Lendar watched the manoeuvre carefully, and Magda, her hand on the ship’s single protonic-gun, kept her eyes to the sights in case sudden action was called for.

But so fast did the “B.A.” move there was no time for the Interplanetary Patrol to get their own weapons. Like a hornet the “pirate” machine streaked above and around them, jets flaring exhaust gases. Disintegrator beams being used by the I.P. flashed evanescently—and uselessly—in space as they tried to get the high-speed attacker into focus.

“Right—try the detour,” Magda ordered. “We’ve done enough around the ships to show the crew and passengers what we’re up to. Get the patrol away if possible.”

Immediately Lendar gave a burst to the side-jets and darted the “B.A.” away from the liner—and the patrol. But the I.P. men fell for the trick and immediately started to give chase.

“That’s it!” Magda exulted. “They’re going to follow us. They’re probably counting on the fact that if they don’t let go of us they can finish us for good—and end the piracy.”

“Trouble is, they *can* finish us for good if they ever get within range!” Lendar’s face was anxious. “We’re taking one hell of a chance, Sis.”

“Only way. Keep going—fast as you can, but don’t go so fast as to out-distance them or they may give up the chase.”

Lendar gave his attention to the controls once again, slowly swinging the vessel round until it was heading in the direction of the distant, luminous mist of the asteroid belt . . . To the rear the four patrol ships kept level with each other, the flames from their jets showing the effort they were making to catch their quarry.

“Wonder if they’re using maximum power?” Lendar gave his sister a quick glance.

“Of course they will be! How else can they expect to catch up with us? Let them keep at a fixed distance if you can—or even let them think they’re gaining here and there.”

“Which is going to be a long job! The asteroids are the devil of a distance.”

“Long or short it’s got to be done. It’s our only chance to ditch them.”

Lendar said no more. He kept to his post, his hands on the controls, definitely giving the I.P. a run for their money; but after a while the excitement of the chase began to pall and fatigue set in. As Lendar had remarked, the distance to the asteroids was considerable, and the demands of human endurance had to be met. There was nothing else for it but to set the automatic pilot in operation at intervals to allow a chance for eating and sleeping.

The system seemed to work satisfactorily. The I.P. still kept on the trail, evidently determined to pursue their quarry to the “kill”, but despite all the efforts they made—even to occasional gains towards closing the gap—Lendar always drew away again . . .

And so at last the asteroids loomed, a monstrous minefield of meteoric matter sprawling across all space ahead. Magda, who seemed to have taken it upon herself to direct this particular operation, surveyed the scene as she awakened from a rest interval, and then turned to her brother.

“We’re near enough now to make the final dash, Len. Put on speed, and for heaven’s sake watch what you’re doing once we reach the Belt. You’ll need every trick to twist in and out.”

How right his sister was Lendar very soon discovered once the outermost fringe of the asteroids was reached. The rocks, great and small, all floating in haphazard orbits of their own and each an equal distance from the other, seemed to fly out of space as though hurled by giant catapults, but by keeping his attention concentrated solely on controls and instruments Lendar managed to weave and twist and turn as he went deeper and deeper into the field . . .

And to the rear the I.P., possibly thinking they had at last followed the “pirates” to their lair, hurled their own machines into the maze, only to find almost immediately that their vessels were by no means as manoeuvrable as they would have liked.

Magda, watching to the rear, smiled delightedly to herself as she saw the narrow escapes the pursuers were having, and then suddenly it happened! One of the vessels ran head-on into a drifting boulder and the result was cataclysmic. There was not just a collision and a smashed space machine and floating, bloated bodies as a result—but a blinding flash of light which made space intolerable with its glare for a moment. There was no sound in the total vacuum, of course, but the vibratory radiations set up reached the fleeing “B.A.” and set it bouncing for a while, as though in a choppy sea.

When the confusion of shattered rock and evaporating smoke had disappeared, Magda stared to the rear in amazement. She just could not believe what she saw. Not a single ship of the I.P. remained! Every one of them had been annihilated by that inconceivably violent explosion.

“Slow up and turn, Len,” she ordered, her voice mechanical. “There’s something queer here. No collision could produce an effect like that. It was as though atomic force were set free—or something.”

“So I thought.” Lendar was looking apprehensively at the scurrying masses around them as he dodged and ducked adroitly. “And heaven help us if we get mixed up with any of them.”

“No reason why we should if you go slowly—and you can afford to until we get out of this maze. Nobody pursuing us—I just can’t understand it,” Magda insisted, gazing intently through the window. “These rocks must be made of a substance we know nothing about. Appallingly explosive. Have to tell Ral about it the moment we see him.”

And for lack of any further information on the subject she had to drop it at this point. Instead she watched tensely with her brother, as little by little, he eased the “B.A.” through the midst of the dangerous maze, until at last they had free space ahead of them again.

“Whew!” Magda whistled. “No more decoys to the asteroids for me!”

“And what about the raid on that liner? Do we make it as planned?”

“Most certainly we do, and we ought to get away with it from sheer surprise, granting we can catch the liner up before it reaches Earth. Give us everything we’ve got: the power plant is still fairly well loaded, but we’ll grab some spare bars as soon as we can.”

Lendar advanced the power output to the tolerable maximum, set in the robot control, and then relaxed. For many millions of miles there was no need for either he or his sister to tend the vessel. It would simply reach a set velocity and then cruise at that velocity until they altered their tactics. So the monotonous hours dragged by as they pulled away from the asteroid belt and hurtled across the gulf, back to the region of the Mars-Earth space-line.

Advance observation through the night-glasses satisfied them that the liner had not yet reached Earth. It was about at the orbit of the moon, unattended, its crew probably satisfied that attack by “pirates” was now out of the question. Whether this was the fact or not Magda was determined to carry her plan through if only to feel she and her brother were doing their part in furthering Ralsor’s scheme.

Their technique in attacking the liner was identical to that of the first occasion, when Ralsor had been with them. A power dive from a vast "height" above the liner, and firm anchorage to the vessel's roof. At this angle they could not be seen by those within. Then the entry via the airlock on the roof and the surprise attack, or at least hold-up, of the passengers by Magda whilst Lendar dealt with the crew. He locked them in finally, but not until he had appropriated two of the heavy lead cases in which the spare uranium bars were kept. Meantime, for the sake of effect, Magda relieved the passengers of whatever valuables she could find.

In fifteen minutes the whole audacious business was over—and without any shooting or interference, since Lendar had cut the alarm wires so no other members of the great vessel were aware of what was transpiring.

Then the quick getaway. By the time the alarm could be raised they were thousands of miles away in the deeps, beyond all possible chance of pursuit, and certainly free of all conceivable attack by the Interplanetary Patrol.

"Back to Rhea," Magda ordered, her eyes glowing with triumph. "The risk came off, Len—but before we try any more I'd prefer Ral to be with us. Too much strain on the nerves otherwise . . ."

Back on Earth, getting the destiny of his space line well organised, having summoned to his side certain business men whom he knew he could trust to handle matters when he would have to be absent, Ralsor was not immediately aware of the activities of Magda and her brother—but he very soon became so when the Pioneer Corporation's liner touched Earth and the furious passengers told their stories.

The reporters rubbed their hands gleefully, thoroughly enjoying this battle which had flared up between the two space lines, and not having any particular liking for the tycoons back of the Pioneer Corporation they did not forget to splash the news of piracy in a big way. They had hardly done so before radio reports from Mars told of the experience of Ralsor's passengers who had seen the pirate machine fly round them and then leave them alone.

All of which created a definite drift of custom from Pioneer Corporation to the Zenith Spaceways. It made Ralsor smile complacently whilst Emris Cafton and Valcent Drolag surveyed their dwindling receipts and looked helplessly at one another.

"This has got to be stopped!" Cafton declared flatly, his emaciated face set into hard lines. "Arnos Bral is getting away with everything! If this goes on we're going to be bankrupt before we know it."

"You don't have to tell me." Drolag was sitting lost in speculations in the main office, whither he and Cafton had retired to discuss the matter between themselves.

"I cannot understand it at all," Cafton continued, frowning. "There must be some *reason* for pirates not attacking Bral's liners."

"There is—a scientific one. Or so he said."

"I'd be more inclined to suspect he's in league with the pirates!"

"I thought of that long ago, but we've no proof. He never sends out radio messages, and as far as we can see is totally unconnected with these space scavengers. Frankly," Drolag finished, biting his lip, "I don't know what the devil *to* do. I've suggested a merger and he won't have it."

"I'm wondering," Cafton said slowly, his eyes narrowed, "whether there was any truth in Lerab's assertion—the one he made just before committing suicide. About Arnos Bral really

being Dayton Ralsor. After all, Ralsor is known to have escaped the Jovian penal settlement where we sent him.”

Drolag’s smile had a bitter quality this time. “Talk sense, man! You don’t suppose Ralsor could survive above a few seconds in the poisonous atmosphere of Jupiter once he escaped from the settlement, do you? And no spacesuit was taken, according to the authorities’ check-up. In any case there’s no resemblance between Ralsor and Bral. Bral is big, powerful, a man of iron strength I’d say. As for Ralsor—well, you know what *he* was like. Dying on his feet.”

“Then what did Lerab mean?”

“God knows! I don’t think he knew what he was talking about in any case—not only in regard to Bral, but to everything else. He was almost demented with business worries. No, Cafton, we’ve nothing there to hang on to.”

Silence again as the two men pondered what must be done next.

“He won’t listen to a merger,” Cafton recounted slowly. “All right, maybe there’s another way. How about buying from him the secret of how he stops the pirates. He says it’s scientific, which implies some kind of formula. If he’s anything of a business man he ought to be willing to sell, or permit us some kind of licence. In that way he can still keep his space line and we can keep ours, but we’ll *both* be immune from piracy instead of just him.”

“Try it if you like,” Drolag shrugged. “I’m not going to speak to him again because I know I’d get nowhere. You might have better luck.”

Emris Cafton was at least willing to try, and within half an hour he had fixed an appointment and was being shown Ralsor’s private office. Ralsor’s greeting was gravely polite as he motioned the thin-faced, bony-shouldered magnate to a chair.

“We haven’t met before, Mr. Bral,” Cafton said, clearing his throat. “I am——”

“Mr. Drolag’s one surviving partner,” Ralsor smiled, returning to his swivel-chair. “I know exactly who you are, Mr. Cafton.”

“Oh! Well, that saves a lot of trouble. I am here, Mr. Bral, to see if we cannot come to some arrangement.”

“Concerning what?” Ralsor examined his finger-nails idly.

“Concerning the competition between us. You have an unfair advantage in that you can somehow prevent piracy, whereas we cannot. Whether your ultimate aim is to try and destroy the Pioneer Space Corporation and establish your own line in its place I don’t know—but if that is your objective it is most unprogressive. The more space lines there are the more science can advance and——”

“A merger,” Ralsor interrupted, “is out of the question. I made that perfectly clear to Mr. Drolag.”

“So he told me. I suggest that you sell your secret of immunity from piracy. I understand it is something scientific.”

“Definitely it is.” Ralsor smiled enigmatically. “You see, Mr. Cafton, I know all about these pirates.”

“So I have suspected!” Cafton snapped. “And you probably have a means of communicating with them—or even you may be quite friendly with them, which accounts for your immunity.”

“I would be glad if you would allow me to finish,” Ralsor said deliberately. “I know all about these pirates because, before I established my space line, I was a space explorer. I have investigated many regions of the void and for that reason I can state positively that these pirates hail from a small planet in the region of Andromeda. That they are similar to us in

physique is unusual, but not impossible. I had the chance once, when I was attacked by them, of seeing their faces. From Earth standards, they are hideous—which may account for the masks they now wear. I even learned that they are outcast from their own planet by reason of criminal activity. They live by plundering jewels and valuables which can fetch good prices in the lower dives of Mars and Venus.”

Emris Cafton sat in silence, his eyes half shut, taking in the story Ralsor was so glibly relating.

“The peculiarity about these two people from Andromeda is that their eyes can only see certain wavelengths,” Ralsor continued. “Possibly their spectrum is different from ours—I’m not sure—but the fact remains that they do not see as we do. Experiments on my part, once I had escaped them, produced a paint of a fixed wavelength, which to us looks like silver and appears to glitter most dazzlingly. To those from Andromeda it presents invisibility.”

Cafton opened his eyes abruptly. “You mean that is the reason for your queerly-painted spaceships? That the paint makes the ships invisible to the Andromedian pirates?”

“That,” Ralsor conceded calmly, “is the answer.”

“Thank you for telling me that much. You must have a price for your paint formula. Name it, however high.”

Ralsor shook his head, at which Cafton tightened his mouth.

“Where is the sense in holding out, Mr. Bral? You are in business to make money, and here is a chance to make a fortune without any effort, beyond handing over a formula. Our space-lines will still be distinct and separate, but piracy will be banished, as far as those two from Andromeda are concerned, anyhow.”

“I am sorry, Mr. Cafton, but the secret remains mine. You asked me a little while ago whether my intention is to smash the Pioneer Space Corporation. It is.”

“But in heaven’s name, why?”

“Purely as a matter of business. Obviously I would do much better with your Corporation eliminated—so I shall work to that end. If by some fluke you find this special paint I have devised, all power to you—but somehow I don’t think you ever will.”

Cafton got to his feet impatiently and snatched up his hat.

“And that is your last word, Mr. Bral?”

“Definitely!”

The tycoon swung in anger towards the door, pausing only as Ralsor’s voice reached him again.

“There is nothing to stop you finding the formula for the special paint, Mr. Cafton, but I would suggest you make the research in your own scientific laboratories. Any attempt to steal or examine one of my space machines, with the object of analysing its painted covering, might prove disastrous for you and the person concerned. I am keeping a twenty-four hour watch on all my machines.”

Cafton went out and slammed the door, leaving Ralsor grinning to himself. That the “mystery paint” was only aluminium and silver paint mixed with phosphorescent plasma he had kept to himself, and it made him feel rather like a magician who has performed a particularly brilliant illusion . . .

However, there were other matters to be attended to now. He was reasonably sure that no further approaches would be made by the Pioneer Corporation just at present, which made it as good a time as any for him to depart into space and further his plan of revenge. He left that same night, putting a thoroughly trustworthy manager in charge of affairs. The business of the

Zenith Spaceways was booming considerably now it was generally known that travellers had made their trip without any interference from pirates.

Knowing full well that Drolag and Cafton were probably keeping tabs on his movements—even having isolated members of the Interplanetary Patrol keep a watch on him—Ralsor did not try and leave Earth secretly. Before he went he made it perfectly clear to the news centres that he was leaving for outer space to examine the possibilities of opening up “sealed” spaceports on the giant planets, purely for the sake of those travellers who wished to study the four outer worlds for scientific reasons.

This statement being generally circulated Ralsor found he was not followed into the void, and the Customs preliminaries at the space station above the Heaviside Layer were soon dispensed with—then he was winging his way towards the orbit of Mars.

In three days he had crossed it. Here he made sure he was still not being followed; then putting in the automatic pilot he gave himself up to relaxation during the lonely, monotonous hours whilst the vessel hurtled onwards into the gulf between Mars’ orbit and Jupiter’s. Only at the asteroids did he need to control the vessel himself, and it was at this point that he dared to make a short-wave contact with Rhea and announce his coming. Since the radio was directional it would never be heard to the rear, not even on Mars now he was “beyond” it.

“Ral, it’s you!” came the thin, space-warped voice of Magda from the faraway satellite of Saturn. “Len and I have been waiting for you—wondering about you. Can you hear me? I’m working the transmitter on full juice from the power plant in the ‘B.A.’ Over.”

“I can hear you,” Ralsor replied. “I only wish this was television as well so I could see you. To look on friendly faces again is my main ambition at the moment. I’ll tell you everything when I reach Rhea. I just wanted to make sure all is well with you. Over.”

“Couldn’t be better—and we made a lovely raid on our own account, as maybe you heard? Over.”

“I heard,” Ralsor agreed dryly. “Nice work by both of you. Well, see you soon as I can. Over.”

“We’ll look forward to it. How far away are you? Over.”

“About mid-way through the asteroids. I’ll——”

“Whilst you’re there,” the girl’s voice cut in, overlapping the end of Ralsor’s own communication, “try and examine some of the asteroid rock. But take great care how you do it. A small chunk blew four patrol ships into vapour when we waylaid them, so the asteroids must be made of something extremely explosive. Save you the trouble of a later examination if you do it now. But *do* be terribly careful, Ral. Over.”

“I will,” Ralsor promised. “Even though I don’t quite know what you’re talking about . . . ’bye for now.”

Wondering vaguely what the girl could have meant Ralsor switched off and then looked through the port. He was well clear of the asteroidal “minefield” and hurtling along at about half maximum velocity, using of course one of his own company’s smaller machines.

“Explosive asteroids?” he muttered, puzzled. “I don’t get it—but maybe I should look into it.”

Accordingly he began immediately to slow down his vessel’s speed, but in spite of this his velocity was sufficient to carry him well beyond the asteroids before he showed any appreciable deceleration; with the result that he had to turn back and forth until at last he had reached a comparative standstill, some hundred miles from the outermost fringe of the asteroids. Here he surveyed, finally singling out a small drifting fragment. Switching on the

attractor he drew it towards the vessel and finally, with infinite care, manoeuvred it through the vacuum tray and into the small portable laboratory.

This delicate—and, as he understood it, highly dangerous—task completed he again set the power-plant in action, swinging the nose of the machine well away from Jupiter's powerful field—and so, as the vessel hurtled onwards again on the second lap of its journey he went to work to examine the piece of meteoric rock he had managed to capture.

Experimenting with a piece the size of a pea, which he had managed to detach from the main rock by the use of a hard-rubber hammer, he very soon discovered the incredible power of disruption the substance possessed. A direct blow on the small piece volatised the steel hammer he used for the purpose and blew to pieces all the smaller instruments within a radius of a foot. The merciful thing, from Ralsor's point of view, was that he had done the "smashing" by remote control—using a piece of string over an angle bracket—otherwise his hand might easily have been blown off.

"Interesting," he muttered to himself, surveying, and then looking at the main piece, still untouched. "I don't understand it, but it's still interesting."

He also became aware of the extreme danger of having such a violently explosive piece of material in the control room. If the vessel were involved in any kind of collision and the substance became detonated by impact, nothing could save him and all around him being volatised. So he spent an hour carefully bedding the stuff down in rolls of cotton wadding from the first aid equipment, afterwards wrapping it inside two air-pillows from the bunk, and finally placing it inside shavings within a box from the storage hold. This done he felt a little safer, and because he had still a long way to go to complete his trip he gave himself up to thinking the business out.

There had to be a reason why the remains of a one time world—for such the asteroids had once been—behaved in this way. It was a problem which kept him occupied for the remainder of the journey, with the result that by the time he brought the vessel down to Rhea's steamy surface where reposed the "B.A." and Magda and Lendar waiting to welcome him, he was a deeply thoughtful man. So much so his greeting to the two in the rough base camp seemed almost perfunctory.

"Anything the matter?" Magda asked, her hazel eyes anxious. "The I.P. after you?"

"Great heavens, no!" Ralsor laughed and shook himself free of meditation. "Nothing's wrong, Mag. In fact everything may be very much right—thanks to your peculiar discovery concerning the asteroids."

"You experimented then?" Lendar enquired eagerly.

"I did—with alarming and surprising results. But we can go into that later. Right now we need a meal and an exchange of notes. How about it?"

"Everything's ready in the 'B.A.'." Magda led the way towards it and Ralsor, forgetting things scientific for the moment, watched the lithe grace with which she moved.

"I do believe Sis is putting on weight," Lendar grinned. "That's what comes of lounging around the Garden of Eden and doing nothing but eat and think."

"Weight in the right places," Ralsor murmured vaguely, conscious of the fact that now he was looking upon Magda again all the hard issues of life seemed quite inconsequential.

Within the vessel a complete meal of concentrates had been set out, and the trio wasted no time in dealing with them, Magda meanwhile telling her side of the story, with corroboration from Lendar at intervals.

“Splendid work indeed,” Ralsor approved, when he had heard everything. “That act of yours in approaching one of my vessels and then leaving it alone has been echoed from Mars and Venus and Earth, until I wonder Drolag and Cafton don’t commit suicide same as Lerab did.”

“We heard about that over the radio,” Lendar said. “Number one out of the way. But how about the other two?”

“That’s why I’m here.” Ralsor’s face was serious. “I’ve worked out how to deal with Emris Cafton, who is next in line of ‘fire’, but I was rather stumped to know what to do with Drolag. Now I think I have it—thanks to the asteroids.”

“How do you mean?” Magda’s face was puzzled.

“I mean that Valcent Drolag is engaged on the manufacture of weapons with which he intends, maybe some years hence, to make an all-out attempt at conquest of the inner Solar System; in other words, compel the inhabitants of Venus, Mars and Earth to come under his aegis. It’s no more than I expected since he has space travel in his hands and the control of all the world’s heavy armaments. All of which made him a puzzle to me when I tried to work out how to bring him to ruin. Now I think I have it . . . Have either of you worked out what the asteroid rocks are composed of?”

“Some kind of super-gelignite, I’d say,” Lendar answered, but Ralsor shook his head.

“You know better than that, Lendar. The stuff *volatizes* and sets up severe vibratory currents in the process, destroying everything within immediate range. There’s only one answer to that—atomic disintegration.”

“But atomic disintegration doesn’t occur just through impact,” Magda pointed out.

“As we understand nuclear fission, it doesn’t. But many physicists have declared that substances impregnated with atomic radiation might, over a long interval of time, achieve such a state of atomic unbalance within themselves that the merest touch would cause them to release their energy in one grand flash. And that, I think, is what happens here. Rocks taken from the region of the Bikini Atol have revealed similar characteristics, so certainly the asteroids might.”

“Mmm, sounds possible,” Lendar admitted, thinking. “But how did the asteroids get into that condition? Any ideas?”

“Only one—and it more or less conforms to astronomical belief. Namely, that the asteroids were once an entire planet between the worlds of Mars and Jupiter, and that it was populated by some highly scientific race. They possibly discovered atomic power, even as we have done on Earth, but were not so fortunate in their method of releasing it. Some vast atomic explosion occurred which blew their worlds to pieces, and because the explosion *was* atomic the pieces have taken unto themselves the atomic impregnation. Hence they are now instantly explosive under impact.”

“And what has it to do with Valcent Drolag?” Magda questioned.

“I’m going to try and find a means of making him destroy himself, and his major arms factory—which is underground. I know its exact location, but to destroy it from the air or by any other means, is virtually impossible so closely is it guarded. So the only way is to make Drolag do it himself, and maybe the piece of asteroid rock I have carefully packed away in my spaceship may do the trick . . . But that comes later. Emris Cafton is our next target, and that means another piracy raid. Obviously the I.P. will be on the watch, so we’ll have to plan carefully. First, what about times of departure from Venus? Have you been able to get them?”

Magda shook her head gloomily. “They’ve stopped issuing them—for obvious reasons.”

Ralsor smiled and drew out his wallet. “Which makes it just as well I brought a departure-arrival list with me. Nothing to stop me doing that. I wrote for one, whilst on Earth, as an ordinary citizen and got it straight away. Covers six months, and that’s all we need. Now, let see——”

“A Venus freighter this time?” Lendar questioned.

“Definitely. I want one with consignments for Emris Cafton, which will inevitably be sapphires, rubies, and other jewels intended for his precision factories. It’s probable that each load from Venus carries something for him, as it did for Lerab, though at that time Cafton wasn’t our concern.” Ralsor searched through the Pioneer timetable, and then nodded quickly. “Here we are. One due in a fortnight, from Venus, at sixteen hours, Standard Astronomical Time, and another one three days later, also at sixteen hours. That’s the way we want it. Probably both vessels will carry Cafton cargoes, but our interest is in the first one, where I’ll make a switch to crystals, as I did in the case of Lerab.”

“*If* you can get away with it this time,” Magda pointed out seriously. “I’ll wager both vessels are heavily convoyed with I.P. ships.”

“No doubt of it—which is where my scheme comes in. What I propose to do is radio to the patrols, as though it were from the *second* liner, asking for their help against pirates. They will think they are needed to augment the patrols already guarding ship number two, and they’ll leave number one unprotected. They will obviously think that if number two is being threatened, number one cannot be; and that’s when we’ll act.”

“Neat,” Lendar smiled. “Very neat. But if the patrols pick up your radio signal on the detectors and realise it hasn’t come from anywhere near ship number two, what then?”

“The call will be sent and over before they can detect it.” Ralsor gave a confident smile. “It’ll work, believe me!”

CHAPTER SIX

During the journey through space from Rhea to the predetermined spot from where Ralsor intended sending his radio S.O.S., he was busy with the vessel's radio apparatus, using also several extra components which he had taken from the machine in which he had flown from Earth. The result of his activities was a powerful hetrodyning unit which could be switched into commission at any moment it might be needed, and having a maximum radius of half a million miles. What his exact reason was for this he did not explain at the time.

The point of "rendezvous" selected lay five thousand miles from the direct Venus-Earth space line, far enough away for the "B.A." with its black coating to be completely invisible from an approaching liner; but the liner itself would be quite discernible to those within the "B.A." through the night-glasses. Distances in space, due to the absence of air, seem comparatively slight.

So the "B.A." hovered, Lendar at the controls as usual and Ralsor and the girl in their black suits, and space suits as far as the helmets. When the time came they had only to don their masks and helmets and go into action. Nearby lay a box full of Jovian crystals, variously representing sapphires, rubies, and other precious stones. Everything was ready: it remained to be seen whether once again they could pull off a raid by sheer strategy.

Evidently the Pioneer machines were running up to schedule, for approximately at the time Ralsor had calculated Magda sang out suddenly, the night-glasses to her eyes:

"Just become visible, Ral! Four convoy patrols with it— Here, take a look."

Ralsor took the glasses and surveyed the scene—invisible to the naked eye—earnestly. Though the liner-freighter and I.P. machines were only the merest glittering specks as yet, they were perfectly discernible against the starry back-drop, and gradually coming closer. At their very nearest, however, they would be 5,000 miles distant.

"Just as I'd hoped," Ralsor said, putting the glasses aside. "And according to schedule, which I hope to heaven nothing has altered, the second vessel ought to be about a thousand miles from Venus, and following in the wake of this one at a distance of some fifteen million miles. Fifteen million miles is a long hop for those I.P. boys, and most certainly it will give us all the time we need."

He turned aside to the radio equipment, tested it, and then prepared himself to wait. It was two hours before the liner-freighter reached its nearest point, upon which he sent forth a brief radio call which could not help be picked up by both the liner's operator and the men inside the four patrol ships.

"Attack imminent by pirates! Send aid! Have just left Venus and——"

Ralsor cut off and gave a taut glance at Magda and Lendar. The truncation was deliberate, in that he did not need to identify the supposed vessel from which the call had come. The information that it had just left Venus was enough. Then, with scarcely any pause, Ralsor switched in the hetrodyner and left it in action.

"Why?" Magda asked, picking up her mask.

"In case the patrols radio for more details. The actual second liner and its patrols might get the message and wonder what the blazes all the fuss is about. This hetrodyne will scramble things enough to prevent that——"

“They’re on the move!” Magda exclaimed eagerly, looking through the port. “Looks as though they’ve fallen for it.”

Ralsor nodded as he watched through the window. “Give them time to get right out of sight, and then we’ll attack. You know the routine, Len?”

“I ought to, by this time! Lendar poised his hands over the controls in readiness, but it was forty minutes before Ralsor gave it, and by this time both he and the girl were in their spacesuits, fully masked and ready for action.

“We can risk it now,” Ralsor said, through his audiophone. “Our friends of the I.P. seem to be well launched on their fifteen million mile fool’s errand.”

Lendar switched on the power and began the hurtling flight through space which by this time was all too familiar to him. Then a thought suddenly seemed to strike Magda and she turned to Ralsor quickly.

“Ral, what happens if they radio for the patrols to return?”

“They can’t with the hetrodyner on,” Ralsor answered, and, gun in hand, he moved to the airlock.

The 5,000-mile distance to the freighter-liner was nothing more than a long hop when the “B.A.” really got under way, and in less than half an hour it had entered into its full power dive and was sweeping down on the great vessel from above—until finally, with commendable precision, Lendar magnetically anchored the machine to the roof of the monster.

“Good work,” Ralsor said briefly. “Here we go.”

He opened the lock and the girl quickly followed him. As on other occasions, it was unlikely that they had been observed, due to the angle at which they had arrived. In fact it was less likely than usual since the ship’s crew must be believing that an attack was taking place fifteen million miles distant.

“You know what to do.” Ralsor’s voice reached the girl from his audiophone. “Take the main passenger saloon as usual and relieve them. I’ll lock the control room and then get the jewels switched——” and he jerked the box he had strapped to his suit-bloated back.

The girl signalled that she understood and within a moment or two they had reached the external airlock. This time they did not delay to remove their spacesuits and in consequence were soon descending to the main passageway. In fact there was nowhere else they could arrive since all the vessels were built to the same design.

Immediately they gained the floor they parted company. Ralsor had just reached the control room door as the first mate started to come through it. Instantly the mate’s hand flew to his gun but before he could snatch it out a fist of steel, encased in a massive glove, crashed straight into his face and sent him flying backwards into the midst of his colleagues. Before they could grasp what had happened the door slammed and Ralsor jammed over the external clamps.

It was as he hurtled through the passenger saloon, where Magda was deliberately at work with her gun levelled, that Ralsor received several kinds of a shock. Through his headphones, connected to his audiophone and short-wave radio apparatus, he could hear the enraged voice of the ship’s commander shouting for help. This was to be expected—but the horrifying part was that somewhere a voice was answering. It was a second or two before Ralsor realised the answering voice was coming from a patrol man.

But what of the hetrodyne wave?

“—these blasted pirates!” the ship’s commander raved. “Either there’s another party of them or else you men have been called off on a false alarm. Get back here—and quickly!”

“Immediately, sir! Seventy-two X breaking contact. We’ll be with you.”

“Damn!” Ralsor swore to himself, sweating suddenly. For the life of him he could not understand why the hetrodiner was not working; then with a cold shock it occurred to him that upon anchoring the “B.A.” to the big vessel the entire current of the power-plant would be turned over to the magnetism circuit, thereby cutting out the hetrodiner, or if not that then rendering it so weak as to be ineffectual.

That meant that everything depended on speed, and Ralsor wasted no time. He hurtled beyond the passenger saloon and to the storage hold. As usual there were two guards on duty. They heard Ralsor coming down the right-angled passage, but had no reason to suspect but what it was one of the crew—even though they had been alerted by the alarms.

When Ralsor burst upon them he did not hesitate a second: it was his life or theirs. He fired point blank at each of them, dropping them in their tracks, then just as quickly he turned his gun on the storage hold door lock and vaporised it, smashing his way into the space beyond.

Still working at desperate speed he looked around for, and found, several cases consigned to Emris Cafton. By the time he had made the necessary switch in jewels and returned the lid to the case some eight precious minutes had slipped by and the great vessel was alive with sound as members of the crew came from various directions in response to the continual ringing of the alarms.

Two men, uniformed and with guns in their hands, came down the narrow corridor as Ralsor hurried into it again from the storage hold. Instead of firing at them he threw them off focus by charging straight at them, flinging each of his mighty arms about their necks and slamming their heads together with fiendish force. This impact alone was sufficient to daze them, and the two uppercuts which followed in quick succession finished the job. Ralsor left them groaning weakly on the floor, trying to regain their battered senses.

“Quickly—out!” he yelled to Magda, as he streaked through the passenger saloon. “No time to explain.”

For that matter he did not need to, for the girl had also heard through her own headphones that danger was imminent. At Ralsor’s instruction she promptly swung round and headed out of the further door with Ralsor close behind her. In the main corridor beyond were members of the crew hurrying to investigate—until Magda, every bit as tough as Ralsor in the emergency, fired her gun and dropped the men in their tracks. After that it was only the work of seconds to clamber up the steel ladder into the air-pressure chamber and drop down the heavy lid of the inner lock.

“With a bit of luck we’ll make it,” Ralsor panted through the audiophone. “Let’s go——”

He flung up the outer lock and floated outside into the void, buoyed up by the simple process of springing himself with his feet. Magda was with him a second or two later and together they floated and clawed their way to the “B.A.” anchored some little distance away near the nose of the great liner.

Suddenly Magda stopped and looked behind her into the awful vastness of the void. She caught at Ralsor’s bulging arm.

“Ral, we’re not going to make it! Look!”

Ralsor felt his nerves tauten at the vision he saw. Out in the deeps of space four patrol machines were visible—even to the naked eye, which proved they were comparatively near as

spacial distances are reckoned. And they were becoming larger with every second.

“We just can’t get away in time, Ral,” Magda cried.

“We’re going to have a damned good try, Mag. Come on!”

As rapidly as they could they finished the distance to the “B.A.” and tumbled through the two air-locks. Lendar, his face drawn with anxiety, swung round from the control board.

“On your way!” Ralsor ordered. “Immediately!”

Lendar did not need to be told why, flinging the little machine away from the giant liner with dizzying, crushing speed.

Struggling for breath against the inertia-load Ralsor and the girl dragged themselves out of their spacesuits and pulled away their masks, then they both immediately darted to the window, to behold the four patrol machines streaking after them with exhausts flaring.

“Faster!” Ralsor insisted.

“If I do we’ll flatten out,” Lendar answered. “We’re on half maximum as it is. Besides, I daren’t build up speed at that rate. Our jets might crack under the temperature increase.”

“Yes, that’s possible.” Ralsor’s face became grim for a moment, then as he watched the four patrols slowly gaining, chiefly because they were already fully warmed up from the travelling they had been doing, he came to a decision.

“Definitely we’re not going to make it this time,” he said quickly. “So there’s got to be a way around it—and I think there is. I take it you’re both prepared to trust me, no matter how I speak and act?”

“Naturally,” Magda responded, and her brother nodded.

“Right.” Ralsor began moving rapidly. He picked up the box he had brought in with him and deposited it in the storage hold; then he put the two spacesuits into the locker. This done he found a piece of strong cord and gave it to the surprised Magda.

“Tie my wrists behind me,” he ordered.

“But—but, Ral, why should——”

“Hurry up, Mag! They’re nearly upon us. I am the captive of you two. That’s the angle I’m going to play. Quick, now!”

Magda did as she was told, then Ralsor gave a final direction.

“Lendar, put one of the hood masks on. That should lend the finishing touch. Fortunately the matter of the case of jewels doesn’t signify because the patrol don’t know about that—— Right, slacken off. They’re upon us. Better to do as they order than risk getting the ‘B.A.’ blown to bits.”

Lendar looked gloomily through the port as he cut off the power-plant. The nearest of the patrol vessels was flashing its “STOP!” order as it came up alongside. Before long air-lock had been sealed to air-lock, and then the commander of the leading vessel, accompanied by two of his officers, came into view.

In a glance he weighed up the situation—or imagined he did. Ralsor, his wrists firmly bound behind him and his face grim; Lendar, his head and face hooded, at the control board, and Magda just standing in troubled expectancy. The effect was just as Ralsor had hoped it would be.

“Glad you caught up, officer,” he said, moving forward. “If you’d free my wrists I’d be obliged.”

“Mister Bral, isn’t it, of the Zenith Spaceways?” The commander motioned to one of his men and Ralsor found his cord cut away.

“That’s right. Though I’m head of a rival spaceway I’m obliged to you for your help——”

“The Interplanetary Patrol is an independent body, Mister Bral, even though originated by the Pioneer Corporation. Our job is to keep law and order. I’m Commander Briscoe.”

Bral inclined his head briefly. “To you, then, Commander, will go the honour of capturing these two renegades who have so long been attacking the Pioneer Spaceway.”

Commander Briscoe looked intently at Magda and then frowned a little.

“Something about your face, young woman, which is familiar. Who are you?”

“Magda Sneed,” Ralsor answered, as the girl hesitated. “And this man in the hood is her brother Lendar. They’re the ones who have been calling themselves the Black Avengers.”

“Off with your mask!” Briscoe snapped, and Lendar obeyed. He gave his sister a glance, as though he did not quite know how to take Ralsor’s behaviour.

“Something here I don’t understand,” Briscoe continued, his sharp eyes pinning Ralsor again. “We men of the I.P. were given to understand that the pirates were from Andromeda, with peculiar eyes only able to see in a fixed wavelength—yet now we find they are Earth people. Not only that but the son and daughter of the late Razlon Sneed who was a big power in the Pioneer Corporation before its reorganisation . . . What’s the explanation?”

“There can only be one,” Ralsor answered calmly. “There must be more than one lot of pirates—those who are from Andromeda, whom I encountered some months ago and learned about their visual wavelength; and these two here, who perhaps are trying to cash in on what the Andromedians have done. In any event this is a case of two simultaneous attacks. I believe another vessel was attacked some way from Venus, or so I heard over the radio equipment here. You went to rescue it, didn’t you?”

“And we were called back here,” Briscoe said. “What reason would these two have for behaving as pirates?”

“The obvious one that their father died, so they believe, because of the machinations of the present heads of the Pioneer. But all this is trivial,” Ralsor went on impatiently. “These two abducted me as I was on my way to investigate the outer planets. I have been their prisoner ever since and my spaceship was destroyed. Thank heaven you caught up with them.”

“Are you two the Black Avengers or not?” Briscoe demanded. “We know you attacked the ship back there.”

Lendar caught an almost imperceptible nod from Ralsor.

“We are the Black Avengers, yes,” he answered briefly. “And we did capture Mister Bral here. We thought he might prove a useful hostage later.”

“That’s enough for me. Start driving this vessel back to Earth . . .”

“I don’t think that is a wise proposition,” Ralsor remarked. “There is a very powerful plant in this machine and it could slip away from you.”

Briscoe smiled tautly. “I think not, Mister Bral. We shall stay here in the vessel until the journey is completed. There will be no false moves, believe me.” He moved briskly to the radio and switched it on. “Mister Marsden? Withdraw the machines and investigate that call from Venusian freighter in distress. We will be staying aboard this vessel to direct it to Earth.”

“Instructions received and will be carried out.”

Briscoe switched off and gave the necessary orders for the air-locks on both vessels to be closed. Once this was done the four patrol machines began to move away, leaving the “B.A.” still drifting at comparative anchor.

“For the sake of precaution I will drive this vessel myself,” Briscoe stated. “I assume there is nothing particularly complicated about the controls?”

“Nothing,” Lendar replied sullenly, rising from the switchboard. “These switches here”—he indicated them—“are linked to the power plant. And this set here controls the jets.”

Briscoe nodded and seated himself. For a moment or two he sat surveying the board whilst his two colleagues took up positions at either end of the control room where they could keep an omniscient eye on everything.

Ralsor turned aside, deliberately expressing contempt for Lendar and Magda as they drifted together. They looked at one another vaguely, wondering exactly how Ralsor was going to get out of the predicament.

“Yes, simple enough!” Commander Briscoe finished his detailed examination and advanced the power lever by one notch. The “B.A.” immediately got on the move and, in fifteen minutes, the course had been set directly for Earth. This done, Briscoe relaxed a little and aimed a glance at the lounging Ralsor as he lounged beside the main outlook port.

“How have these two renegades treated you, Mr. Bral?” he asked.

“Fairly enough.” Ralsor turned. “They would hardly do anything else, having me in mind as a hostage. The only reason I was tied up was to incapacitate me whilst they attacked that liner.”

“Mmmm.” Briscoe compressed his lips and seemed to be thinking of something as he surveyed the switchboard. After a moment or two he spoke his mind. “With all deference, Mister Bral, I am still finding it difficult to reconcile the Black Avengers with these two young people here. Nor does it tie up convincingly with your own widely spread story of attackers from Andromeda.”

Ralsor shrugged as Magda and Lendar gave apprehensive glances, sensing as they did that at any moment Ralsor might find himself completely entangled.

“I have given you the facts, Commander, as far as I can work them out,” Ralsor answered, entirely calm.

That Briscoe was still dissatisfied was obvious, but he did not press the matter, probably because he realised the limits of his authority. A matter like this was one for the jurisdiction of the Interplanetary Court. Not that Ralsor cared whether his story sounded convincing or not: he had a plan in mind which, if it worked—as it must—would prevent the Commander or his colleagues from ever saying a word.

“I think,” Briscoe said at length, “we can increase our speed. I assume you will all be able to stand the acceleration?”

Magda and Lendar did not respond. Ralsor merely smiled.

“I can assure you, Commander, that the strength I have gained from constant inertias and space travel makes me capable of standing ten times this load.”

Briscoe eyed him for a second and then advanced the speed lever. The machine noticeably jolted to a higher acceleration. Briscoe got to his feet and snapped in the automatic control.

“You lay claim to considerable strength then, Mister Bral?” he asked, becoming cordial again.

“I do.”

“It occurs to me, since we have quite a long and tedious trip ahead of us that we might improve it by a little exercise.” Briscoe pulled off his uniform jacket and tossed it on one side. “In the matter of relative strengths, for instance.”

Ralsor smiled again. The Commander, in his shirt, was a heavily muscled, powerfully built man—as indeed he had to be in his calling—and Ralsor had guessed correctly in that he was

the kind of man who could not tolerate the thought of any other man boasting of superior muscular power.

“Socially,” Briscoe said, “you and I are completely apart, Mister Bral. I am the first to admit it—but if you would care to forget that in a little friendly bout it might liven things up a little.”

“Willingly.” Ralsor straightened up and zipped off the grey wind-cheater he was wearing. He muttered inward thanks that neither he nor Magda had taken time to put on their usual black uniforms before the recent raid, otherwise the deception would have been harder to explain than it was already.

“You men keep alert,” Briscoe snapped, glancing at his colleagues. “This is only a friendly bout——”

“Chiefly because you resent any man daring to proclaim himself extremely strong?” Ralsor asked dryly. “I am ready when you are, Commander.”

The savagery of the blow Briscoe lashed out seemed to suggest he had chosen this method to give vent to his real feelings. That he did not trust Ralsor was obvious: yet on the other hand he dare not say too much in case he were in the wrong. In this departure he could take it out of Ralsor’s hide under the guise of a “friendly bout”—or at least that was his intention. What he did not perceive was that Ralsor’s psychology alone had brought about the fight—with very definite reason.

Briscoe’s uppercut, terrific though it was, missed its mark and he stumbled forward. He was saved from overbalancing frontwards by a stinger under the chin. It straightened him but did not overbalance him. Dazed, hurt, he stared at Ralsor’s smiling face.

“You were a little precipitate, my friend,” Ralsor explained amiably.

The Commander’s face hardened. He clenched his fists again but before using them he made sure his two comrades were still alert and that Magda and Lendar were not up to any mischief. They were in fact watching the bout in silent wonder, trying to fathom why Ralsor had ever agreed to it in the first place.

Then again Briscoe sailed in to attack. Ralsor dodged, but withal took a blow in the chest which staggered him a little. He recovered instantly, brought up his left with the apparent intention of landing a blow to the jaw—but with split-second timing he abruptly dropped his left and smashed round his right. Briscoe, who had jerked his head to one side, received the full impact of that right-hander straight in the face. He reeled backwards and hit the wall, shaking his head dully. Behind that punch had been all the power of Ralsor’s Jovian-built muscles, and Briscoe had little doubt any more as to which man was the stronger.

None the less his grinning comrades spurred him into action again. He hurtled forward and whipped up a haymaker. Ralsor missed defending it and spun round as it clipped him on the side of the jaw. He half fell across the switchboard, and in those seconds he did all he needed—cut out the automatic control and dragged the speed lever to maximum.

The result was exactly as he had expected. The “B.A.” suddenly surged from moderate speed to maximum velocity, the jets being warmed up to take the sudden extra discharge. Automatically the gravity-load doubled, trebled, and quadrupled. Briscoe, already badly shaken from the punch he had received, collapsed helplessly. Lendar and Magda staggered towards the wall bunks but could not quite make it before the appalling load forced them down to the floor.

The two remaining officers, who obviously thought the whole thing was accidental and not deliberately planned, made no effort to use their weapons in reprisal. Instead they dropped

them and doubled up slowly, fighting for breath. Then, with gradually purpling features, they too collapsed and all their struggles to rise again were completely futile.

Ralsor, hanging on to the switches, stirred very gradually as he saw the last man go down. Even his iron strength was being taxed to the uttermost by the tremendous velocity at which the "B.A." was streaking into the void. Nevertheless, his ruse had worked—and that was all that mattered. Had there been any actual danger of death to Magda and her brother he would not have taken such a chance—but as he well knew the unconsciousness of inertia was only caused by the pressure on the chest muscles, preventing the lungs and heart from functioning to their fullest capacity.

Inch by inch Ralsor moved, his face wet with the perspiration of his efforts. By very slow degrees he managed to get into a space-suit and screwed the helmet in place. Then, still labouring under the tremendous load, he rolled each of the three officers along the floor and out into the chamber between the inner and outer air-locks.

The moment he opened the outer air-lock the air pressure in the chamber—sealed off from the control room—blasted all three bodies out into space. It nearly carried him with it but, being prepared, he stopped himself with a gloved hand on either side of the air-lock rim.

It was murder. No doubt about that—but the time had gone, so Ralsor considered, when he could afford to discriminate. Return to Earth, with Magda and her brother in the grip of the Interplanetary Court, and himself subjected to merciless cross-questioning, would undoubtedly have meant death . . . So he considered he was justified.

For a long moment he watched the bloated corpses floating along with the ship, chained by its attraction; then he closed the outer lock and returned into the control room, shutting the inner lock behind him. In a matter of fifteen minutes he had rid himself of his space-suit, slowed the "B.A." down to normal, and revived Lendar and the girl.

They looked about them in amazement as they discovered the three I.P. men were missing.

"They're floating along outside," Ralsor said briefly. "I did the only thing possible . . ." and he added the details.

"And was that sudden acceleration deliberate?" Magda asked.

"Certainly it was. There was no other way to do it except by apparently falling on the switchboard by accident—hence the build-up to having a fight with Briscoe . . ."

Ralsor gazed outside for a moment or two and then added, "We got out of that difficulty by the skin of our teeth, but we may never be so lucky again. Call off all attacks for the time being. I'll tell you when."

"But—where are you going?" Lendar looked puzzled. "You'll be returning to Rhea with us, won't you?"

"To pick up my piece of asteroid rock—and bury these bodies which will come along with us. After that I'm returning to Earth in the same vessel in which I journeyed from it. When I get back I'll say you two turned on the guards and murdered them but that I managed to escape when you went to your base on Ganymede. That may set the remaining I.P. men searching Ganymede for you—but since you won't be there it doesn't matter."

"I don't like the idea of us being called murderers," Magda said anxiously. "How do we fare if things ever get straightened out and we can return home?"

"Nothing to worry about. Nobody except those three dead men has ever seen you, so nobody can say who the Black Avengers really are . . . As for me," Ralsor finished, "I'm returning to Earth to deal with Emris Cafton—and finally Valcent Drolag. You two must stay

on Rhea and wait for me. Better change the course, Lendar. We're thousands of miles off it after that dash."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was a month later when Ralsor returned to Earth, and purely for the sake of appearances—for he knew the other I.P. men must have sent in their reports—he visited the headquarters of the Interplanetary Patrol to commence with and reported his experiences, sticking to the tale he had outlined to Magda and Lendar, both of them safe on far away Rhea. This done, and it not signifying whether he was believed or not, since nobody could ever prove otherwise, he returned to his own headquarters at the Zenith Spaceways, to discover that in the interval business had boomed considerably, with a corresponding drop in the passenger lists for the Pioneer Corporation.

“In fact, Mister Bral,” his manager told him, “I shouldn’t be surprised if Pioneer don’t come forward soon with another offer of a merger.”

“If they do they’ll be wasting their time,” Ralsor shrugged. “I want absolute control—or nothing, though I haven’t given them those terms yet.”

To which the manager had nothing more to say. Ralsor spent a couple of days checking over details with him, and speaking somewhat vaguely of the possibilities of outer-space exploration tours in the region of the giant planets—then he turned to the more vital matters of his own plan of revenge. The first move he made was to ’phone Emris Cafton and ask him to come over. As he had expected, Cafton promptly agreed, probably thinking that something was going to be done to save the ebbing fortunes of the Pioneer Corporation. He soon discovered differently.

“Kind of you to come, Mister Cafton,” Ralsor greeted, shaking the bony hand. “I rather thought the recollection of our last interview might have prevented you.”

“I live only for the present,” the tycoon replied evasively, seating himself. “Obviously you are willing to talk business otherwise you wouldn’t have contacted me.”

“Business yes, but I should make it clear right at the start that it has nothing to do with our rival spaceline companies.”

Cafton’s eyebrows rose. “No? Then what *can* you possibly want with me? We have nothing else in common.”

“In this instance I think we have,” Ralsor smiled, settling in his swivel-chair. “Namely, precious stones. As you well know, I am a dealer in diamonds, but not in any *other* kind of stone. And, much though I hate to admit it, you have the monopoly of the cheaper kind of gems used in precision instruments.”

“So you’ve found that out?” Cafton asked cynically.

“I have.” Ralsor gave a sigh. “So far, the spaceships I have in my fleet have all been fitted with instruments for which there was no shortage of the necessary gems for the more sensitive parts. But now I plan to add further instruments—in the light of recent discoveries I have made concerning space radiations—and I require a considerable quantity of sapphires and rubies. The Cafton Organisation seems to be the only one which can provide what I require.”

“How unfortunate for you, Mister Bral!”

“There is no reason why it should be. To whom do you owe the most loyalty? Yourself or the Pioneer Corporation?”

“I don’t understand,” Cafton said, puzzled.

“I mean you can name your own figure for the gems I need—and I’ll gladly pay it. Or you can turn the deal down and do the Pioneer Corporation a good turn by preventing me from using more up to date instruments than I am now. To try and hold me out from getting the required jewels won’t do you any good in the long run, Cafton, because I’ll find some other method in time . . . So, what about it?”

“What are your exact requirements?”

For answer Ralsor pushed a memo across the desk upon which he had listed the details. The gems king studied it carefully and then whistled.

“Evidently you are a man of considerable wealth, Mister Bral—or else you don’t realise how much these items will cost. I’ll make a deal with you—for five-hundred-thousand pounds.”

“And drive another nail in the Pioneer coffin. Very well, I’m agreeable.”

For a moment or two Cafton did not speak: he seemed profoundly surprised that the figure he had named had been so calmly accepted. He might have understood it better if he had known that the gems stolen from his cargo, and replaced with crystal, were worth some £800,000 on the commercial market.

“All that is needed is for you to make the necessary arrangements to have the jewels delivered to me—here,” Ralsor said. “When that is done I will give you my cheque. Agreed?”

“I would prefer half the amount now to confirm the deal.”

Ralsor gave a wry smile, opened one of the desk drawers, and wrote out the necessary cheque for £250,000. Then, when the gems king had taken his departure, Ralsor picked up the telephone and spoke on the private line.

“Walsh? Bral speaking. Continue with that experimental space machine . . . You have the remote control switchboard completed?”

“Exactly to your design, Mister Bral.”

“Good. You’ll hear from me later. Make a good job of those dummy instruments.”

“You can be sure of that, sir!” And there was a laugh from the astro-engineer at the other end of the line.

Ralsor smiled to himself and switched off. For the moment everything was as he wanted it. The next thing needed was the delivery of the required gems. In the meantime he had a good deal of enquiry to make. He made it through various secret channels and at the end of a week had discovered that the recent cargo of gems assigned to Emris Cafton had been disposed of to various precision-instrument manufacturers, most of them under Cafton’s own aegis. Which automatically meant that many firms would discover, in time, that some of their instruments were totally useless, thanks to faulty gems in the works. This fact, when revealed, would put Cafton in pretty much the same bad odour as it had put the late Harving Lerab. A final master move would finish things completely, towards which Ralsor was relentlessly working.

In the meantime he had the destinies of his Zenith Spaceways to guide, and it was beyond doubt now that Zenith was rapidly winning the affection of the space-travelling public at large. By this time practically everybody knew that Zenith spelt safety from piracy, and on the opposite end of the seesaw Cafton and Valcent Drolag fought their losing battle, knowing that sooner or later they must sell out, force a merger somehow, or else crash in bankruptcy . . . Emris Cafton, indeed, already seeing the red light, was quietly making his plans to withdraw from the Pioneer Corporation altogether and devote himself to his immense gem and precision-instrument organisations.

But the claw of Dayton Ralsor tightened inexorably. The moment the gems king had the required jewels delivered Ralsor had them examined by his experts. Out of some three-hundred-and-fifty gems they found forty-seven were crystal. These Ralsor singled out and sent to Walsh for fitting into dummy instruments.

Then, by every conceivable means of publicity, Ralsor announced that his test space-pilots were to try out a new machine, fitted with special detecting instruments which would make space-flying much simpler and safer. Thanks to the “generosity” of Emris Cafton in granting him special jewels needed for the instruments this test had become possible . . . From which point the public was guided and reminded constantly, and finally given the date of the test flight. Thousands saw the queerly designed machine dart up from the Zenith space-grounds, but none knew that no pilots were inside it. The whole experiment was a masterpiece in remote radio control handled from a special region in Ralsor’s experimental laboratories where he himself was supervising the whole business.

The one man who took a dim view of the affair was Valcent Drolag, and his accustomed painted smile was absent from his moonlike face as he upbraided the gems king for his “stab in the back”.

“What kind of a partner are you supposed to be?” Drolag paced angrily up and down the main Pioneer private office on the morning of Zenith’s experimental test. “You literally hand to our rival everything he needs to improve his service! Damn it man, isn’t it enough that we’re already on a hopeless downhill slide without you giving us a push as well?”

Cafton’s thin face had no expression. “I’d be a fool to turn down a small fortune for the sake of a doomed Corporation,” he replied briefly. “When I gave Bral the gems he needed—for a figure out of all proportion to their value—I wasn’t thinking so much of helping him as of helping myself. And there isn’t a thing you can do about it!”

“You think not? I’m going to call an emergency meeting of the Board and have your behaviour placed before it. Unless I’m very much mistaken you’ll be told to resign.”

Cafton shrugged. “You can save yourself that trouble, Drolag. Here is my resignation, ready written. Hand it to the Board as and when you choose. My lawyer is attending to my financial holding in the Corporation and you can regard my personal contact with the Corporation as ceasing from this moment.”

With that Cafton left the office and closed the door. He had known full well that this moment would have to come—and it had. But in walking out of one trouble-spot he plunged headlong into another, some six hours after leaving the Pioneer Corporation building.

He did not immediately realise that he was in any way connected with the news which burst upon the public that evening—the news that the test space machine of the Zenith Company had crashed after reaching five-thousand miles from Earth. It was only after a week of investigation by experts—entirely neutral without any axe to grind with either Zenith or Pioneer—that Cafton comprehended that he was in a particularly nasty position. In short he was being publicly blamed by Arnos Bral for the failure of the test machine to make the grade.

Before the actual legal action took place Cafton knew the facts. The machine had failed because, according to the experts who had examined the wreck of the machine when it had crashed back to Earth, the instruments had been fitted with faulty—indeed spurious—gems. Because of that they had not only failed to function under extreme test, but “brave men had lost their lives.” Since the smash had been absolute no traces of the crew were discovered. This was considered quite natural. That there had never been any men in the ship at all was known only to Ralsor and those who had handled the remote control.

Swindling and murder were the major charges against Cafton, and in face of the evidence there was little he could do about it. It was particularly damning for him that also about this time various firms in the precision instrument field, checking their own equipment which had been fitted with Cafton's latest delivery of gems, were also found to be faulty. In a matter of a month Emris Cafton found seven firms were suing him for breach of contract, swindling, extortion, and sundry other charges—and on top of them all was Ralsor's own direct charge of murder.

Cafton's lawyer did his best, but he was not a miracle man. Before he could escape the gems king found himself under arrest and before long he was brought to trial. What few chances he stood were mercilessly slashed away by constant accusations to the effect that he had deliberately sold faulty gems to the Zenith Spaceways to bring it into disgrace, and thereby try and revive the failing fortunes of the Pioneer Corporation. The fact that he had resigned from the Pioneer Corporation did not make any difference: he could have done that to put himself in a proper light. The fact remained he had stayed with the Pioneer Corporation for quite a time *after* selling the spurious gems to Amos Bral.

The trial was a long one, lasting over several days as first one side and then the other argued the matter to shreds—but the inescapable fact remained that “murder” had been done through the agency of the spurious gems—and many other ships might also have gone to destruction, both maritime and spaceships, but for the various precision engineers making a check-up.

As the law had been mercilessly impartial with Dayton Ralsor, so it was with Emris Cafton. The jury found him guilty and Judge Montrose, presiding as usual over the court, pronounced the sentence.

“You have heard the case against you, Emris Cafton. You have been accused and defended, and pronounced guilty by a sane and just quorum of your fellow Earthmen. It remains only for me to direct that you be removed to the penitentiary on the planet Jupiter, there to work out the remainder of your natural existence, banished from the society of those you sought to deceive. If you have anything to say, say it now. The law gives you twelve seconds in which to voice an utterance.”

Cafton remained silent, white-faced and grim, and in the front row of spectators Ralsor smiled bitterly to himself recalling a far-gone day when he had heard those self-same words addressed to himself.

This had been well worth waiting for.

CHAPTER EIGHT

After the disappearance of Emris Cafton from the commercial scheme of things there was calm for a few weeks, both on Earth and in the spaceways. The Pioneer machines were not attacked by pirates—nor of course were the machines of the steadily growing Zenith Company, but the fact remained that “once bitten, twice shy”, and the public in general drifted towards the Zenith Company for preference.

Ralsor, with another blare of trumpets, launched a second test projectile, purely for the sake of appearances, and proclaimed it a success. It would, he said, open up the way to the hazardous outer planets where conflicting gravities demanded special instruments, which the Pioneer Corporation did not possess. This ripe plum tempted the space explorers and accordingly Ralsor gained even more converts to his space line.

Without a doubt things had reached saturation point, as far as Pioneer was concerned. Valcent Drolag well knew it when he came to examine the latest receipts. There were only two alternatives now—bankruptcy, or amalgamation with Zenith, and of this latter possibility Drolag had profound doubts. Nevertheless he was a drowning man clutching at a straw so, his cap metaphorically in his hand, he asked for an interview with “Arnos Bral” and was granted it. Ralsor knew it would have to come some time so he was entirely ready for it.

“I frankly admit,” Drolag said, sitting down, “that I am here to throw myself on your mercy, Mister Bral. Which is a most unpleasant position for me.”

“In other words your Pioneer Corporation is on its last legs and you wish to know what I propose to do about it?”

“Exactly.”

Ralsor settled in his swivel-chair and pushed across the cigarettes.

“And are you here to make terms on your own behalf, or are you acting as spokesman for the Pioneer Corporation?”

“I’m here as Governing Director of Pioneer, willing to listen to any reasonable offer you may make. You know the extent of our line, the ships we have, the business we do—or used to do. You have set your face solidly against a merger up to now, but I still hope you may have changed your view.”

“No, I have not.” Ralsor shook his head. “The only negotiation I will consider is outright purchase of Pioneer—lock, stock, and barrel.”

Drolag’s genial expression faded. “Outright purchase! The idea’s preposterous!”

“No idea’s preposterous when you’re on the rocks, Drolag.” And as the tycoon remained grimly silent Ralsor added, “No use brooding over it, Drolag. Either you sell or go bankrupt. And as a business man I know what your answer to that will be.”

“There are too many issues involved for me to consider outright sale,” Drolag insisted.

“Such as the domination of the Solar System?” Ralsor suggested quietly, and his expression did not change as Drolag gave a start.

“Confound it man, what the devil are you talking about?”

“Nothing to be gained by trying to hide it, Drolag. I know all about you—even to your most secret plans. You plan the domination of the Solar System, and for that purpose you have an immense armament concern hidden away in the Midlands, deep underground.”

“And well guarded,” Drolag snapped. “You’d find that out if you ever tried to enter it.”

“I have no intention of trying to do any such thing—and indeed I don’t blame you for having such high ambitions. They are almost parallel with my own.”

“Really?” Drolag’s manner changed slightly: he became obviously more conciliatory. “In that case you will perceive why I must retain my hold on the Pioneer Line. It is my one means of covering up my real aims. With the Line in action I can go anywhere and do almost anything—apparently legitimately—and no questions asked.”

“You can still do that even if you make yourself a partner with me.” Ralsor leaned forward intently. “I am suggesting, Mr. Drolag, that we make the conquest of the System a joint affair. We are both men of ambition, both unhindered by sentiment, and both wealthy and wielding considerable power. The one difference between us is that I have a thriving space line as a cover-up for activities, whereas yours is collapsing. If you are willing to sell Pioneer to me, whereby I control *all* space travel, I am willing you should be my private partner in a plan to master the System.”

Drolag reflected for a long time, then gradually he began to look suspicious.

“A man who aims at the conquest of the System—or for that matter the conquest of *anything*—has no need to cut in another man as partner, Mister Bral.”

“I disagree, when the project is so vast. A general has very great need of his lieutenants, and one in particular whom he can leave in charge when the occasion demands it.”

“Which means that I would be virtually under your dictates?”

“Certainly. Since I own the space line I consider I have the authority. I would make our partnership legal, granting to you forty-nine per cent of whatever our campaign against the Solar System yields—be it in jewels, valuable minerals, parts of planets, or even living creatures.”

“Forty-nine per cent! Very kind of you! That gives you the controlling power, with fifty-one.”

Ralsor shrugged. “Up to you. It’s that or bankruptcy.”

“You’ll give me time to think about it?”

“Twenty-four hours—which will permit you to consult your Board of Directors.”

Drolag nodded thoughtfully and got to his feet. He was still preoccupied as he shook hands and departed, leaving Ralsor smiling to himself. He knew pretty well what the answer would be. A man of Valcent Drolag’s ambitions could not afford to turn down this last chance of achieving at least some of them.

Nor did he. Before the twenty-four hours were up he announced that the Pioneer Corporation had agreed to sell out—or, as was more likely, had been *told* to, by him—and that all was ready for the necessary legal technicalities. Ralsor’s reaction was to stay long enough to check the terms of the draft transfer, and arrange the figure for outright purchase—then whilst the law pursued its pedantic way towards making the sale complete he took the opportunity of flying to Rhea, once again with advance publicity about making an exploratory tour of the outer planets, and thereby foxing the Interplanetary Patrol. He also made a private note that at the earliest opportunity he would have the Interplanetary Patrol reorganised, or else dissolved altogether.

On the journey to the Saturnian satellite he encountered nothing untoward and found both Magda and Lendar in their usual haunt in the forest—the “B.A.” nearby. Judging from the vegetation which had grown up around its bellying base it had not been used for some time.

Warned of Ralsor’s coming by radio the girl and her brother were waiting eagerly to greet him as he stepped from the air-lock—nor was it entirely by accident that he held Magda’s

hand-grip far longer than was necessary. Every time he saw her she had the same effect upon him, and when he was away from her he felt curiously, utterly alone.

“Is it true, Ral?” Magda asked him quickly, her eyes bright, as she led the way to the spaceship for the usual confab.

“True?” Ralsor looked surprised. “Is what true?”

“Why, about your buying up Pioneer! We heard the details over the radio and it seems you’ve made Valcent Drolag consign everything to you.”

“As good as, yes,” Ralsor smiled. “The agreement will be there for signing when we get back home. To me it represents nearly the end of the road. I’ve broken the Pioneer Corporation and forced them to give me—for a sum I shall never miss—everything they stole. I’m human enough to admit that revenge can be very sweet sometimes.”

“Did you say ‘when *we* get back home’?” Lendar questioned.

“I did.” Ralsor followed Magda into the spaceship. “That’s one of the reasons I’m here—to tell you to pack up the piracy and come back home as yourselves. Nothing to stop you. The whole plan of vengeance has about worked itself out.”

“Sure?” Magda questioned seriously, settling at the table. “I thought you were going to square accounts with Drolag, just as you did with Emris Cafton? We heard about that over the radio, too.”

“I *am* going to square things with Drolag; have no fear of that.” Ralsor’s face was grim. “He already knows that I am aware of his secret armament organisation—and that is my stepping stone towards making him test that chunk of asteroid rock, and so—I trust—blow himself and his concern to bits. That’s the final part of the plan. I have the rock nicely packed away into its shockproof box in my private safe back home . . . However, that is my part of the business. Yours is to return home with me, leaving the ‘B.A.’ here until such time as we decide to redeem it. You can come back quite safely: nobody knows you are the ‘Avengers’—those who did are dead. It’s my intention to cut you in as directors, of course, on the Zenith-Pioneer Spaceways.”

“Which sounds like the joys of the earlier days returning!” Lendar looked at his sister eagerly. “Remember them, Sis, when dad was alive? All the money we needed, and one long round of pleasure and unlimited cash for the pair of us.”

“I remember,” Magda conceded gravely. “But when we get back to Earth it’s going to be something very different to the old wine, women and song routine you used to pursue, Len. As I see it there’ll be plenty of work to be done, eh, Ral?”

“Without a doubt,” he agreed, “but that needn’t stop you enjoying yourselves for a while. You’ve both earned it, after the dangers and the enforced isolation on this satellite you’ve had to endure. Also later on we must make the necessary moves to return the property we temporarily stole from the spaceship passengers. Needless to say it will be done anonymously.”

The two nodded and waited for the next remark; but apparently Ralsor had nothing further to add—so after a meal and a rest the girl and her brother collected together the few things they wanted and then, dressed in normal space attire with no trace of their “Black Avenger” outfits about them, they entered Ralsor’s spaceship in readiness for the return journey. It was as she clamped shut the air-lock that a thought occurred to Magda and she turned quickly to where Ralsor was settling at the switchboard.

“Ral, how are you going to explain away our coming home with you when you’re supposed to be exploring the region of the outer planets alone?”

“We’ll get around that as we’ve done before, Mag. Land by night and then separate. You can go to your own home—I suppose you still possess it?”

“Fortunately, yes,” Lendar responded. “We couldn’t find a buyer for it; it’s so old-fashioned.”

“All to the good. You’ll be better able to sort yourselves out at home than in an hotel, and far less questions asked. You’ll go there and I’ll go to my own place. Later we’ll meet. I’ll advise you when the coast is clear.”

With that Ralsor moved the power-switches and started his space machine into the void. Thereafter followed the same old routine, and the only vessels seen in the void were those owned by Ralsor’s own Zenith Line. The Pioneer Corporation was definitely defunct, only awaiting incorporation upon Ralsor’s return to Earth.

He attended to the details quickly enough upon resuming his duties, saying but little about his space activities. Since there was nobody who could press him to give a detailed account of his actions he was perfectly safe, and knew it . . . His most persistent caller was Valcent Drolag, anxious to know all the details concerning the projected conquest of the Solar System—but for the time being Ralsor did not satisfy him. He was too busy rearranging his greatly augmented fleet of space machines and getting them converted to Zenith’s high standard.

During this time Magda and Lendar had no calls upon them either, so it was entirely natural that they should drift back to the haunts and ways they had pursued before deciding to depart to the Rheaian Garden of Eden. Financially they were no longer embarrassed: Ralsor had seen to that—so Magda went back amongst her intellectual friends, with only a vague explanation of where she had been in the interval; whilst Lendar, always the more flippant-minded of the two, resumed his position as a city playboy, concerned only with a good time and the full enjoyment of youth whilst it lasted.

There came an occasion, however, when he overdid it. The persistent questioning of his empty-headed friends as to where he had been “keeping himself” for so many long months finally broke down his barrier of silence, yet it would never have happened had he not been drinking too heavily of Venusian liqueurs.

“Where’ve I bin?” he repeated, as a red-head kept firing her broadsides at him. “You’d cert’ly be mighty surprised if I tol’ you, m’dear!”

“All right, Len, give me a surprise,” the red-head urged, twining a gentle arm about his shoulders. “You’re not going to hold out on your girl-friend, are you?”

Lendar grinned vacantly. “You’re not my only gi’l frien’, m’dear—but jush to show there’s no ill feelin’ I’ll tell you I’ve—hup! pardon me—I’ve bin a pirate! An’ so has Sis! Robbin’ people right an’ left to get some money again. I’ll bet that surprises you!”

The red-head laughed shortly, even though there was surprise in her eyes. She glanced at the others lounging around the chromium-plated bar of the exclusive night-spot.

“You, a pirate? A hold-up man along with Maggie?” one of the other women exclaimed. “It just couldn’t be!”

“I tell you it is!” Lendar nearly shouted, nettled. “Both of us! Don’t you remember the— the shoutin’ an’ fuss over the ‘Black Avengers’ attacking—hup—the Pioneer Line? That was Sis an’ me . . . an’ another fellow.”

“What other fellow?” the red-head demanded.

Lendar raised an unsteady finger and closed one eye.

“S’posed to be a secret—but since we’re all friends I’ll tell you . . . Hup! Re-remember Dayton Ralsor?”

“Certainly we do,” one of the group replied, puzzled. “He was the former head of Pioneer, wasn’t he? Squandered the takings, or something, and got himself sent to Jupiter for the rest of his natural.”

Lendar grinned and turned to the waiter behind the bar. “Same again all roun’, Johnny.”

The waiter did not seem to take things in for a moment; then with a start he apoloigised and followed out instructions.

“Dayton Ralsor didn’t stay long on Jupiter,” Lendar continued, thoroughly enjoying the centre of attention. “He got ’way, same as any sane man would. An’ now he’s . . . Well, who’d you think?”

“We’re not good guessers, Len,” the red-head said, twining herself still closer to him. “You’re not going to hold out on the most important point of all, are you?”

“Not f’r all the money an’ gems in the System,” Lendar grinned, hugging her. “Dayton Ralsor is Arnos Bral, the Govern’g Director of the Zenith Line.”

The waiter dropped a tumbler in the dead silence which followed, and then he gave an apologetic grin.

“Sorry, folks. Time the scientists invented unbreakable tumblers as well as spaceships!”

“Arnos Bral is *Ralsor!*” the red-head exclaimed at last, blankly. “Len, you’re more tight than you look!”

“I’m not tight, m’dear. ’Sfact, believe me!”

None of the party did, apparently, but there was another beside the party—and the following morning early Valcent Drolag found a trim, undersized man being shown in to him as he sat at breakfast.

“What is it, Johnny?” the tycoon asked briefly. “I don’t like being put off my breakfast.”

Judging from the deliberate way Drolag was polishing off a thick rasher of ham and two eggs this struck the night-club waiter as somewhat off the beam.

“Picked up a bit of news last night, Mister Drolag, so I thought I’d justify being on your private payroll.”

“Nice of you,” Drolag sneered. “I might add that it’s about time. I’ve had you and several other boys planted in that night-spot of mine for several years now, but I’ll be damned if any of you have justified your existence . . . What is it anyway?”

“Two things. The Black Avengers, who attacked your space line before you sold out to Zenith, are Magda and Lendar Sneed, son and daughter of Sneed, who was once a Pioneer director . . . The other thing is: Arnos Bral is Dayton Ralsor, who was shipped to Jupiter some time back.”

Drolag put down his knife and fork. “Who in hell told you all this?”

“Nobody told me, Mister Drolag, else I’d have suspected they were handing me a line. I overheard it from none other than Lendar Sneed himself. He was in his cups and a red-head got him talking. And that’s what he said.”

“All right.” Drolag resumed his meal. “I’ll remember you in the monthly cheque Johnny. Maybe you *have* justified your existence, after all.”

Johnny merely grinned and then departed without further comment. Drolag continued with his breakfast, half-smiling to himself. He had no doubts whatever about Johnny’s statement. Had not Harving Lerab himself declared that Arnos Bral was really Dayton Ralsor? There had been a doubt about Lerab’s sanity; but there was certainly no doubt about *this*.

“Very nice,” Drolag mused, as he finished his meal.

"I'm glad you found it so enjoyable, sir," his manservant murmured, misinterpreting. "And Mister Bral is asking for you on the 'phone."

Drolag got to his feet and went into the library, raising the 'phone from where it lay beside the cradle.

"Drolag speaking. 'Morning, Bral."

"Can you spare time to come over?" Ralsor asked briefly. "I can't say anything over the wire, but you'll find a trip well worth your while."

"Be with you in fifteen minutes." The tycoon put the 'phone back on its rest and smiled crookedly to himself as the nucleus of a plan began to form in his mind. Just at present, however, was not the ideal time to put it into execution—so instead he did as Ralsor had requested and arrived at the Zenith headquarters fifteen minutes later.

Ralsor could definitely sense that there was something different in the tycoon's attitude, but he assumed it to be his reaction to the fact that he was no longer the boss, that he had to more or less do as commanded by the man who had out-witted him. Out-witted him, yes—but for how long?

"Now that everything is signed and settled between us," Ralsor said, "I think the time is ripe for me to explain what I suggest for the conquest of the Solar System."

"I am all attention," Drolag responded, even though he appeared to be thinking of something else.

"Well, we have all the normal methods of science," Ralsor continued. "By which I mean heat beams, sonic vibrations, bombs, disintegrators, and so forth, but the possibility remains that none of them may be quite enough for our purpose. Therefore I think we should develop to the limit a substance of my own discovery which I have called Formula X-27. It has the appearance of ordinary rock when made up, but inherent within it is a power which makes an H-bomb seem like a damp squib by comparison. I am willing to gamble, from the postulations I have made mathematically, that X-27, when fully developed, will make even the biggest scientific civilisation we may encounter bow to our will. It is no exaggeration to say that the potential power of a piece the size of a pea could reduce all London to ashes."

That the tycoon had suddenly become deeply interested was more than obvious. The abstracted look had gone from his eyes and he was leaning forward on the desk.

"Do I understand that you have partly investigated this possibility and have yet to finish it?"

"Frankly, Drolag, I'm beaten." Ralsor made the confession without batting an eyelash. "I have contrived this substance and built up Formula X-27, but I have not the scientific knowledge to probe it fully. Nor, apparently, have my own group of scientists. Since we're in this together it seems to me that your own scientists—and I know you have them in that underground laboratory of yours—had perhaps better explore the possibilities."

"Mmmm—yes. That means letting them into whatever secrets the substance possesses. Never does to share your knowledge with any man, Bral, unless of course you're compelled."

That Drolag was playing right into his hands was more than Ralsor had expected.

"Well, then, perhaps you might have some ideas of your own?" he suggested. "Quite obviously you must have a good knowledge of scientific explosives to have built up your immense armaments concerns. I, on the other hand, have been more concerned with diamonds and gems. I'm quite willing to let you have this substance for examination after your signed undertaking that whatever accrues from it is divided between us."

Drolag reflected swiftly and then nodded. “Very well; that arrangement suits me perfectly. When will you deliver the stuff or where can it be collected?”

“If you will come here personally at eight o’clock this evening—alone for obvious reasons—I will hand it over to you and you can sign the undertaking.”

To which Drolag did not even demur. He departed with his customary disarming smile back on his cherubic face, and once he reached his car he sat for a time thinking. It seemed to him that his original plan—to inform the authorities that Arnos Bral was actually Dayton Ralsor, and have him rearrested—had now better be delayed somewhat, at least until he had handed over his remarkable X-27 for analysis. After that, get him arrested promptly and out of the way which would leave the field absolutely clear.

“That’s it,” Drolag muttered to himself, and gave his chauffeur instructions to drive to the headquarters of the chief of police for the metropolis.

Because Valcent Drolag was a powerful member of society the chief of police listened politely to the somewhat garbled tale the magnate offered him.

“*How* I know Arnos Bral is actually Dayton Ralsor is my own business,” Drolag said. “You can soon prove it by checking his fingerprints——”

“Only after he has been convicted for the second time on the strength of your evidence, Mister Drolag.”

“Meaning what?”

“I mean that you are intending to bring against Bral the charge that he is one Dayton Ralsor, sent to the Jovian Penitentiary, from which by some miracle he escaped. If all the facts you offer to the jury are sufficient to show that they credit your story, Bral will be formally convicted—and note I say *formally*, which is a different thing from actual conviction. It means, in the light of present interplanetary law, that the accused can then be subjected to all the normal methods of proving his identity, fingerprints amongst them . . . But if the jury do *not* believe your preliminary evidence of accusation is strong enough the charge will collapse.”

“Damned jiggery pokery!” Drolag growled. “I tell you he’s Dayton Ralsor.”

The police chief shrugged. “I’m neither contradicting or agreeing with you, sir: merely stating the letter of the law which I am compelled to follow. I suppose you alone intend to bring the charge? You have no others to support you?”

“Nobody else at all—or at least I don’t think two others whom I have in mind would prove very useful. No; I am bringing the charge personally.”

The chief of police nodded impartially. “In that case you had better sign this form and we will have Ralsor arrested immediately.”

The tycoon looked at the form thrust across the desk towards him. Then he pushed it away.

“I’m not signing that until after eight o’clock this evening.”

“Might I enquire the reason for the delay?”

“A very good reason—but I’m not divulging my personal business. I’ll do all that’s necessary later.”

The police chief shrugged. “Very well. Naturally I cannot force you to sign the form, but upon the strength of what you have said I have the law to implement and must have Ralsor arrested immediately. You can prefer the charge later. If you fail to do so there will be no accuser, of course, and Ralsor will have to be released again after twelve hours. And *that*, Mister Drolag, will cost you a pretty penny.”

“Why?” The tycoon cursed himself for not knowing interplanetary law—so varied from common law—more thoroughly.

“Why! My dear sir, you do not imagine you can make an accusation such as you have and not implement it, do you? From the moment you said you had a charge to make our recording equipment went into action, so every word you have uttered is there for proof. You cannot play fast and loose with the law, you know.”

“I’ve no intention of doing so, and if there’s any more of your damned impertinence I’ll have you run out of office.”

The police chief smiled coldly. “When you governed Pioneer, Mister Drolag, that statement might have worried me: now it is merely amusing . . . To return to the matter on hand, are you signing the form now, or not?”

“After eight this evening: no sooner.”

“Very well. I will expect you here then, Mister Drolag. Mister Bral will be in his cell awaiting the charge.”

Drolag set his mouth. “Look, do you *have* to be so damned efficient, man? Arnos Bral isn’t going to run away before eight to-night. Give me time to get my own affairs completed with him and——”

“You should have delayed your statement until that hour,” the police chief interrupted. “Having set the machine in motion I have no alternative but to make an immediate arrest. I am not being awkward, Mister Drolag. I have superiors—the Police Executive itself—to satisfy even though I am the nominal chief of police. I just don’t dare delay. If Bral did get wind of my intention to arrest him at eight to-night he’d disappear—and I’d lose my job.”

Drolag hesitated over a volley of abuse at the complete overturning of his plans; then he checked himself and without further words left the headquarters. Back in his car again he scowled in thought, wondering about the possibility of getting “Bral” to hand over his X-27 mineral immediately without waiting until eight o’clock . . . Indeed it was the only chance, so Drolag promptly returned to the Zenith headquarters, to make the galling discovery that “Mr. Bral” was out of the city for the rest of the day.

“May help things,” Drolag mused, as he left the building. “If I can’t get at him neither perhaps can the police. If on the other hand they beat me to it I——” He stopped, a gleam coming into his eyes, and the thought in his mind was so comforting he began to smile.

It was more than possible that, having been so closely in touch with Ralsor as to know his identity, Magda and Lendar Sneed might also know about X-27 as well . . . Yes, that would make things simple if the police acted too fast for comfort.

CHAPTER NINE

That Ralsor was out of the city for the rest of the day was quite correct. He was spending it with Magda Sneed, enjoying a simple picnic, and her company, in the peace of the countryside. He felt it was a day to celebrate since within reasonable time, so he believed, the last of his enemies would have destroyed himself and the scheme of vengeance would be complete. Magda, though she was more than responsive to the man who had obviously fallen completely in love with her, could not view the final scene with absolute detachment. She had the heart of a woman and shied away from the contemplation of what was—in essence—murder. Or was it, if by his efforts, Valcent Drolag brought about his own death?

On the reverse side of the picture the police, too, were active. They comprised a highly efficient organisation, equipped with every scientific and human means of detection. Therefore, tracing the movements of Ralsor was not particularly difficult because he had made no effort to conceal them. The first warning he received of trouble was when Magda had just left him as his car stood outside her home. The pity was that he did not go into the house with her, otherwise he would have found Lendar just recovering from a stupor which had lasted all day, and thereby he might have been warned in time. As it was he hurried down the steps, intent on getting back to the city in time for his appointment with Drolag . . . Then he frowned a little as he saw a police car halted outside the main gates of the house.

Probably coincidence. He drove out in the usual way, braking as the police car's STOP signal flashed imperiously. The next thing Ralsor knew a uniformed inspector had slipped into the car beside him.

“What the devil's the meaning of this?” Ralsor demanded angrily.

“Technical arrest,” the officer answered, displaying the warrant. “Charge will be preferred later. Drive to police headquarters. I'll remain beside you.”

“Technical arrest?” Ralsor repeated in amazement. “What am I supposed to have done?”

“The charge against you is that you are a prisoner escaped from the penitentiary on Jupiter, and that your actual name is Dayton Ralsor. You are to be detained pending information. Drive on.”

It took Ralsor a second or two to realise the dangerous fix he was in; but he also knew there was nothing to be gained by becoming awkward or asking questions—so with his face grim he drove as directed to police headquarters, about which time Valcent Drolag was also being driven through the city to the Zenith Building. When he found Ralsor was not there to keep his eight o'clock appointment he knew the worst had happened, and with a grim face he continued the journey to police headquarters.

The chief of police was still on duty, purely to settle the issue. He looked up from his desk as the tycoon was shown in.

“Damned zealous lot, aren't you?” Drolag asked sourly. “I suppose you've arrested him?”

“Certainly. We're only awaiting your signature to this official charge.”

“Can I see him first?”

“Not until you've signed the form.”

Drolag snatched at it, scribbled his signature, and then stood waiting impatiently until at last Ralsor was brought into view, a warder behind him. Before Drolag could utter a word the chief of police made his own statement.

“The official charge against you, Mister Bral, is now complete. You are accused of being Dayton Ralsor, escaped life-prisoner from Jupiter. Evidence will be brought by Mister Drolag here to prove the charge.”

Ralsor hesitated. He did not fly into a rage. He did not even change his expression, unless it was to allow a certain wonder to creep into it. To admit for one second that the charge was true would finish everything for him. The one thing he did realise was that his plan to hand the asteroid rock to Drolag and thereby cause him to destroy himself had completely misfired.

“You’re a man of queer ideas, Drolag,” he commented at length. “What makes you think I’m Dayton Ralsor?”

“Many things,” the tycoon growled, too disgusted at the failure of his own arrangements to say much.

To Ralsor the puzzle was complete. He could well understand the magnate wanting to get him out of the way, but why had he thrown away his own chances of obtaining X-27? Ralsor, like Drolag, was not fully conversant with the methods of interplanetary law.

“Naturally,” Ralsor said presently, “I shall fight this ridiculous accusation to the last ditch. I am Arnos Bral, and a highly respected and important member of the community. I don’t understand what you’re driving at, Drolag, but you’re certainly going to regret it.”

The tycoon did not say anything so Ralsor turned to the chief of police. “Have I your permission to ’phone my lawyers?”

“Certainly. You’re not stripped of civil rights until conviction.”

Drolag began moving. “I’ve done all I need to do here. I’ll be seeing you again later, chief. When will the trial be?”

“I cannot say. Certainly not for two weeks.”

Drolag nodded and went on his way without a backward glance. The next place at which his car stopped was the Sneed residence on the city outskirts, entirely familiar to Drolag since on many past occasions he had had reason to call here and discuss with Razlon Sneed. To his annoyance the maid informed him that both Magda and her brother were out for the evening.

“Then I will come in and wait——” Drolag started to say; then he suddenly changed his mind. “No; I’ll call again.”

“Yes, sir. Whom shall I say?”

“You mean you don’t recognise Valcent Drolag?” the magnate asked in surprise. “You should keep more in touch with the news, my girl.”

Leaving a vaguely bewildered maid looking after him he returned to his car at the drive gates and settled within it to wait—for nearly four hours. Then, towards midnight, as he was becoming restive and the chauffeur was yawning with boredom, a sleek car came into view at the opposite end of the semi-circular avenue. Immediately Drolag alerted.

“If they try to drive in their gateway here, don’t move,” he told the chauffeur.

“Very good, sir.” The chauffeur folded his arms and watched.

Evidently it was the Sneed car for it swung in an arc to enter the driveway and then halted. From it, after a session of irritated horn-blowing, Lendar alighted and came striding across to the chauffeur.

“Aren’t there better places to park than across the gateway of my home?” he demanded.

Drolag looked through the open window. “The fault is mine, Mister Sneed. I wanted to be sure of catching you—or your sister. Preferably both of you.”

Lendar gave a start. He was in evening dress, his overcoat flowing open and a white silk scarf streaming. His voice was somewhat blurred, but he was certainly not intoxicated in the

fullest sense.

“Mister Drolag! Or am I crazy?”

“I am Drolag, and you’re not crazy. Hop in here a moment.” Lendar hesitated, a variety of thoughts chasing through his mind. Valcent Drolag was his bitterest enemy, even as he had been his father’s. He could not have any good intentions in mind.

“Hurry it up!” Drolag ordered, his tone changing abruptly—and now he looked more closely in the summer twilight and in the reflected glow of the car lamps Lendar could see an automatic gleaming in the tycoon’s hand as he brought it above window level.

“What’s the matter, Len?” came a girl’s remonstrance. “Are you going to be all night?”

Drolag glanced swiftly towards the car at the opposite side of the road.

“Your sister?” he questioned briefly, and as Lendar nodded the magnate climbed out of his own car and gave brief orders to the chauffeur. “Drive home, Jackson. I’ll attend to this myself.”

In a matter of seconds the limousine was gliding on its way and Drolag remained with his automatic pressed tightly into the small of Lendar’s back.

“Don’t give anything away, my young friend, or it will be the worse for you. Return to your car and leave me to do the talking.”

Lendar obeyed, and Magda watched the two approach. She could sense there was something wrong, but just *how* wrong only dawned on her as she recognised the cherub-faced Drolag with his painted smile.

“What do *you* want, Mister Drolag?” she demanded, as he came up with Lendar beside him.

“Just a few words, Miss Sneed—which will apply equally to your brother. It is only fair for me to warn you that I have here an automatic, and I won’t hesitate to use it if I don’t get what I want.”

Magda did not allow fear to betray her. “You’ll not get anything out of us, Mister Drolag. In fact I don’t see that we have a single thing in common, not after the way you murdered father!”

“Oh, come now, Miss Sneed, let us not go back over ancient history, especially when it is untrue— In the car, my friend,” Drolag added, prodding Lendar. “It appears that you have been doing the driving.”

Still at the mercy of the gun Lendar did as he was told and settled beside his sister. Drolag clambered into the rear and sat so that his gun was between the heads of the girl and young man.

“Now, before we move on,” Drolag said slowly, “I may as well explain myself. To begin with I need hardly point out that you, Mister Sneed, have been amazingly indiscreet.”

“Concerning what?” Lendar growled.

“Concerning your confession to being one of the Black Avengers and directly responsible for the collapse of my space line. Which also involves you, Miss Sneed, in interplanetary piracy.”

“All right, so I talked too much,” Lendar snapped heatedly. “I can’t recall everything I blabbed because I was more or less tight at the time. But there’s nothing you can prove!”

“I don’t wish to. You have already done me a great favour by giving me the chance to have Dayton Ralsor—alias Arnos Bral—arrested as an escaped ‘lifer’ from Jupiter.”

Magda twisted sharply in her seat. “You—you mean that Ral is——”

As she did not finish Drolag nodded slowly in the dim light.

“I mean that he is under arrest and I shall see that he is convicted when his trial comes up in a couple of weeks. But that isn’t why I’m here . . . Unfortunately, Ralsor was about to complete a deal with me for a formula—X-27—but was arrested before we could negotiate. I think it possible that you two, being so closely connected with him, may know where that formula is. You can either admit the fact of your own free will, or I shall produce ways and means to *make* you.”

Magda slowly recovered from the shock of learning of Ralsor’s arrest and her mind began searching for what Drolag could mean.

“This—this X-27,” she said, hesitating. “What is it supposed to be?”

“Are you being deliberately evasive, Miss Sneed, or haven’t you ever heard of the formula’s official title?”

“Never,” Magda replied, quite truthfully. “If you can give me an idea what it is maybe I — Well, anyway, what is it?”

“An extremely powerful explosive. Dayton Ralsor had half investigated its possibilities but left the remainder of the investigation to me. He was going to hand it to me to-night and we were to sign an agreement concerning it.”

Lendar moved in vague excitement and gave the girl a quick glance. She affected not to notice.

“I think,” she said slowly, “I know what you’re referring to, Mister Drolag—but I certainly don’t intend to let you have anything so valuable. Not until Mister Bral says so.”

“Why call him by that pseudonym when you as good as admitted a moment ago that he’s Ralsor?” Drolag demanded. “And in regard to X-27, I mean to have it, Miss Sneed. And I mean to have it *now!*”

“And perhaps confer on you the power to destroy everything you choose?” Magda shook her head. “No! With Mister Bral in charge it would be his own affair, but without him I’m not taking the responsibility.”

Drolag tightened his usually smiling mouth. He quite failed to see that the girl was deliberately being reticent in order to make him all the more anxious to obtain the asteroid rock.

“Listen to me, Miss Sneed,” he said at length. “Either you produce this substance known as X-27, or this dearly beloved brother of yours is going to disappear—for good. And even when that happens I’ll *still* find a way to make you do as I ask. Be more sensible to do it the simplest way, wouldn’t it?”

“Take no notice of him, Sis,” Lendar snapped, entering into the spirit of the opposition. “X-27 is too mighty for him to get his hands on it——”

“And you’re too valuable to me for me to take chances,” Magda interrupted. “I know you mean what you say, Mister Drolag, because after what happened to my father I wouldn’t put anything past you.”

The tycoon began to grin again in the gloom. “You have more sense than your father, Miss Sneed. Produce this X-27, and I shall not trouble you or your brother any further.”

“Very well. I believe X-27 is in the safe in Mister Bral’s mid-city apartment, but I’ve no means of getting either into the apartment or the safe.”

“I have,” Drolag replied. “Drive as I direct, Mister Sneed, and be quick about it.”

Lendar did not hesitate any further, and the fact that he was quietly grinning to himself was not obvious either. He drove first to an address in one-time Soho and there he was ordered

to call at a certain house and ask for an individual named Harrison. Meanwhile Drolag stayed in the car, his automatic gently pressing against Magda's back.

Harrison, a slim, smooth-talking man carrying a small bag like that of a medical man, obeyed the summons immediately and the next stop was Ralsor's mid-city abode. Here, the fast working Harrison quickly opened the door with the tools he had brought with him, and in another ten minutes he had made short work of the safe combination also. Within, clearly visible, was the shockproof sealed case containing the chunk of asteroid. Presumably it did, anyhow. There was no reason why Ralsor should have taken it out of its hiding-place—nor in fact had he.

"So that's it?" Drolag rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "Good! You can go, Harrison. I'll see you later."

Harrison went. Magda and Lendar exchanged looks, knowing the awful power of the stuff in the case if it received a violent jolt. With an effort Magda spoke, trying to sound at ease.

"We've done all you asked of us, Mister Drolag. We can go now, can't we?"

"When I've checked if the case has anything in it," the magnate replied, and lifting it from the safe he dumped it with unpleasant force upon the table. Nothing happened.

The case was not locked. In fact there was nothing very complicated about it since Ralsor had never foreseen that anybody but himself would handle it—until he gave it personally to Drolag. So with quick movements the tycoon snapped back the catches and then peered within upon the grey chunk of rock in its bed of deep cotton wool, surrounded again by layers of felt, backed again by lead, and behind this again were small shock-absorbing springs attached to the outer case.

"Must be very sensitive," Drolag commented, closing the case up again. "Far as I can tell this is the stuff described to me. If it isn't I'll be on the track of you two in double-quick time. If you've played tricks you'd better admit it now!"

"No trick at all," Magda said, drawn-faced. "And there's no reason why you can't let us go now."

"You can drive me to my home, then you're free." Drolag picked the box up and then reflected. "No, take me to the airport instead. I might as well fly to the Midlands immediately and get rid of this stuff in the right quarter."

"Drive you to the airport," Lendar repeated, with an uncomfortable glance at Magda. "Yes—of course."

"I'd have thought," Magda said, leading the way out into the corridor and leaving Drolag to close the maltreated door as best he could, "that you'd supervise any experiments with that substance. Mister Drolag. Whoever finds out its secrets has infinite power. And I've always thought of that as *your* prerogative."

"I know what I'm doing," Drolag retorted. "Nobody is going to investigate X-27 without my watching what goes on! And I'll thank you, young woman, not to try and tell me how to run my business!"

Magda said no more, reasonably convinced that Drolag would be present to witness the initial experiments on the asteroid rock—and to partake whatever accrued from them.

They returned to the car and Lendar drove as fast as he dared to the airport, his mind all the time on that box on the tycoon's knees. When the airport was reached he stumbled in getting out of the car and the box dropped from his grasp. It seemed to Magda and Lendar that all the world stopped in anguished tension for a moment; then the magnate straightened up, retrieved the box, and gave a brief nod.

“You’d better be right,” he said curtly, and went on his way.

“Whew!” Lendar whispered at last, as Drolag was lost in the crowd around the booking offices. “He’s got enough stuff there to blow half the world off the map. I’m for getting out of here quickly! Suppose his ’plane crashes?”

“I only hope the scheme works,” Magda muttered. “Funny that it should be our job to launch it after all . . . Makes me feel we’re getting our own back for poor dad.”

“And if things don’t go according to plan?”

“If they don’t we might as well think about the Rheaian Garden of Eden again and forget that Ral . . . ever existed.”

Magda fell silent again, unable to absorb the thought that Ralsor might be taken away from here, never to return. For if he was returned to Jupiter special precautions would be taken . . . There was nothing for it now but to wait— Wait and hope that a second’s clumsiness, a too earnest examination, a too forcible handling of the radioactive rock, would bring annihilation to Valcent Drolag and his Midlands underground armament concern.

The end of strain came in the middle of the night, when both Magda and Lendar were trying restlessly to sleep. Not only they but thousands of souls in all parts of the country felt a colossal shock pass through the bowels of the earth, whilst windows rattled and small objects fell from their perches . . . In various parts of the world seismographs jumped under the shock and the experts traced the epicentre to somewhere in the centre of England . . .

Magda knew what had happened, and so did Lendar. Ralsor in prison, wondered, but was not sure. It *could* be an earthquake shock of unprecedented severity. Magda and Lendar knew it was not: they knew that the asteroid rock had been detonated, either by accident or deliberately to test its powers; but they had no guarantee that Valcent Drolag had gone with the explosion. So they waited for the morning.

It became known as Catastrophe Day. Reports were pouring in that England had been completely torn asunder by an explosion of inconceivable violence and that the Irish Sea and North Sea had joined forces to produce a channel twenty miles wide across the centre of England. Damage was incalculable and no attempt could yet be made to assess the death roll. This would take a long time because so many people had been drowned.

So Ralsor, who had guessed the truth by now, having heard everything over the prison radio speakers, still had to wait. Nor could Magda and Lendar help him. A week, a fortnight— then, since Drolag had not turned up to implement the charge against Ralsor the law could not bring the accused to trial. So Ralsor found himself free. Yet, though he was back in the Zenith-Pioneer headquarters, though he had Magda as his wife and Lendar as one of his test astropilots, he never felt quite safe.

Until six months later. Then, amongst the names of those who had died on Catastrophe Day, the death roll still being calculated, there appeared a vital one—Valcent Drolag, arms king, had been found in the sea. His corpse was partly decomposed, but recognisable.

“He asked for X-27,” was Ralsor’s comment, as with Magda and Lendar he read the announcement. “He got it!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Numerous mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *The Black Avengers* by John Russell Fearn (as Vargo Statten)]